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Nostalgia for war and the paradox of peace in the Colombian emerald trade

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ABSTRACT

In 1991 the most prominent leaders of Colombia's emerald mining sector signed a peace agreement that brought a decades-long conflict to an end. Peace brought consolidation to the business. It gave mine owners the ability to control the supply of emeralds that would be let out onto the market. New efficiencies in the production process disrupted older social relations. Miners who had once let emeralds slip through their fingers, now exercised a much tighter control. In the time of the emerald wars, the owners of the mines had to sustain large followings. This meant that they had to be very generous and openhanded with their emeralds, diffusing them through networks of people joined together by kinship, affinity and personal loyalty. The end of the wars brought an end to the need for such followings. Miners could cut out many of the men and women who stood between themselves and the foreign buyers of Colombian stones. They could also restrict the scope of informal mining on their lands. Thus peace had the paradoxical effect of squeezing out the smaller players, disrupting the social networks formed in times of violence and threatening the livelihoods of thousands of miners and traders.

1. Introduction

Luís Murcia Chaparro was gunned down on a small farm on September 11, 2014. Murcia, known by the nickname "El Pequinés" was one of the most important signatories to the 1991 peace accords that brought the Colombia's most recent Emerald War to an end. This killing comes hard on the heels of the assassination of Martín Rojas, "El Capotera," in May of last year (El Tiempo, 2014a). It also follows the unsuccessful attempts on the lives of Pedro Nel Rincón, "Pedro Orejas" and Hernando Sanchez (Escobar, 2014). All of these men are, or were, *Patrones* of the Colombian emerald mines. The Colombian press is already reporting that the "Green Wars" have begun again (El Tiempo, 2013c).

The government is bolstering the presence of the military in the emerald mining area. There is a temporary ban on the carrying of firearms by private individuals, even when their weapons are duly licensed (El Tiempo, 2014b). Bishops of the Catholic Church are pleading for investigations on the part of the government and restraint on the part of the miners themselves (El Tiempo, 2013e). There seems to be ample cause for concern.

If the cycles of killing begin again, this would mark the end of a twenty-year period of relative peace around Colombia's emerald mines. That peace brought great prosperity to the men who negotiated it. They were able to invest their money in their mines, rather than in their private security forces and hired gunmen. They were able to rationalize their operations, curb pilferage, mechanize their mines and enjoy their wealth without living in constant fear. They were also able to attract major direct foreign investment into Colombian emerald mining in nearly a decade.

The peace was good for the patrones, but it was not necessarily good for the thousands of men and women who depend on the emerald business to sustain themselves and their families. Peace brought consolidation to the business. It gave mine owners the ability to control the supply of emeralds that would be let out onto the market. New efficiencies in the production process disrupted older social relations. Patrones who had once let emeralds slip through their fingers, now exercised a much tighter control. One man took the reins of the previously fractious and decentralized emerald business. This was Víctor Carranza, *El Patrón de los Patrones*.[1]

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[1] Don and Patrón are terms of respect used in the emerald business and throughout Colombia. Patrón is the stronger of the two, but in this article I use them interchangeably.

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Don Víctor held the peace through negotiations and through violence. It benefited him immensely. He attained a ripe old age before dying of natural causes on April 4, 2013 (El Tiempo, 2013a). His funeral was enormous. It was attended by dignitaries of the church, the state and the mining area. But few of the people who I spoke to in the course of ethnographic fieldwork on the Colombian emerald trade expressed any regrets over Don Víctor's passing. They spoke wistfully of an earlier time, before he came to power, when emeralds had flowed more plentifully from the mines, through the markets and out to the foreign buyers.

They talked with fondness about the late Eighties when the last Emerald War was at its bloody peak and the early Nineties when it was in its denouement. This article explores the question of why small emerald miners and traders would feel nostalgia for a time of such violence. Their colleagues were being shot in the streets of Bogotá or thrown into the Rio Minero and yet this is looked upon as a golden age.

I argue that in the time of the emerald wars, the patrones of the mines had to sustain large followings of people who were willing to kill and die for them. This meant that they had to be very generous and openhanded with their emeralds, diffusing them through networks of people joined together by kinship, affinity and personal loyalty.

The end of the wars brought an end to the need for large, armed followings and networks of informers. Patrones could hoard the stones for themselves and cut out some of the middlemen (and women) who stood between themselves and the foreign buyers of Colombian stones. They could restrict the scope of informal mining on their lands. Thus peace had the paradoxical effect of squeezing out the smaller players, disrupting the social networks formed in times of violence and threatening the livelihoods of thousands of miners and traders. If the patrones of the emerald business divide themselves into opposed and armed camps again, perhaps emeralds will flow more freely once more. I am afraid that traders will find their nostalgia for war to have been misplaced.

