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ISBN

9798186382102

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Publication Date

2026-06-03

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Santa Barbara

The Mezcal Boom: Globalization, Cultural Commodification, and Uneven Development in
Oaxaca's Mezcal Industry

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Global Studies

by

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June 2026

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June 2026

ABSTRACT

The Mezcal Boom: Globalization, Cultural Commodification, and Uneven Development in Oaxaca's Mezcal Industry

by

Marinella Stollenwerk Cavallaro

Mezcal, an artisanal agave spirit produced primarily in Oaxaca, Mexico, has undergone rapid commercialization over the past two decades, expanding from a locally consumed cultural product to a globally exported commodity. This boom has generated significant economic activity, yet the rural Oaxacan communities whose traditions and labor sustain mezcal production frequently do not share in the value the industry generates. This thesis examines that disjuncture, asking how global demand is reshaping mezcal production and cultural heritage in Oaxaca, whether mezcal can function as a tool for economic development for rural producers, and what differing organizational responses to inequality in the industry reveal about the possibilities and limits of development intervention.

The research is based on five months of fieldwork in Oaxaca, conducted through semi-formal and informal interviews with mezcal producers across three comparative field sites - Santiago Matatlán, Santa Catarina Minas, and Sola de Vega. These sites were chosen

to reflect different positions within the mezcal economy: large-scale commercialized production, ancestral production with established tourism, and ancestral production with geographic isolation and limited market access. The thesis also draws on formal interviews with three organizations working within the mezcal industry (SACRED, Aventureros del Mezcal, and Agamarga), observation at cultural events, and analysis of regulatory frameworks including the denomination of origin. The analysis is grounded in commodity studies and develops its argument through Scott Cook's triangulation of value, which examines commodities through use, exchange, and symbolic value.

The thesis argues that the mezcal boom has created significant economic opportunity, but unevenly. Opportunity is structured not by the quality or tradition of producers' mezcal but by their visibility, certification status, and market access. Organizational interventions in the industry, while meaningful at the level of individual producers, cannot reorganize a commodity chain structurally designed to concentrate value at the branding and export end. The thesis concludes that globalization has not created these dynamics but amplified them, institutionalizing mezcal's symbolic value as a new form of extraction. This pattern extends beyond mezcal to other cultural commodities, where the heritage and tradition that generate value in global markets are increasingly captured by actors far from the communities that produce them.

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I. Introduction

The first time I ever drank mezcal, it was poured from a 3-liter Coke bottle by an 81-year-old woman.

It was my first day in Sola de Vega, Oaxaca. I was freshly graduated from college and ready to spend the next 9 months of my life teaching English at an agricultural university through a Fulbright exchange. The previous day, I had traveled to Sola from Mexico City. This journey involved an 8-hour bus ride, a 4-hour car ride, a flooded highway, a detour into the mountains of the Sierra Sur, and a man and his donkey, who helped us when my new boss stopped to ask for directions.

Needless to say, I was fairly lost and confused on my first day in Sola. I wandered around the town searching for a place to do my laundry. Unfortunately, there was no cellphone service to help guide me, and Google Maps wouldn't have been much help anyway, as it hadn't been updated in years. I gave it my best attempt before returning home, accepting my defeat.

When I entered the gate to my home, I saw an older woman sitting on a chair in front of the stairs leading up to the apartment I shared with two professors at the university. She lived right below us, and her children and grandchildren lived in the house to the side. When she saw me, she pulled up a chair next to her and patted the seat, indicating that I sit down.

Given that I was the only foreigner in Sola, she was naturally curious about what I was doing there. When I told her my sad tale about failing to find a place to do my laundry, she immediately called her grandson over, made him take my laundry, and sent him off in a mototaxi to the lavanderia. She then invited me to some of the food she had been cooking

and pulled out a large Coke bottle filled with a yellow liquid. I had heard that Sola was famous for its mezcal, but I hadn't imagined that it would be presented in that way. I had only heard about mezcal in the context of fancy bars and cocktails, and the faded Coke label didn't quite fit this image. She poured us each a shot of mezcal in a glass originally made for small candles, with a cross engraved on the bottom.

I took my first sip and nearly spat it out. I had just graduated from college, so was more used to a sweeter and perhaps less sophisticated type of drink. She laughed and told me that I would get used to the taste, living in Sola.

Doña Flora turned out to be my new best friend in Sola de Vega. I sat with her nearly every day coming back from school, and was even given the special seat next to her at her 82nd birthday. She also turned out to be correct in her prediction that I would soon grow used to the taste of Mezcal.

Sola de Vega was practically synonymous with mezcal. I took frequent trips to Oaxaca City, planning visits to the grocery store, a luxury that Sola didn't have. When I would tell people who I met in Oaxaca City that I was living in Sola, their first question was "why?" and the next was always if I liked the mezcal. The sign when you enter the town says "Tierra de Mezcal Tobalá," the land of Tobalá mezcal. At every parade, celebration, and event in the town, there were always people going around carrying white gas containers filled with mezcal and little plastic cups to pour it into to share. To make learning English feel more relevant to my students studying agriculture, forestry, business, and food processing at my university, I planned lessons based around mezcal and agave. In Sola, mezcal found its place in culture, family, business, livelihood, and religion.

However, despite its mezcal industry, Sola was also very poor. Doña Flora, among many others in the older generation in the town, had never gone to school and had never learned to read. The town had no cellphone service and only satellite connection to wifi, meaning that on cloudy days, the town was completely off the grid. It experienced frequent blackouts, which could last days at a time. It also faced issues of excessive alcoholism and security concerns, which are often associated with poverty in rural Mexico. Thus, in Sola, I saw the production of ancestral mezcal, a type of traditional mezcal production that sells for hundreds of dollars in upscale bars in the US, while seeing many of the producers of that mezcal living in conditions of poverty. I also observed mezcal, which in Sola was a small-scale, family-based industry, being commercialized, more industrially produced, and sold on a larger scale during the tours I took with friends while visiting Oaxaca.

These observations raised broader questions about whether mezcal can function as a source of economic development for rural producers in Oaxaca and how its rapid commercialization is reshaping the cultural significance of what was once a local and traditional practice. The goal of this thesis is, therefore, to examine these tensions, understanding the implications of the fact that Doña Flora's mezcal-filled Coke bottle is now at the center of a billion-dollar industry.

A. Context, Research Questions, and Argument

Mezcal is a distilled agave spirit, generally containing between 40 and 55% alcoholic content. It has denomination of origin protections, meaning that it must be produced within certain states in Mexico. However, it is generally associated with Oaxaca, where approximately 90% of production takes place. It must be made 100% from agave. There are

various different types of agave that can be used to produce mezcal. An agave plant typically takes 8-10 years to reach maturity and can only be used one time, as the plant dies once it is harvested. Mezcal production is a generally artisanal production process, traditionally produced in small family distilleries called palenques. Most production stages are not mechanized, necessitating substantial agave and considerable manual labor. This artisanal production process has contributed to mezcal becoming known as a popular and expensive craft spirit in export markets.

Within the past 20 years, the demand and popularity of mezcal have grown significantly, creating a mezcal boom. Production has risen from 980,000 liters in 2011 to nearly 14 million in 2022. Exports for mezcal now exceed domestic consumption, with 75% of exports going to the United States. Mezcal is therefore a traditional product, with cultural significance to Oaxaca, that is now being produced primarily for foreign consumption.

This thesis asks three main questions:

1. How is global demand reshaping mezcal production and cultural heritage in Oaxaca?
2. Can mezcal function as a tool for economic development for rural producers in Oaxaca, and how does the cultural importance of mezcal shape development outcomes?
3. What do differing organizational responses to inequality in the mezcal industry reveal about the possibilities and limits of development intervention?

Throughout this thesis, I will argue that the mezcal boom has created significant economic opportunity for those involved in the mezcal industry in Oaxaca, including rural producers. However, this opportunity is uneven. The economic opportunity created is generally defined by factors such as tourism access, certification status, and market knowledge, as opposed to

quality and tradition - features that are often marketed in the most expensive mezcals. I will also argue that while different organizations are attempting to address this unevenness, their interventions are limited, as the commodity chain is designed to extract value from the producing communities and concentrate this value in exports and branding. These arguments are based on theories of commodity studies and draw on anthropologist Scott Cook's triangulation of value, which argues that a commodity's worth is shaped not only by its use value and exchange value, but also by its symbolic value - the cultural meanings attached to it. Applied to mezcal, this framework helps explain how tradition, heritage, and authenticity shape its position in global markets.

B. Methodology and Positionality

To research this thesis, I conducted fieldwork in the state of Oaxaca for 5 months. I observed and participated in cultural events such as calendas (festive processions), jaripeos (local rodeos), fiestas patronales (saint's day celebrations), Guelaguetza events, and mezcal fairs in Oaxaca City and Sola de Vega, Oaxaca. I conducted semi-formal and informal interviews in three different mezcal-producing towns in Oaxaca: Santiago Matatlán, Santa Catarina Minas, and Sola de Vega. I selected these three sites as they represent different positions within the mezcal economy - large-scale commercialized production, ancestral production with established tourism, and ancestral production with geographic isolation and limited market access. Aside from interviewing producers and community members, I also conducted formal interviews with several organizations that work in the mezcal industry, including SACRED, Aventureros del Mezcal, and Agamarga, which will be discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis. I was invited by SACRED on a trip through Jalisco to observe the

opening of a well, their most recent development project, and talk to tequila and raicilla producers in the region.

