The Extractive Industries and Society 1 (2014) 273–283

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

The Extractive Industries and Society

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/exis

Original Article

The history of emerald mining in Colombia: An examination of Spanish-language sources

Brian Brazeal

Department of Anthropology, California State University, Chico, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 16 July 2014
Received in revised form 28 August 2014
Available online 22 September 2014

Keywords:
Emeralds
Mining
Colombia
History

ABSTRACT

This article presents a review of Spanish-Language sources on the history of emerald mining and trading in Colombia from colonial times to the present with a special focus on the late 20th century. Sources are drawn from academic history, anthropology and political science, but also from books produced by mining organizations, journalistic exposés and popular history and fiction. They chronicle the history of violence that characterized the mining area from the 1550s to the 1990s as well as the peace established among miners in 1991. The history of emeralds is intimately tied up with the history of the Colombian nation, its violent struggles and its hopes for a peaceful and prosperous future.

1. Introduction: the Czar is dead

On April 4, 2013 Víctor Carranza, the Emerald Czar of Colombia died. He had presided over a tenuous, 20-year-old peace that had brought an end to 50 (some would say 500) years of war around Colombia's emerald mines. He was accused of forming paramilitary groups, masterminding assassinations and even suborning presidents, but he was always exculpated. It seemed a miracle that he died of cancer after surviving so many violent attacks on his life.

In the wake of Carranza's death there was intense speculation in the Colombian media that the *esmeralderos* would go to war once again (El Tiempo, 2013b). There have been skirmishes, assassinations, a few tragic deaths of women and children, and a few imprisonments of the most bellicose miners, but the peace seems to be holding (El Tiempo, 2013c). The owners of the largest mines, together with civil, military and ecclesiastical leaders, are scrambling to ensure that the equilibrium imposed in 1991 endures.

This seems like an opportune moment to review the long history of emerald mining in Colombia. Colombian authors have claimed that conflicts over emeralds encapsulate their country's whole violent history (Guerrero, 2002:123). The brutality of the conquest, the Bolivarian revolution, the political violence of the first half of the twentieth century, and the violence of the drug trade in the second half of the twentieth century, have all reverberated through the emerald mining area.

But this is an optimistic moment in Colombian history. The world's longest running civil war seems poised to end. Political power depends on hotly contested elections rather than back room deals negotiated among elites. Disenfranchised farmers and disenchanted urban middle classes alike are clamoring for their rights and their cries are being heard. This optimism reverberates through the Colombian emerald trade as well. Emerald dealers no longer gun each other down in the streets of Bogotá. Emerald miners are no longer tossed into the murderous black waters of the Rio Minero. Perhaps an examination of the troubled history of emerald mining in Colombia will help keep those troubles from repeating themselves.

This article is intended as a review of the Colombian literature on emerald mining and trading. It depends on published, secondary sources and not archival research. However, as these sources are published in Spanish, and as some of them are difficult to find, even in Colombia, they might not be accessible to this journal's readership.

Emeralds, and the travails of the mining area, have fascinated Colombian academics, journalists, novelists and the general public to a surprising degree. Perhaps this is because the stones themselves are finer and have been mined for longer in Colombia than anywhere else. Perhaps it is because the story of these gemstones are so tied up with the story of the Colombian nation. The sources are drawn from academic history and anthropology but they also include a self-congratulatory proclamation of an organ of the state. They include a massive tome published by a massive mine that attempts to silence the recent past by burying it under a mass of scientific and mythological detail. There is a journalistic exposé and some ghost-written pseudonymous pulp fiction. Each illuminates a different facet of the history that still "weighs like a nightmare on the brains of living" (Marx, 1964:1) Several authors have pointed to the brutal and seemingly inexorable ways in which this history repeats itself.

E-mail address: bcbrazeal@csuchico.edu.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2014.08.006
2214-790X/

Today that cycle may be broken, in spite, or perhaps because of, the fact that the Czar is dead.

2. Sources and methods

I have conducted both ethnographic and oral historical research on emeralds in Colombia, but this article is neither an ethnography nor an oral history. It is a review of published Spanish-language sources on the social history of Colombian emerald mining and trading. As such, the people who I spoke to in the course of my research in Colombia are not implicated in the production of this text. The information I received from them is strictly "on background." The aim of this article is to open up the literature that might not be available to Anglophone scholars and to share the contents of sources that are difficult to access outside of Colombia itself. I have attempted to synthesize these sources into a coherent narrative, rather than reviewing each of them individually.

It is hardly fashionable in academic historiography these days to discuss history as a succession of the doings of great men. By the same token, it has become trite in the history, sociology and anthropology of Latin America to fall back on "patron-client relations" to account for social structures and historical processes. This article does both. This is in part an artifact of the sources it draws on. Many of them come from journalism, popular history and fiction. These sources interweave history and biography and make it sound as though the processes that unfolded in the emerald mining area were the results conflicts among the leaders of the bands of illegal miners.