2. Farewell to arms

Colombia's most famous emerald mines are located in the Western Boyacá province. The mining area is on the eastern slope of the Western Cordillera of the Andes Mountains. It is *tierra caliente*, hot country, in contrast to the cool highlands. These mines have produced the world's finest emeralds since long before the arrival of the Spaniards in South America. Conflict around the emerald mines seems to stretch into the pre-colonial past as well (Beltrán and Ordoñez, 1995).

The second half of the twentieth century was a turbulent time throughout Colombia. The violence in the emerald mining area often equaled or even surpassed the violence of the Civil War between government forces and the communist *guerrilla*. It also equaled or surpassed the violence occasioned by the international narcotics trade. Still, it never received the same degree of national or international attention (Gutierrez and Guerrero, 2008). A Bishop of the Catholic Church explained it to me in the following terms. The *esmeralderos* never blew up a bridge. They never assassinated a politician. They only killed each other. The government was content to let them continue doing so. There also seem to have been strong ties between several generations of emerald miners and conservative politicians. This may have shielded the patrones from too much government interference in their affairs (Marín, 1979).

The violence in the emerald business in the second half of the twentieth century is usually divided into three distinct periods known as the first, second and third *Guerras Verdes* or Green Wars (Solano et al., 1996). These were not fought as pitched battles, but as selective assassinations perpetrated by the followers of one patrón against the followers of another. I have chronicled the history of these conflicts elsewhere (Brazeal, 2014). This article focuses on the end of the third war and the peace established in the early 1990s.

The final emerald war is usually described as being a conflict between the miners of Muzo and those of Coscuez. Muzo and Coscuez are two mining areas situated within a few kilometers of each other in Western Boyacá. There were multiple, powerful families associated with each area. Many members of these families are still patrones of the emerald mines today. In Muzo, the most prominent and most belligerent leaders were Gilberto Molina and Víctor Carranza. In Coscuez, they were Luís Murcia Chaprarro, "El Pequinés," and Rodriguez Gacha, "El Mexicano."

The so-called wars have been described as cycles of vengeance. The patrones had large, armed followings. The men who worked as bodyguards for the patrones were known as their *pájaros*, or birds. When one of these pájaros was killed, his male kin would get together and take revenge by killing a member of the rival patrón's following (Uribe, 1992). There was a lot more at stake than personal vendetta. For the patrones, the conflict was about control of the Coscuez mine. The owners of Muzo saw it as a ripe target for acquisition and wanted to get it at any cost. They failed to take it by force, but they succeeded at the negotiating table. This logic has persisted to the present day.

In 1989, El Mexicano orchestrated a massacre that took the lives of Gilberto Molina and many of his followers and bodyguards (Tellez, 1993). Later that year, El Mexicano himself was killed by Colombian government forces (Semana, 1992). With Molina and El Mexicano dead, Carranza and El Pequinés could come to terms.

Many different people deserve credit for their participation in the peace process. There were miners like José Buitrago, who served as intermediaries between rival patrones. The dons themselves could not come together because of their deadly enmity. Two Catholic bishops, Monseñor Raul Jarro Tobos and Monseñor Hector Gutierrez Pabón, traveled tirelessly over the rough roads of the mining area preaching pardon and tamping down conflicts. When Monseñor Jarro was perceived as overly friendly to Víctor Carranza, he was kidnapped by one of the followers of El Pequinés. El Pequinés presented his own case to the good Father and asked that he advocate on his behalf as well. The Bishop complied and the peace moved forward.

A mine manager worked out the financial aspects of the peace accords. Shares in the major mining operations in Coscuez were parceled out among the surviving patrones. The largest shares probably went to Víctor Carranza, members of the Molina family and Luís Murcia Chaparro, El Pequinés. Traditional leaders of bands of illegal miners from Muzo and Coscuez (like the late Don Martín Rojas) also received their portions. New emerald dons also emerged. Members of the fighting forces associated with Coscuez made lucky strikes in the mining operations that they ran. They consolidated followings and became prominent miners in their own right.

The division of the shares in Coscuez was intended to mollify the belligerents and allow them to focus their efforts on mining, rather than fighting one another. They were paid to keep the peace. For about twenty years, it seemed to work. The killings gradually abated as old scores were settled (Uribe, 1992). The dons agreed to oblige their followers not to extract further vengeance. Self-congratulatory proclamations were issued and mining activities intensified.

The dons instituted an interesting commercial arrangement to ensure the equitable distribution of the profits from their mines. If a given mine produced any stones, these would be put in a locked leather bag called the *tula*. At the end of the day, the stones from the tula would be weighed, photographed and placed in a safe.

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