In terms of positionality, I am a young Pākehā (New Zealander of European descent) female; therefore, all my interactions were shaped by my obvious status as an outsider due to my nationality, ethnicity, and gender. However, I had previously lived and worked in Sola de Vega, one of my fieldwork sites, which provided me with a much deeper familiarity with this site and an understanding of the cultural significance of mezcal in this region. This familiarity with Sola de Vega may have influenced my interpretations of the other two sites, as, instead of having the experience of living in them for a significant period of time, I was going with the sole purpose of visiting palenques. Furthermore, my positionality as a young, foreign woman may have influenced what producers were willing to tell me or not tell me.

C. Thesis Structure

This thesis will be divided into 3 chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the theoretical and informational background to my argument. I situate mezcal within the commodity studies background of Latin America and Mexico, explaining the growth of the industry. I also establish the theoretical framework for analyzing mezcal's value through anthropologist Scott Cook's triangulation of use, exchange, and symbolic value, arguing that attention to mezcal's cultural significance is necessary to understand mezcal's position in global markets. Chapter 2 will present my fieldwork across 3 different mezcal-producing regions, showing different development outcomes in each region and demonstrating how global demand hasn't erased cultural heritage but reorganized it. Finally, Chapter 3 will analyse three organizations responding to inequality in the mezcal industry, arguing that while each offers a partial

solution, none can fully address the structure of the larger commodity chain that directs value away from producing communities.

This thesis aims to contribute to the field in a few ways, which will be further discussed in the conclusion. Firstly, there is currently very little comparative work on mezcal-producing communities, a gap that my fieldwork aims to fill. Secondly, this study of mezcal demonstrates how cultural commodities function differently within development and commodity processes than raw materials or agricultural goods. This helps support Scott Cook's theory of the triangulation of value and demonstrates the importance of recognizing a commodity's symbolic value. This thesis, therefore, contributes to broader debates about the influence of globalization on cultural heritage and cultural goods, arguing that mezcal represents a pattern in which tradition and heritage are simultaneously the source of a commodity's value in a global market while also being shaped by the global market itself.

II. Chapter 1

This chapter builds the theoretical and historical foundation for the thesis's argument, working toward a framework for understanding how mezcal acquires value. It begins by introducing commodity studies as an approach to understanding labour relations and trade in global markets. It then situates Mexican commodities within a history of Latin American extraction, looking specifically at coffee, barbasco, and tequila, to show how integration into global markets has historically marginalized local producers. The chapter concludes by introducing Scott Cook's theory of triangulation of use, exchange, and symbolic value, and establishing the thesis's central analytical framework. Applying Cook's theory of symbolic value to mezcal allows for an analysis of how a cultural commodity, rather than a raw material, is impacted by the global market.

A. Commodity Studies Theory

Commodity studies is rooted in Karl Marx's understanding of capitalism, labour, and social relations of production. Marx explains that "the wealth of societies in which a capitalistic mode of production prevails appears as a 'gigantic collection of commodities' and the singular commodity appears as the elementary form of wealth" (Marx, 1867). He then defines a commodity as "an external object, a thing which satisfies through its qualities human needs of one kind or another" (Marx, 1867). In this way, Marx places the commodity at the center of capitalist society, not just as an object that fulfills needs, but as a concept through which labor, value, and social relations are expressed.

This is the basis of his theory of value, in which the production and circulation of commodities generate surplus value that is extracted from producers and accumulated as

capital. Marx explains this dynamic through his discussion of commodity mysticism, writing that “the social relationships of production of persons appear as social relationships of objects to one another and to the persons involved” (Marx, 1867). Therefore, the social relations and labour involved in producing a commodity are hidden and instead appear as a natural property of the commodity itself. Through this process, commodities come to represent unequal social relations. Thus, commodities are not neutral objects. Instead, they represent structures of labour, power, and social relations.

Building on Marx’s insight that commodities embody social relations, anthropologist Casey Walsh explains that commodity studies have combined “an emphasis on productive relations, labor, technology, and environment; a historical perspective that incorporates contingency, process, change; and a focus on the articulation of local, regional, national, and global systems, spaces, and social formations” (Walsh, 2003). As such, the study of commodities provides an entry point into understanding globalization. By tracing a single commodity, we can see how labor, production, and social relations are shaped across local, regional, and global scales.

Commodity studies functions as a methodological approach for analyzing the historical, social, and political processes that shape an increasingly interconnected world. This idea is developed by anthropologist Angelique Haugerud, who argues that commodities give us a unique insight into processes of globalization as they transport cultural messages as they circulate. She writes that a “painting or a musical work carries more than a price tag; the circulation of the object conveys images, ideas, information, and meanings as well” (Haugerud, 2000). The study of a single commodity as it is produced and transported across

the world, therefore, not only reveals economic processes but also can be used to understand the movement of cultural meaning.

By examining mezcal through the lens of commodity studies, we can gain insights into how a locally produced good can be transformed into a global export commodity. This perspective also allows us to understand how culture is transported and transformed, as well as the social and political interactions that occur when producing a cultural product in a globalized world. To situate mezcal within a broader framework of commodity studies, it is first necessary to examine the historical and structural role of commodities in Latin America, as well as in Mexico and the region of Oaxaca.

B. Latin America's Commodity History

The modern history of commodities in Latin America can be traced to its colonial foundations, where commodity economies were structured around extraction and oriented toward export. These patterns are further explained through Raúl Prebisch's theory of Latin American structuralism, which analyzes the organization of global trade and its unequal effects. Structuralism argues that the export of raw materials from Latin America has led to the exploitation and dependency of these countries on the countries that import their products. Structuralism directly critiques David Ricardo's theory of comparative advantage, arguing that the benefits of free trade are not equally distributed among countries. Prebisch suggested that countries were divided into two categories: the core and the periphery. Core countries are higher-income countries that export manufactured goods, while periphery countries export primarily raw materials. He focused on Latin America, writing that "the specific task that fell to Latin America, as part of the periphery of the world economic

system, was that of producing food and raw materials for the great industrial centres” (Prebisch, 1950). This, he believed, created a system of global trade that disadvantages periphery countries as they rely on the export of primary goods but must import expensive manufactured goods.

Scholars have used commodity studies to analyze how these dynamics of structural inequality are produced and maintained. As Walsh explains, commodity studies in Latin America have been used to examine rural class formation, political mobilization, and strategies for economic development in a region that has “since its conquest, been organized to produce primary materials for a globalized market” (Walsh, 2003). In this context, commodity studies reveal enduring patterns of exploitation and dependency within Latin American economies.

Sociologist Maristella Svampa argues that Latin America, post the Washington Consensus, prioritizes large-scale exports of raw materials - naming this process the “commodities consensus.” The commodities consensus has “involved a process of ‘reprimarization’ of Latin American economies, emphasizing their reorientation toward mainly extractive or rent-based activities, with little added value” (Svampa, 2015). This model of neoextractivism reinforces earlier patterns of dependency while intensifying their social and environmental consequences, often at the expense of local communities, indigenous rights, and environmental sustainability.

Andy Robinson expands on the environmental consequences of commodity production in Latin America while also emphasizing its cultural effects. He outlines patterns of extraction, conquest, and depletion through various export commodities throughout Latin America, from quinoa in Bolivia to avocados in Michoacán. In his analysis of these

commodities, he is not only looking at the economic implications these trades have for Latin America; he is also looking at the way that people's environments and cultures have been impacted by these processes. He writes that “looting has occurred not only in the economic sphere of the extraction of raw materials but also in the extraction of the soul from peoples whose cultures are being annihilated in a remorseless process of commodification” (Robinson, 2021). Thus, he emphasizes the importance of focusing on the people and cultures of those on the production end of this global trade system and emphasizes the way that culture, too, can be extracted within a global system of trade.

At the same time, commodity studies also emphasize the role of local actors within these global systems. As Steven Topik, Carlos Marichal, and Zephyr Frank argue, the international market is not simply “an exogenous force on which Latin American producers had no influence” but is instead shaped through interactions across scales (Topik et al., 2006). In this view, globalization is not a one-directional process imposed from above but one in which “the local becomes embedded in the international.” Following a commodity through its production and circulation thus reveals not only structures of inequality, but also the ways in which local producers engage with, adapt to, and influence global markets. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that commodities in Latin America remain shaped by histories of colonization and extraction while also producing cultural transformation, environmental change, and, in some cases, local agency. These dynamics provide a foundation for examining how commodity systems operate within specific national and regional contexts, particularly in Mexico and Oaxaca.

C. Mexico in the Global Commodity Chain

The study of commodities in Mexico reveals how national identity, as well as local jobs and traditions, are shaped through global trade. While Mexico shares many of the structural characteristics of Latin American commodity economies, its position is distinct due to its historical integration with global markets, particularly the United States.