But there is a grain of truth in this perspective. The *Dons* or *Patrones* of the emerald mines hold great sway over the areas where they operate. Academic sources, written by political scientists and anthropologists, describe these men as the heads of organizations forged by links of kinship and affinity rather than straightforward capitalist organizations for the exploitation of a mineral resource. Working in an emerald mine, even for a few weeks, is considered an "opportunity." Miners do not generally receive wages, or if they do these wages are mere pittance. Instead they get the chance to comb through the dirt that is hauled away from the productive veins, looking for green stones. If they are lucky, and sneaky, they might manage to filch an emerald from the mine face itself (Parra, 2006; Uribe, 1992).[1]

Miners get these opportunities by virtue of their proximity to patron. They are given the privilege of working long shifts in grueling conditions for a few weeks for no pay in hopes that they might pocket a stone worth as much as a house. In return, the patrons expect loyalty. In the past this included bearing arms to protect the person and property of the Don and his followers. These Dons, in turn fulfill the traditional role of patrons, serving as godfathers to people's children, helping them out in times of trouble, throwing huge parties on religious occasions and distributing largess in sundry other ways (Uribe, 1992).[2]

[1] Parra's (2006) article gives us a sustained look at questions of sex and gender. Most writers on Colombian emerald mining focus on men. Women only enter the stories as prostitutes, virtuous wives or young virgins offered up to the sexual rapacity of the Dons. But the links of kinship and affinity that tie patrons to their followers are forged by and through women. Parra's work highlights their roles. She was born and raised in the mining area, to a mining family and much of her work is drawn from information provided by her own family members.

[2] Uribe (1992) gives us the only book-length treatment of the troubled history of the emerald mining area to have emerged from the Colombian academy so far. Her "*Limpiar La Tierra*" or "To Clean The Earth" offers an anthropological explanation of the violence of the mines and shows how killing can become the preeminently moral activity. Men are defined by their enemies and who will avenge them. Her title comes from a statement offered by a bodyguard to one of the Patrones, who laid his Browning pistol on the table during their interview, "*Matar bien es limpiar la tierra*," "To kill well is to clean the earth" (Uribe, 1992:95). Maria Victoria was part of the Jesuit-Organized CINEP team of researchers on violence in Colombia. She had extraordinary access to the Dons and their followers, and the book she produced was considered threatening to the trade when it was first published in 1992.

The towns in the mining area are small. The people are related to one another. They live in intimacy, tinged with deference, with their patrons. They have been willing to fight, and to die for them (Uribe, 1992). So if I describe the conflicts in the emerald mining area in the twentieth century as conflicts among individuals, it is worth remembering that these individuals commanded and still command large followings. Their followers are people who are accustomed to working in the most difficult and dangerous conditions. They consider themselves more adept in the use of violence, and better equipped for it, than the Colombian police or military (Uribe, 1992; Steiner, 2005).

It is also worth remembering that many, perhaps most, of the people in the mining area took no part in these conflicts whatsoever, except in that they struggled to survive them. It was impossible to work or even to live in the mining areas without having some relation to the Dons, but this did not necessarily extend to bearing arms for them. Most illegal miners were men and women standing by a sluice *echando pala*, scooping up the dirt washed down from the mine, hoping to find an emerald and to sell it to sustain themselves and their families (Parra, 2006).

This article examines a period that extends over nearly 500 years: from the conquest in the first years of the sixteenth century to the establishment of the peace in the emerald mining area in the 1990s. However, its focus is mostly on the events that transpired in the second half of the twentieth century. The Bank of the Republic was granted on ostensible monopoly over the emerald mines in 1947. This event unleashed a wave of illegal mining activities that precipitated the three so-called emerald wars.

The aftermath of these conflicts shapes social relations in the emerald trade as well as public perceptions of miners and traders to this day. I include information about the pre-Columbian period, the conquest and the Bolivarian revolution to the extent that this material sheds light on the more recent conflicts. This article omits a substantive discussion of archeological and ethnohistorical sources on the pre-Colombian period (for example Langbaek, 1987). It also omits a discussion of primary sources from the colonial period (for example Aguado, 1956). I hope that it compensates for these lacunae with its examination of popular sources that might otherwise escape the notice of the anglophone academic community.

The wealth of the popular literature on Colombian emerald mining points to the importance of emeralds in Colombia's national imaginary. Colombian emeralds are generally held to be the finest in the world.[3] However, it is rare to see Colombians who are not directly involved in the trade wearing emerald jewelry. The stones have found their ways to the courts of the Mughal, Persian and Ottoman empires not to mention those of the Incas and Aztecs. They are included in the crown jewels of several European countries. They adorn the monstrances and reliquaries of the Catholic Church. They have graced display cases of the finest jewelers in the world. They symbolize vast wealth and have generated considerable fortunes, but not for the Colombian state and certainly not for the majority of the miners who dig for them.

Those who have managed to succeed in emerald mining and trading are always viewed with some suspicion in polite Colombian society. They are derided as "*campesinos con plata*" or peasants with money, whose consumption habits do not accord with the staid preferences of Bogotá's elites (Parra, 2006:18). They are described, in academic and popular discourse alike, as a Mafia (Uribe, 1992, Páramo, 2010). Nearly everyone I met in Colombia who was not affiliated with the trade urged me to stay away from

[3] Excellent gems occasionally emerge from other mines around the world, but Colombia, and especially Muzo remains the benchmark against which other stones are measured.