Like much of Latin America, Mexico's commodity economy has its roots in the colonial period, when production was oriented toward the extraction and export of raw materials. This pattern persisted into the twentieth century and was further intensified under neoliberal reforms, during which the state opened markets, reduced social programs, and privatized state industries and ejido lands (Weaver et al., 2012). In 1994, NAFTA was ratified, which deeply impacted the Mexican economy. It became more heavily reliant on the United States as its major trading partner, solidifying Mexico's dependent role in global commodity chains. Currently, the United States buys approximately 75% of Mexico's export products, making the economy highly vulnerable to shifts in U.S. markets and political developments such as tariffs (Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2024).

Examining Mexican commodities - where and how they are produced, as well as for whom - demonstrates how the Mexican state and its people negotiate their position within the world's political economy. As Walsh argues, "debates over the sources and destinations of commodities have always been integral to the way Mexicans define their nations, regions, and localities and how they situate these within the global arena" (Walsh, 2003). Mexican commodities like coffee and barbasco demonstrate how Mexico's integration into global markets produces both economic dependency and uneven social and environmental

consequences at the local level - dynamics that are also central to understanding the contemporary mezcal industry.

The coffee industry in Mexico provides a clear example of how global commodity markets produce inequality and precarity for local producers. While Mexico is one of the world's leading coffee producers, with cultivation concentrated in states such as Chiapas, Veracruz, and Oaxaca, the benefits of this production are unevenly distributed. Smallholder farmers, who make up the majority of producers, often face significant challenges due to limited institutional support, inconsistent government policies, and low levels of private investment (International Coffee Organization, 2025). As a result, many coffee-producing households live in poverty and remain highly vulnerable to fluctuations in global market prices.

These dynamics are closely tied to the structure of the global coffee trade. As anthropologist Paola Sesia has argued, the liberalization of coffee markets has led to significant price volatility, with global prices dropping dramatically between 1997 and 2002, from approximately \$200 to \$43 per 100 pounds on the New York Stock Exchange (International Coffee Organization, 2010). While producers receive minimal compensation for raw coffee, transnational corporations such as Nestlé and Starbucks capture a disproportionate share of value through branding and retail. In Mexico, these global pressures have been compounded by neoliberal reforms. Under the administration of Vicente Fox, state programs designed to support coffee farmers were dismantled and replaced with social welfare initiatives, “transforming campesinos from economically active agricultural producers to the ‘poor’” (Sesia, 2012). As Sesia’s research in coffee-producing communities in Oaxaca demonstrates, this shift has increased dependence on federal subsidies while

limiting producers' ability to generate sustainable livelihoods from their land. The coffee sector in Mexico thus illustrates how integration into global commodity markets can produce conditions of marginalization and economic precarity for small-scale producers, as well as showing how the state has failed to create appropriate regulations to protect these producers.

Barbasco offers another example of how global commodity chains can marginalize local producers in Mexico. The barbasco trade emerged in the 1950s in Mexico, primarily in northern Oaxaca and southern Veracruz, and linked rural production to global pharmaceutical markets. The barbasco root was first collected in the jungle by campesinos. It was then sold to be processed, with specific chemical compounds extracted, until it was finally sold to pharmaceutical companies to produce synthetic hormones for oral contraceptives. Historian Gabriela Soto Laveaga examines this process, arguing that the multiple steps along the production process helped to create a system in which barbasco pickers were easily exploited. Describing a buyer who purchased barbasco for Syntex, a major pharmaceutical firm, she notes that when asked why campesinos were paid so little, he responded that there were so many workers that "any of them was willing to bring barbasco at any price," and that "the campesinos had no idea what was being done" (Laveaga, 2003). This conversation reveals that in the barbasco industry, there was both a surplus of labor and an asymmetry of knowledge within the commodity chain, which allowed for the marginalization of the producers.

At the same time, the barbasco trade also generated forms of local organization and resistance. Through ejido meetings and organizations such as Proquivemex, campesinos began to share information, form unions, and advocate for greater control over the commodity chain. As Laveaga shows, these efforts were often framed in terms of national

identity. Producers in these meetings spoke of how “a Mexican product such as barbasco must benefit the Mexican peasantry,” showing how ideas of national identity were used by campesinos to help advocate for their rights. The barbasco trade thus illustrates not only the marginalization that can occur within global commodity chains, but also the ways local actors contest and reshape these dynamics, including by mobilizing ideas of national and cultural identity.

Barbasco also offers a useful counterpoint to mezcal due to the fact that barbasco had little local use before pharmaceutical companies generated demand for it. It was, in effect, made into a commodity by the global market. Mezcal is different as it was produced and held cultural significance within Oaxacan communities long before global demand emerged. This distinction matters for how the extractive pattern plays out. Where barbasco's commodification marginalized producers economically, there was no sense of cultural extraction as there was no prior cultural meaning to transform. Mezcal's commodification, by contrast, impacts a product that was already culturally important. Therefore, the impacts of mezcal's commodification extend beyond economic marginalization to the reshaping of cultural value itself.

The examples of the coffee and barbasco industries demonstrate how commodities in Mexico have historically been shaped by global demand, unequal power relations, and the marginalization of local producers. They also show that local actors are not passive within these systems but contest and reshape them. Yet both cases concern raw materials and agricultural goods. Understanding mezcal requires an understanding of how value attaches to a commodity that is not only economic but also cultural. It is this cultural dimension of mezcal that following sections of this chapter will examine.

D. Mezcal in the Global Market

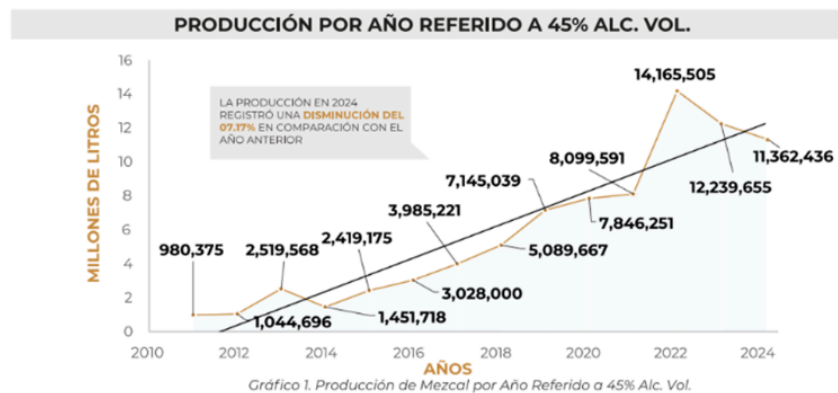
Unlike many commodities in Latin America and Mexico that have historically been produced for export, mezcal was traditionally produced for local consumption and was not structured around global commodity markets. Instead, its production was primarily focused in rural areas of Mexico, using traditional systems of labour and knowledge. As Maria Lira, James Robson, and Dan Klooster explain, “mezcal production has traditionally been organized as a family activity based on family members’ interactions, strong relationships, and the preservation of techniques and knowledge that have spanned generations” (Lira et al., 2022).

Mezcal functioned not simply as an economic good but as a cultural product, produced and consumed within households and communities, often for religious or social practices. De Orellana et al. write that the history of mezcal is “full of legends, flavors and folklore, and all of them incorporate a vast amount of traditional wisdom, especially regarding the cultivation and use of plants” (de Orellana et al., 2010). Anthropologist Toomas Gross noted in his fieldwork in the Sierra Juarez of Oaxaca that mezcal was spoken about and treated with a sense of reverence. He noted that mezcal was often “personified and endowed with a particular ‘personality’ that is somewhat congruent with that of the rural population. Mezcal’s smoky flavour and its acutely strong taste, for example, are considered to stand for the toughness, sturdiness, and resilience” of the people in the region (Gross, 2014). Mezcal is also a feature in most rites of passage and celebrations in Oaxaca, including baptisms, weddings, and fiestas patronales. Mezcal is even put on most altars for the Day of the Dead in Oaxaca, signifying its spiritual significance and its role as something that brings

families and communities together. Across all three fieldwork sites, palenqueros described how traditions and practices surrounding the production of mezcal had been passed down from the generations before them and how this was something they hoped to pass on to their children as well. In all three sites, there was also discussion surrounding the importance of mezcal to their communities. Mezcal wasn't simply an economic product or a livelihood; it was something that deeply shaped cultural life in the towns.

However, the cultural and economic structure has changed dramatically over the past two decades as mezcal has been rapidly incorporated into global commodity circuits. As seen in Figure 1, production has increased exponentially, rising from approximately 980,000 liters in 2010 to a peak of nearly 14 million liters in 2022 - an increase of over 1300%. Although production declined slightly in 2023 and 2024, it has remained above 10 million liters, indicating sustained expansion of the industry.

Figure 1. Mezcal production by year, standardized to 45% Alc. Vol., 2010–2024

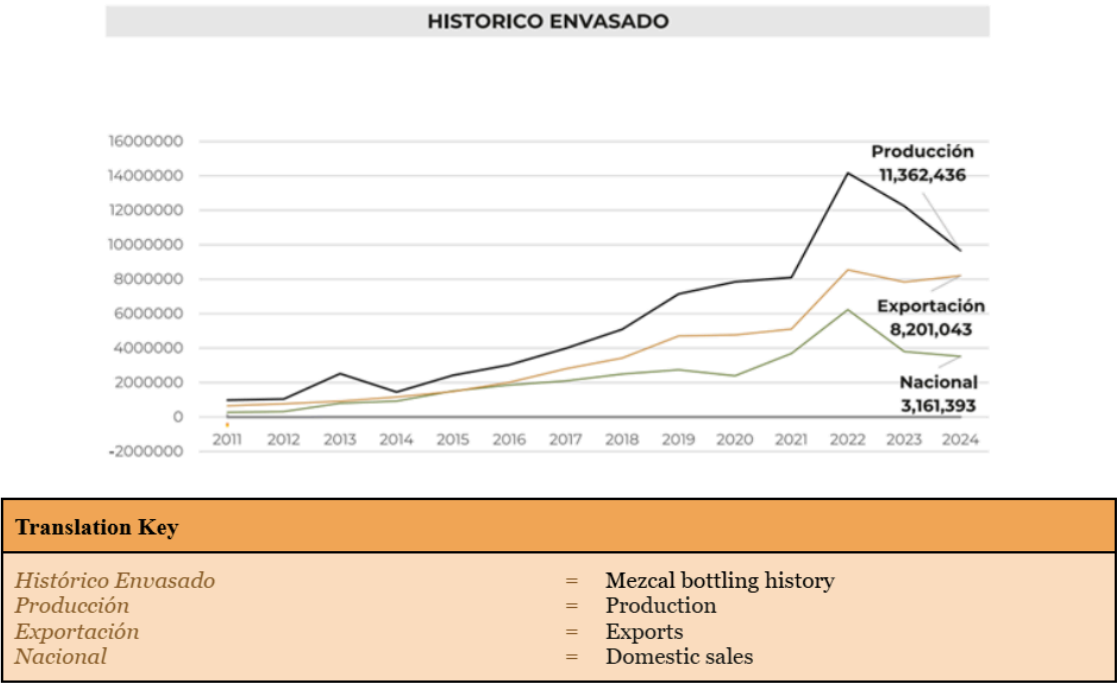


Translation Key	
<i>Producción por año referido a 45% Alc. Vol.</i>	= Production by year, standardized to 45% Alc. Vol.
<i>Millones de litros</i>	= Millions of liters
<i>Años</i>	= Years
<i>La producción en 2024 registró una disminución del 07.17% aproximadamente con el año anterior</i>	= 2024 production registered an approximately 07.17% decrease compared to the previous year

Source: COMERCAM (2025)

This growth has been closely tied to the expansion of export markets. By 2024, approximately 8 million liters of mezcal were bottled for export, compared to around 3 million liters for the national market. The majority of mezcal exports are sent to the United States, which accounted for approximately 75% of total exports in 2020 (Arellano-Plaza et al., 2022). While both national and export production have increased over time, exports have consistently accounted for the majority of bottled mezcal. As seen in Figure 2 below, the gap between national and export mezcal is growing, reaching a difference of approximately 5 million liters in 2024. Together, these trends demonstrate a significant transformation in the mezcal industry from a product historically produced for local consumption to one increasingly oriented toward global markets.

Figure 2. Historical bottled mezcal production, exports, and domestic sales, 2011–2024



Source: COMERCAM (2025)

The structure of the mezcal supply chain has shifted from local exchange to a complex system oriented toward export markets, with many new players involved in the chain. The growing success of the mezcal industry has led to the involvement of national and international investors, politicians, entrepreneurs, professionals, distribution intermediaries, and marketers, causing an increase not only in the production of mezcal but also in the number of brands (Arellano-Plaza et al., 2022). In many cases, mezcaleros now produce mezcal for sale to external brands, which bottle and market it under their own labels. This process often involves intermediaries who connect producers to brands, further distancing production from final sale. The following diagram (Figure 3) represents a simplified version of this commodity chain to help clarify the different steps in this process. It shows how the mezcal chain has grown beyond just producers and consumers to now involve various intermediaries who bottle, label, and market mezcal for foreign consumption.

Figure 3. Simplified mezcal commodity chain

Note: This is a simplified representation of the commodity chain. Chains can involve many more actors and pathways



Source: Author's own. Adapted from Cervantes-Luna et al. (2022)

Based on their field work in San Juan del Río, an Indigenous Zapotec community located 82 km from Oaxaca City, Lira, Robson, and Klooster noted that this expanded commodity chain has significant drawbacks. They explain that brands often pay low prices (around \$6-9 USD per liter), which “does not properly compensate for the time, labour, knowledge, skills, and resources invested in making that mezcal” (Lira et al., 2022). Thus, the changing structure of the market has allowed for producers to be underpaid, as the value of the product gets captured later down the supply chain, with brands selling mezcal at high prices to foreign consumers.

Mezcal’s origins as a small-scale, rural, and traditionally produced drink have made it desirable in global markets. These features are now reinterpreted as markers of quality for urban consumers. Once locally produced and consumed in rural regions of Mexico, mezcal is now largely marketed to urban and international consumers, particularly elite markets (Lira et al., 2022). This shift is reflected in its pricing. Bottles of mezcal in the United States often exceed \$100, while a single shot in a bar can cost around \$20. Demand has been driven by a growing niche market for premium agave spirits, as a subset of consumers is looking for mezcal that advertises artisanal production, rarity, and connection to place (Arellano-Plaza et al., 2022). Often, higher-end bottles will mention where the mezcal comes from on the label, as well as the name of the producer, allowing the consumer to feel a sense of connection to what they are drinking. This reflects broader patterns in global commodity chains, where value is concentrated in branding and distribution rather than production.

The growing demand for mezcal has therefore completely restructured the industry. As noted above, it has restructured the relationship between producers and consumers, from locally produced and consumed to a focus on export markets. However, the growing demand

for mezcal has also significantly impacted how mezcal is produced, the environments in which it is cultivated, and regional dynamics through the expansion of tourism.

1. Production

The growing demand for mezcal has reshaped production practices, placing pressure on producers to scale up and commercialize their operations. As Lira, Robson, and Klooster note, many of the institutional frameworks governing mezcal production in rural Oaxaca were not designed with a global market in mind, leaving producers to adapt rapidly to new economic pressures (Lira et al., 2022). This has contributed to a shift toward more industrialized production methods. While this has helped in increasing output, these changes also risk “sacrificing the artisanal aspect of this production” (Arellano-Plaza et al., 2022). Sociologist Sarah Bowen explains how some distilleries in Oaxaca have begun to adopt similar strategies to tequila companies, like cooking agave in autoclaves, using yeast to speed up fermentation, and distilling the mezcal in large stills to produce larger quantities more efficiently. This mezcal, she argues, “bears almost no resemblance to the artisanal mezcal produced in thousands of small family distilleries throughout western Mexico” (Bowen, 2014). Therefore, the rapidly increasing demand for mezcal has impacted traditional production methods, as a growing number of producers and brands are moving towards industrial techniques to be able to produce larger batches. This also puts small producers at a disadvantage, as their traditional production techniques generally produce much smaller batches at a slower rate, meaning they are not able to compete at an equal level in the market.

2. Environment

The increased demand for mezcal has placed growing pressure on agave-producing environments, as rising production has led to the overharvesting of agave and intensified use

of land. In response to expanding demand, large areas of forest have been cleared and replaced by agave monocultures, contributing to deforestation and soil erosion. At the same time, the overharvesting of wild agave has led to the depletion of certain species, threatening local biodiversity (de Orellana et al., 2010). These pressures extend beyond cultivation. Waste generated during mezcal production is often discharged into nearby waterways, while the processing of agave requires significant water inputs, exacerbating water scarcity in already arid regions. As de Orellana et al. observe, it is “ironic that the plants recognized and used for soil conservation in pre-Hispanic times are currently the cause of deforestation and soil erosion” (de Orellana et al., 2010). The environmental impacts of rising demand for mezcal highlight the need to consider not only its effects on producers but also on the communities where mezcal is produced. The production of mezcal has significantly altered the environmental and economic dynamics in many regions of Oaxaca.

3. Mezcal Tourism

The growing demand for mezcal has been accompanied by the expansion of mezcal tourism, reshaping economic dynamics in both Oaxaca City and rural areas of the state. Tour companies now regularly organize visits to palenques, transporting visitors from the city to production sites where they can observe the process and participate in tastings. In addition to these day trips, a more specialized form of tourism has emerged, with guided tours taking visitors into rural regions to visit multiple palenques and experience different production methods. Mezcal tours have reshaped dynamics within mezcal-producing communities, as many palenques have created demonstration areas for tourists; some have hired guides, and in some larger palenques, tourists can even take a bottle-shaped bus through agave fields. The way in which tourism has become a significant economic force for palenques and a large

part of the wider mezcal industry in Oaxaca further emphasizes how mezcal is being produced for foreign as opposed to local consumption.

Mezcal has been integrated into the broader tourism circuit of Oaxaca, through state-led initiatives, which aim to sell culture and tradition. Anthropologist Rhonda Brulotte describes how a growing tourism industry has transformed Oaxaca's image as a destination within the global tourism economy. She writes that "artesanías and mezcal are central characters in the story of Oaxaca's evolution: from a once-wealthy colonial center to a geographically isolated, socioeconomic backwater to, in its most recent phase, a tourist mecca renowned for its art and gastronomy" (Brulotte, 2025). Following the success of the tequila route in Jalisco, the Ministry of Tourism and Economic Development launched a mezcal route connecting Oaxaca City to Santiago Matatlán, a key production area for mezcal. The Oaxacan state government also promotes the annual International Mezcal Festival, the same month as the Guelaguetza, one of Oaxaca's most important cultural events, where delegations from different regions of Oaxaca perform traditional dances. As these events happen at the same time in July and bring in both international and domestic tourists, the two events are very intertwined. During the Guelaguetza parade, members of different delegations will pour mezcal into little cups for the people lucky enough to secure a spot close to the parade. As described by Gross, at the International Mezcal Festival, "besides conventional mezcal tasting and the promotion of different brands, the mezcal festival events also include the coronation of the Queen of Mezcal, traditional dances, and folkloric events aiming to associate mezcal closely with Oaxacan folk culture" (Gross, 2014). Therefore, by aligning mezcal promotion with cultural traditions, these initiatives position mezcal as both an economic product and a symbol of Oaxacan identity.

Together, these transformations show how mezcal's integration into global markets is reshaping not only its production, distribution, and consumption, but also the environmental and cultural systems that help create it.

E. Lessons From Tequila

Mezcal is often described as a smoky version of tequila. The comparison between the two drinks extends beyond just the taste. While mezcal has recently been integrated into global markets, tequila represents a more fully developed industry, which has achieved exponential growth and operates at a large, billion-dollar scale. Consequently, examining the growth and development of the tequila industry can provide insight into the potential trajectory of mezcal under continued commercialization.

Tequila production has expanded dramatically over the past several decades, increasing from approximately 104 million liters in 1995 to over 583 million liters in 2025. This growth has been driven largely by export markets, with approximately 407 million liters exported in 2025, including 331 million liters to the United States (Consejo Regulador del Tequila, 2025). As a result, tequila has become a billion-dollar global industry, characterized by large-scale production and an orientation towards international consumers.

The growth of the tequila industry has been both supported and structured by the Mexican state through a series of protections, most notably its denomination of origin. Tequila received denomination of origin protections in 1974, limiting the production of tequila to Jalisco and certain municipalities of 4 other surrounding states, while also regulating how tequila can be produced. This national protection of tequila was strengthened by a clause in NAFTA, which recognizes tequila as a distinctive product of Mexico (North

American Free Trade Agreement, 1994). As Sarah Bowen and Ana Valenzuela Zapata argue, tequila represents one of the oldest and most successful examples of geographic indication protection outside of Europe and has become a model for other Latin American countries seeking to establish similar systems (Bowen et al., 2009). By linking tequila production to specific regions and regulating how it is made, the denomination of origin has helped to standardize the product and facilitate its expansion into global markets.

The expansion of the tequila industry has shifted its ownership structure, with the market being dominated by large companies and transnational liquor conglomerates. The ten largest tequila brands represent 87 percent of the market. Furthermore, most of the large tequila companies, as well as many medium-sized and small distilleries, are owned or partially owned by transnational liquor companies (Bowen et al., 2012). This concentration of ownership has shifted where value is captured within the industry. Tequila is often sold in bulk and bottled outside of Mexico, particularly in the United States, reducing local employment opportunities and allowing profits from branding and marketing to be captured in export markets. At the same time, large companies have started to cultivate their own agave, instead of buying from farmers in the region, further marginalizing independent farmers. Bowen and Gaytán argue that while denominations of origin certifications are portrayed as protective measures that protect small producers and create a comparative advantage over mass-produced goods, they instead prioritize market expansion in ways that favor private industry (Bowen et al., 2012). Therefore, the growth of the tequila industry has allowed for the concentration of profits among large companies while limiting the role of small producers and agave farmers.

The expansion of the tequila industry has also significantly reshaped production practices, driving a shift toward industrialized, large-scale production. In contrast to traditional methods, many producers now rely on mechanized processes and cost-reducing strategies to increase output. One key example is the widespread production of mixto tequila, which contains a minimum of 51% agave and allows the remaining sugars to be taken from other sources, such as sugarcane. This reduces costs and allows for increased production, while further marginalizing agave farmers who are no longer essential to the production process (Bowen et al., 2012). These changes have also had significant environmental consequences. Traditional agave cultivation techniques are being replaced by a “more mechanized, chemically intensive production system, which in turn contributes to groundwater pollution, soil erosion, and loss of biodiversity” (Bowen et al., 2012). To prioritize market expansion, government regulations have therefore permitted the quality and traditional production methods of tequila to be neglected, while exacerbating environmental damage. This shift reveals a tension in how value operates within the tequila industry. Industrialization increases exchange value by reducing costs and scaling production but does so by eroding the tradition, land, and cultural identity that originally drove global demand for tequila in the first place.

Tourism has also been a large part of the growing agave industry and contributed to the image of tequila as a national symbol. Modeled after California’s wine route, the tourism board introduced Jalisco’s tequila trail, which links Guadalajara to the pueblo magico of Tequila. Tourists can take the tequila train, which brings them along the route, stopping at large distilleries like Jose Cuervo, as well as different bars selling 20-liter canteritos and playing live music from the region. The tourism of the tequila region emphasizes the national

importance of the drink, connecting tequila with Mexican pride and culture. The motto of the state of Jalisco, where tequila is primarily produced, is “Jalisco es Mexico (Jalisco is Mexico).” Tequila is following a similar narrative, being marketed to tourists as a part of Mexican identity and culture. However, Bowen and Gaytán argue that “powerful actors have appropriated what it means to be Mexican and manipulated the relevance of tequila’s authenticity as the nation’s spirit. More specifically, the construction of nationalist narratives around the tequila industry is used to forward corporate agendas in the global marketplace” (Bowen et al., 2012). In this way, tourism and national symbolism work together to market tequila as an authentic cultural product while simultaneously supporting large-scale commercial expansion.

The tequila industry illustrates how the expansion of global markets reshapes the value of a cultural commodity. As demand scaled up, the state and large corporations mobilized nationalist narratives and regulatory frameworks not to protect producing communities but to facilitate market expansion. The extractive logic of value concentrating with those who control branding and distribution rather than production is a feature of capitalism and would operate even in a purely domestic market. What globalization adds is scale. It widens the distance between producer and consumer and makes cultural narratives more profitable, since foreign consumers are paying for tradition and authenticity.

The symbolic value rooted in artisanal practice and community is eroded, while a new symbolic value that comes from nationalist branding, location, and an appearance of cultural connection is constructed through branding, tourism, and advertising. The result is an industry in which the cultural identity of tequila generates

enormous value globally, while the communities whose traditions create that identity are increasingly marginalized. As Cook's triangulation of value, discussed later in this chapter, helps explain, exchange value is maximized while symbolic value is reconstructed. Tequila, therefore, offers a point of comparison for mezcal. As globalization amplifies capitalism's ability to concentrate value away from producers, the cultural identity that makes mezcal valuable in global markets could follow the same trajectory as tequila.

F. Theory of Value

A theory of value provides a framework for analyzing how economic and social factors interact in the production and circulation of commodities. Examining commodity studies within the context of Latin America and Mexico helps situate mezcal within broader systems of extraction and global trade. The case of tequila further illustrates how the expansion of global markets can reshape production and marginalize small producers. However, this background does not fully explain how mezcal acquires value, as it does not account for the ways in which its cultural importance influences its position in global markets. To understand this, it is necessary to establish a theory of value.

Karl Marx opens volume one of *Capital*, explaining his theory of use value and exchange value regarding commodities. Marx writes that the utility of a thing constitutes its use value, while exchange value has both qualitative and quantitative dimensions. Exchange value refers to a commodity's ability to be exchanged as well as the proportion at which it exchanges relative to other commodities, a relationship shaped by the socially necessary labor time required for its production.

Scott Cook, in the article “Commodity Cultures, Mesoamerica and Mexico’s Changing Indigenous Economy”, expands on Marx’s theory of value by incorporating the concept of symbolic value. Cook argues that Marx’s work contains a tension between his labor theory of value and his broader theory of socioeconomic evolution regarding the role of commodities. Instead, Cook argues that the “bartering/product-transferring subjects are endowed with language and with various other capacities: social communication; self-identification as subjects; and self-recognition as separate from nature and from the products of their own labour” (Cook, 2006). Using the example of metates, Cook explains how symbolic value needs to be examined to fully understand the value of a commodity.

Metates are stones on which materials like grain and cocoa are ground using a smaller stone. Traditionally, they had a very clear use value and exchange value. With the introduction of corn grinding mills and other mechanized grinding machines, one would assume that the output and value of metates would have significantly decreased. However, in markets throughout Mexico, metates are still being sold, and there is a matching demand to support this. Cook argues that this demand is influenced by the symbolic value of metates. He explains that metates “have always embodied an important symbolic element that revolves around the role of women in the household division of labour and of women’s identity in peasant-Indian society and culture” (Cook, 2006). This symbolic value drives the demand for metates, despite the accessibility of mechanized grinding.

Understanding commodity value requires examining not only use and exchange value but also symbolic value. This Cook describes as the triangulation of value, a theory that embraces all three elements of value and evaluates context to see how exchange value varies according to its relation with the other two value elements. He concludes by stating that

applying this triangulation of value opens the door to a new understanding, not only of the Mesoamerican economy but also of the regional economies of contemporary Mexico and of Mexican participation in the North American economy under construction.

Cook's triangulation of value helps explain the value of mezcal more fully than Marx's framework of use and exchange value alone, as mezcal's market value is strongly shaped by symbolic value. While mezcal's use value as an alcoholic beverage remains relatively constant, its exchange value is influenced by symbolic meanings. The influence of symbolic value on mezcal's exchange value can be examined through denomination of origin regulations, agave varieties, production method certifications, and narratives of authenticity. Together, these factors demonstrate how mezcal functions as a commodity whose value is shaped not only by production and labor but also by cultural meaning and institutional regulation.

The way in which symbolic value shapes the exchange value of mezcal is summarized in Figure 4 below. It is important to note that this table focuses specifically on formal and institutional factors in which we can see the influence of symbolic value and, subsequently, an increase in exchange value. In doing so, it reflects the logic of the market itself, privileging the forms of symbolic value that can be standardized and monetized. Other forms of symbolic value exist - for example, family lineage in production and community identity. These factors are deeply meaningful but not easily quantifiable or institutionally recognized. This table should therefore be read as a map of how symbolic value is captured institutionally, not as a complete account of what makes mezcal symbolic or meaningful.

Figure 4. Symbolic value factors and their influence on mezcal exchange value

Factor	Symbolic Value	Impact on Exchange Value
Denomination of Origin (DO)	Links mezcal to specific regions and cultural traditions; signals authenticity	Increases price in the global market; keeps a monopoly on production
Agave Varieties	Wild agave associated with rarity	Rare agave varieties priced higher due to uniqueness and scarcity
Production Method Certifications	Categories such as artisanal and ancestral signal traditional, labor-intensive production methods	Products labeled artisanal or ancestral generally sell for higher prices than industrial mezcal
Narratives of Authenticity	Marketing emphasizes maestro mezcaleros, generational knowledge, and small-batch production	Consumers often pay higher prices for mezcal associated with traditional craftsmanship and heritage

Source: Author's own

Mezcal has denomination of origin protections, which tie mezcal production to certain regions of Mexico. The DO for mezcal was established in 1994 and defines where mezcal can be made. Originally, only 5 states were included under the DO regulations (Oaxaca, Durango, Guerrero, San Luis Potosí, and Zacatecas), even though at least twenty-four of the thirty-one Mexican states and the Federal District of Mexico have a documented history of mezcal production (Bowen, 2015). Over the years, there have been many changes to these regulations, as different states have petitioned to be included within the borders of the DO. According to COMERCAM, the organization that oversees the regulation of mezcal and certifies product for the market, the Denomination of Origin Mezcal (DOM) includes the states of Oaxaca, Guerrero, San Luis Potosí, Zacatecas and Durango. It also includes 2 municipalities of Guanajuato, 11 municipalities of Tamaulipas, 29 municipalities of Michoacán, and 116 municipalities of Puebla that were added after the latter states had demonstrated that they have a tradition in the production of mezcal. In 2018,

the DOM protection resolution was further modified to include some municipalities in the State of Mexico, Aguascalientes and Morelos. However, there is currently an appeal process looking at the inclusion of 4 municipalities in the State of Sinaloa. (COMERCAM).

Sarah Bowen and Danny Hamrick, in their article “Defining Mexico’s Spirit,” state that advocates for denomination of origin believe that such regulations guarantee the quality and authenticity of mezcal while also enhancing market opportunities. These protections not only promote commercial and economic interests but also address local needs that are rooted in cultural traditions and environmental considerations. Bowen and Hamrick also draw on the work of sociologist Elizabeth Barham, who writes that “by insisting upon a strong link in production to the ecology and culture of specific places, [DOs] re-embed a product in the natural processes and social context of its territory” (Barham, 2003). Bowen and Hamrick explain that in recent years, “traditional foods and drinks have emerged as profitable and politically salient alternatives to the perceived homogenizing effects of globalization” (Bowen and Hamrick, 2014) Thus, in a globalized world, where our food is shipped to various countries for processing and packaging, before arriving at our supermarkets, people value having a sense of connection to the place and people who produced our food. The denomination of origin of mezcal, therefore, adds symbolic value to the commodity. By linking mezcal production to specific geographic regions and cultural traditions, the DO signals authenticity to consumers and suggests that the product was produced in a place and by communities historically connected to its production. While the use value of mezcal remains the same - whether it is produced in Oaxaca or Nayarit, it is still an alcoholic drink - the DO increases its exchange value by attaching symbolic meanings of place and tradition to the product.

The agave varieties of mezcal also contribute to the value of the product. There are over 30 varieties of agave that can be used to produce mezcal. Each type has a different maturation period. The most common type of agave used for mezcal production is *Agave angustifolia*, also known as Espadín. As seen in Figure 5 below, in 2024, Espadín made up 85.25% of mezcal production in Mexico. Part of the reason for this is the maturation period of Espadín. Espadín agave reaches maturity more quickly than most other agave varieties, taking only 6 to 10 years. In contrast, for example, *Agave potatorum*, commonly known as Tobalá, typically matures in 7 to 13 years (Arellano-Plaza et al., 2022). This quicker maturation period has led to the increased cultivation of Espadín. Most other agave varieties fall under the category of wild agave, as they grow naturally in mountainous regions rather than being cultivated. Compared to Espadín, wild agaves have significantly lower sugar content, meaning that a larger number of plants is required to produce the same amount of mezcal. The popularity of Espadín has led to its widespread cultivation, making it a reliable and consistent source for mezcal production. However, a separate but simultaneous process is driving the depletion of wild agave species. As premium consumer markets increasingly seek out rare and different mezcals, demand for wild agave varieties has grown independently of Espadín production, causing these species to become increasingly depleted and harder to find (Lira et al. 2022). This variation in agave species used to produce mezcal has an important impact on its value. Espadín adds value by allowing producers to cultivate agave and produce mezcal in larger quantities within a shorter time frame, supporting a more consistent supply. In contrast, mezcal made from wild agave carries greater symbolic value due to the increasing rarity of the plants. This symbolic value is often translated into higher exchange

value, as consumers are willing to pay higher prices for mezcal produced from rare or wild agave varieties.

Figure 5. Mezcal production by agave type, standardized to 45% Alc. Vol

PRODUCCIÓN POR TIPO DE MAGUEY (REFERIDO A 45% ALC. VOL.)		
En 2024, la producción de mezcal al 45% Alc. Vol. alcanzó 11,362,436 litros, con el Maguey Espadín (A. Angustifolia) como el más utilizado, representando el 85.25%.		
NO	TIPO DE MAGUEY	% QUE REPRESENTA
1	MAGUEY ESPADÍN (Agave angustifolia)	85.25%
2	MAGUEY CENIZO (Agave durangensis)	2.47%
3	MAGUEY TOBALÁ (Agave potatorum)	1.00%
4	MAGUEY VERDE (Agave salmiana)	0.83%
5	MAGUEY PAPALOTE (Agave cupreata)	0.68%
6	MAGUEY AZUL (Agave tequilana)	0.67%
7	MAGUEY TEPEZTATE (Agave marmorata)	0.46%
8	MAGUEY CUISHE (Agave karwinskii)	0.44%
9	ENSAMBLES	5.54%
10	OTROS (31 Variedades)	2.66 %

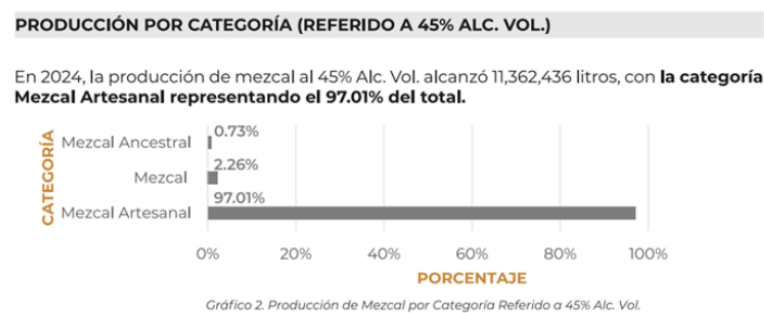
Translation Key	
En 2024, la producción de mezcal al 45% Alc. Vol. alcanzó 11,362,436 litros, con el Maguey Espadín (A. Angustifolia) como el más utilizado, representando el 85.25%	= In 2024, mezcal production at 45% Alc. Vol. reached 11,362,436 liters, with Maguey Espadín (A. Angustifolia) as the most used variety, representing 85.25%
Tipo de maguey	= Type of Agave
% Que representa	= % Share of production
Ensamblés	= Blends
Otros (31 Variedades)	= Others (31 varieties)

Source: COMERCAM (2025)

Production method certifications are another important element in determining the value of mezcal. Mezcal can be classified into three distinct categories: mezcal, artisanal mezcal, and ancestral mezcal. These labels indicate the production methods used for the mezcal. While there may be some variations depending on the state, the general process can be described as follows. Mezcal is generally known for its industrialized production. The agave can be cooked in stone pits or above-ground ovens, and it can then be crushed by a mill or shredder and fermented in concrete or stainless steel tanks. It is then generally

distilled in large stainless steel stills. Artisanal mezcal, the most common production method, allows for agave to be cooked in an underground stone pit or an above-ground oven and crushed by hand, tahona, mills, or a mechanical shredder. It is then fermented in clay, earth, or wood, and finally, it is distilled in copper stills over direct fire. Ancestral mezcal has much stricter requirements than the other two methods. The agave must be roasted in underground pit ovens. It is then crushed by hand, tahona, or specific mills. Next, it is fermented in stone, earth, wood, or clay and most importantly, is distilled in small clay pots over direct fire. The regulations for ancestral mezcal are strict and labor-intensive, requiring significant effort and resulting in small batches. It therefore only accounts for 0.73% of mezcal production in 2024 (COMERCAM). Artisanal mezcal, by contrast, has much more loosely defined requirements; this means that mezcal made with various levels of mechanization can be labeled and sold as artisanal. It accounts for 97.01% of mezcal production in 2024. The percentages of each production type can be seen in Figure 6 below.

Figure 6. Mezcal production by category, standardized to 45% Alc. Vol



Translation Key	
En 2024, la producción de mezcal al 45% Alc. Vol. alcanzó 11,362,436 litros, con la categoría Mezcal Artesanal representando el 97.01% del total	= In 2024, mezcal production at 45% Alc. Vol. reached 11,362,436 liters, with the Artisanal Mezcal category representing 97.01% of the total
Categoría	= Category
Porcentaje	= Percentage

Source: COMERCAM (2025)

These certification labels illustrate how symbolic value influences the exchange value of mezcal. Industrial mezcal is generally the easiest to produce, but it is less valued in global markets because consumers often look for mezcal that is associated with traditional production methods. In contrast, labeling a product as artisanal signals a greater degree of traditional production. Therefore, even when it is produced in larger batches by companies that meet the required standards for production, the consumer still sees the symbolic value of the artisanal label. Ancestral mezcal demonstrates this relationship between tradition and value even more clearly, as it typically sells for much higher prices due to the symbolic value attached to its labor-intensive processes and stronger association with tradition. Certification systems, therefore, attempt to define and regulate authenticity by translating cultural practices into production categories, allowing symbolic value to be standardized and monetized for global markets.

Narratives of authenticity also play a large part in the value of mezcal. Mezcal is usually marketed as a small-batch product made by a maestro mezcalero whose family has been making mezcal for generations. Sarah Bowen describes talking to bartenders, who discussed what they saw as ‘true mezcal culture.’ Many bartenders and retailers spoke of the maestros mezcaleros in reverential, almost spiritual terms, describing the need to preserve mezcal culture in language closer to protecting a work of art or a rare flower from extinction - equating agave spirits with historical artifacts (Bowen, 2015).

The regulations and certifications discussed above all claim to help protect this mezcal culture; however, they have actually caused harm to many mezcaleros by cutting them out of the market or causing them to change their methods to fit the definitions of tradition. Denomination of Origin regulations around the world often include in their goals

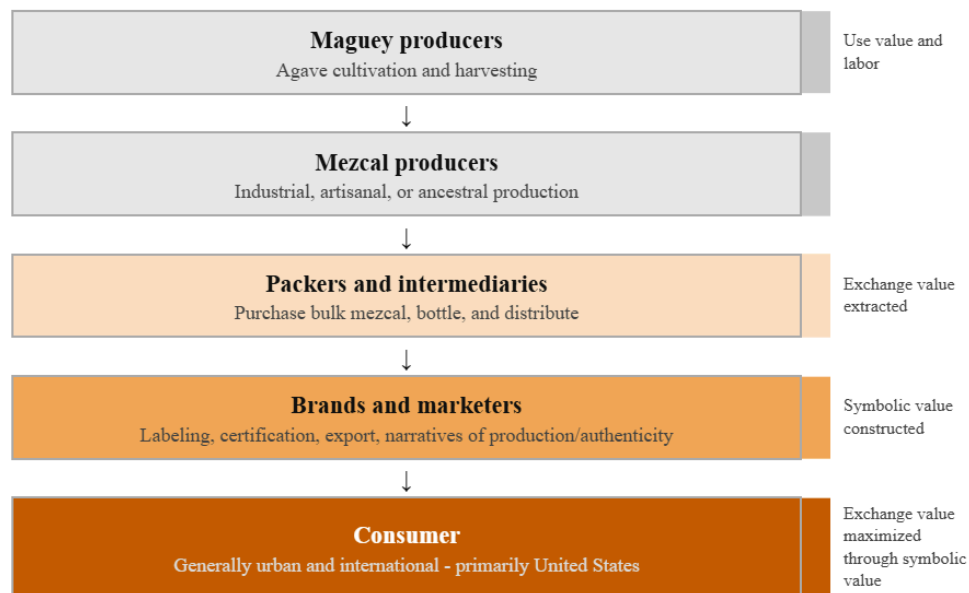
rural development or environmental protection. In Mexico, Designations of Origin (DOs) are overseen by the Mexican Institute of Industrial Property. While the MIIP frames its role as protecting Mexican products from foreign competition, this protection does not extend equally to all Mexican actors in the industry. In practice, it primarily benefits Mexican brands and exporters who are able to navigate the costly certification process and leverage the DO's market protections. The certification process is intended to ensure that mezcal meets the requirements for export markets, sometimes sidelining the needs of the producers themselves. Thus, Bowen argues that these certifications are primarily “focused on guaranteeing truth in advertising, protecting Mexican goods from foreign-produced imitations, and eliminating market distortions” (Bowen, 2015). The issue with Denomination of origin, there therefore is not simply a problem of geographic coverage. It is inherently exclusionary as it functions by drawing boundaries and standardizing production. Any such boundary necessarily advantages those positioned to meet its requirements.

Many producers, whose families have been making mezcal for generations, are not able to sell under the label of mezcal, as they are not producing within the states listed in the DO. The certification process is also long and costly, meaning that many producers lack the financial resources or knowledge to properly certify their mezcal. This means that while they can sell their mezcal informally in local markets, they are not able to export their own product or are less able to negotiate with buyers or intermediaries. Bowen, therefore, argues that if producers are not empowered to determine what “authentic practices look like and how they evolve over time, there is a risk of fetishizing particular practices, or ways of life, as authentic, locking producers into museums of production” (Bowen, 2015). These narratives of authenticity play a central role in shaping the symbolic value of mezcal, which

in turn influences its exchange value in global markets. However, when institutions and certifications control how authenticity is defined, they also determine who can access that value, often excluding the very producers whose traditions are used to construct mezcal's authenticity.

While mezcal's use value as an alcoholic beverage remains relatively constant, its exchange value is heavily shaped by symbolic meanings attached to place, agave varieties, production methods, and narratives of authenticity. These symbolic meanings are constructed through regulatory systems and cultural narratives, and they play a central role in determining how mezcal circulates within global markets. Figure 7 illustrates how Cook's triangulation of value maps onto the mezcal commodity chain.

Figure 7. Mezcal commodity chain and Cook's triangulation of value



Source: Author's own, adapted from Cervantes-Luna et al. (2022).

The extraction of value illustrated in Figure 7 produces two distinct dynamics of inequality and exploitation. The first is inequality, in which value concentrates at the

branding and export stages of the chain while producers receive a small fraction of the final profit. The second is exploitation, a process in which value generated by a producer's labor is transferred to another actor due to differences in power or knowledge. Exploitation is a mechanism within this supply chain that produces inequality. Intermediaries who buy mezcal below its cost of production exploit producers directly, taking advantage of their limited bargaining power and lack of knowledge of the potential profits to be made. Certification bodies and the state do not extract surplus from producers' labor. However, they do create barriers that determine who can access high-value markets, something that generates inequality and leads excluded producers to be exploited by intermediaries. Brands and global consumers capture the symbolic value attached to mezcal's heritage, which is generated by the producing community. The following chapter analyses how different producers interact with this market, while Chapter 3 examines organizations that target issues within the industry. Cook's triangulation of value thus helps explain mezcal's exchange value, as influenced by its symbolic value, but also how exploitation and inequality are produced along its commodity chain.

Commodity studies provides a framework for understanding the social and economic dynamics of the mezcal industry. Situating mezcal within the history of Mexican commodities makes clear that it is not an exceptional case. The extractive structure that has shaped the coffee and barbasco industries is also reshaping the mezcal industry. What distinguishes mezcal is that it had a deep cultural and symbolic value before global demand. Therefore, it cannot be analysed through the lens of raw materials. Instead, its cultural meaning needs to be taken into account. Applying Cook's triangulation of value reveals that mezcal's worth is shaped not only by labor and usefulness but also by the cultural

significance attached to it, making it a cultural commodity whose symbolic value is actively constructed, marketed, and in some cases appropriated by producers, organizations, brands, and the state. The central question this raises is whether that symbolic value translates into economic benefit for the producing communities whose traditions generate it. The following chapter tests this against fieldwork in three mezcal-producing communities that occupy distinct positions within the commodity chain, examining how culture is being reorganized under global demand and what this means for development in rural Oaxaca.

III. Chapter 2

Chapter 1 established that mezcal's symbolic value, which is based in tradition, place, and production method, is actively constructed in ways that often exclude the producers who generate it. This chapter examines how that process unfolds across three mezcal-producing communities, asking three central questions. First, how is the expansion of the global mezcal market impacting cultural heritage and production practices? Second, can mezcal function as a tool for economic development in rural Oaxaca? And third, how are ideas of culture and development intertwined?

To explore these questions, I compare three different communities that reflect different positions within the mezcal economy. Santiago Matatlán, widely known as the ‘mezcal capital of the world,’ has large-scale production, established export networks, and significant tourism. Santa Catarina Minas is known for its ancestral clay-pot distillation and has become a destination for mezcal-focused tourism. Sola de Vega is also associated with ancestral production but differs in its geographic isolation and limited tourism presence.

A. Regional Overview

It is important to understand Oaxaca's regional geography and political economy to situate these three field sites within their broader context. Oaxaca is one of Mexico's most geographically diverse states. It is divided into eight regions: the Central Valleys, Sierra Norte, Sierra Sur, Mixteca, Cañada, Costa, Papaloapan, and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Much of the state is characterized by rugged mountainous terrain, and many of its regions remain remote and difficult to access. At the center of the state lies the Central Valleys, home to Oaxaca City, which is the state's political, economic, and cultural capital. The Central

Valleys benefit from better road infrastructure, established tourism circuits, and greater access to international markets, making them the primary entry point for visitors and investment into the state. Much of what is internationally recognized as Oaxacan culture, like its gastronomy and crafts, originates from communities in the Central Valleys and is part of a tourism circuit that starts in Oaxaca City. This means that the cultural diversity of Oaxaca's other seven regions is not generally part of the global cultural imagination of the state. Regions further from Oaxaca City, particularly those in more mountainous and isolated areas, have had significantly less exposure to tourism circuits and market networks. As this chapter will show, this geographic and economic centralization has profoundly shaped the mezcal industry, concentrating the economic benefits of globalization in communities closest to Oaxaca City while leaving more remote producers on the periphery. The following map (Figure 8) illustrates the location of my 3 research sites, showing their distance from Oaxaca City.

Figure 8. Map of Oaxaca Displaying Research Site Locations



Source: Author's own. Map adapted from Oaxaca Mio.

Examining these three sites together allows for a comparison of how factors like global demand, tourism, and regulations shape cultural practice and economic opportunity in different ways. The following table gives a brief overview of the differences between the sites, which will be further analysed in the chapter.

Figure 9. Comparison of mezcal-producing communities in Oaxaca

	Santiago Matatlán	Santa Catarina Minas	Sola de Vega
Distance From City	1 Hour	1 Hour	2.5 Hours
Road Quality	Good	Good	Bad
Tourism	Yes (Primarily General Tours to Oaxacan Sites)	Yes (Mezcal-Specific Tourism)	No
Production Method	Artisanal	Ancestral	Ancestral
Majority of Producers Certified	Yes	Yes	No
Average Price of a Litre of Espadín (In Pesos MXN)	\$350	\$600	\$200

Source: Author's own

B. Santiago Matatlán

As the largest producer of mezcal in Oaxaca, Santiago Matatlán provides insight into how cultural production changes under global demand. Here, mezcal has shifted from a primarily local and cultural product to an export-oriented commodity. Instead of prioritising traditional production methods, Matatlán is known for Espadín production, hired labour, and mechanization. This transformation reveals how tradition and cultural heritage have been reorganized around scale and tourism.

Santiago Matatlán is a small Zapotec town located in the Central Valleys of Oaxaca, approximately one hour from Oaxaca City along a major highway. While usually being easy to access, due to the good conditions of the highway and the proximity to the city, the day I first went to do fieldwork there, I was particularly unlucky. I took a colectivo from the baseball station in Oaxaca City, expecting to arrive in Matatlán promptly, if not slightly uncomfortably, depending on how many passengers we ended up picking up. Unfortunately, that day, a blockade was formed along the highway. The driver of the colectivo tried driving through a river to help us get around the blockade, and we ended up lost in a field with a very muddy car. The women sitting at the front of the colectivo then pulled up a satellite map of the area and directed the driver through different fields, aiming to find our way back to a road. She assured us that we could have faith in our driver, as he also worked as a judge, evaluating bull riding skills at jaripeos in her town. This occupation clearly has transferable skills for navigating fields and getting around blockades, as sure enough, our colectivo reached Matatlán safely and I only had to pay the driver 50 pesos extra for his services.

Despite having a population of only around 10,000 residents, Matatlán produces the majority of mezcal in the state of Oaxaca and is referred to as the “mezcal capital of the world” (Secretaría de Economía, 2026). According to Bullock, there are roughly eighty registered palenques in Matatlán alone, an unusually high concentration of production relative to its size (Bullock, 2017). As Juan Carlos Bautista explains in ‘Historia, territorio y cultura indígena: origen, auge y ocaso de la elaboración artesanal de mezcal en Matatlán, Oaxaca, México (capital mundial del mezcal),’ “Matatlán adopted mezcal production as its principal economic activity after recognizing favorable attributes for its development, such as

agroclimatic conditions, the diversity of wild maguey species, conditions of poverty and marginalization, illiteracy, and artisanal technology” (Bautista, 2020).

Artisanal production methods are now the most common in Matatlán. Producers explained that ancestral production, through clay pot distillation, used to be more widespread, but because it yields smaller batches, many shifted to artisanal methods in order to increase output and meet rising demand. Similarly, while wild agave was once abundant in the region, most producers now cultivate Espadín, which allows for more predictable and faster production due to its shorter maturation time. At the same time, some larger palenques have begun incorporating industrial production techniques. Producers described the transformation of Matatlán over time, stating

Antes yo miraba que era muy diferente. Los palenques eran más pequeños, porque la demanda del mezcal no era tanto, era a nivel estatal. Sí, sí. Unos que otros los sacaban a nivel nacional. Pero ahorita que se abrió esto de libre comercio y toda esa cosa, ya empezaron a exportarlo a otros países. Asia, Europa, América.

Before, I saw that it was very different. The palenques were smaller because the demand for mezcal wasn't that high, it was mostly at the state level. Some would sell nationally. But now that free trade opened up and all of that, they started exporting to other countries, Asia, Europe, America.

The growth of mezcal production has also reshaped local labor dynamics. Larger palenques attract workers not only from nearby communities but from other states:

Aquí hay mucha gente de otros pueblos. Muchos. Pero de hecho, de otros estados. Hay gente de otros estados aquí. Pero el 70% de las personas trabajan afuera, ¿no? Sí, sí. El 70% de las personas que son de diferentes partes del estado, trabajan acá. Aquí vas a encontrar gente de Chiapas, de Puebla, unos de Durango. Todos los que vinieron aquí por el trabajo.

There are many people here from other towns, many. In fact, from other states. There are people from other states here. Seventy percent of the people working here are from different parts of the state. You'll find people from Chiapas, from Puebla, some from Durango. They all came here for work.

As mezcal demand expanded, Matatlán also became incorporated into tourism circuits. As Brulotte notes, at the start of the twenty-first century, many tourist visits to palenques occurred as part of organized day trips from Oaxaca City, often stopping at small distilleries along the Pan-American Highway east of the city or in Matatlán itself (Brulotte, 2025). The government later formalized a “mezcal route” centered along the highway passing through Matatlán and surrounding areas. However, Brulotte observes that this infrastructure did not transform Matatlán into a bustling tourist hub. Instead, tourism is concentrated in the large palenques along the main highway. Producers located away from the main highway explained that they don't receive any of the

tourism that Matatlán is known for.

No, aquí no vienen turistas. Pero en otros de allá. Sí, porque como estamos más lejos de la calle.

No, tourists don't come here. They go to others over there, because we're farther from the road.

Commercial palenques positioned directly along the highway capture the majority of tourist traffic, limiting the broader circulation of tourism income throughout the town. As a result, the benefits of production and tourism are unevenly distributed within the community.

Santiago Matatlán is known as the “mezcal capital of the world,” a title that suggests tradition and authenticity. At the same time, it is the place where mezcal production is the most commercialized and, in some cases, increasingly industrialized. The town demonstrates how global markets have affected the cultural heritage of Mezcal. Markets have not necessarily erased cultural heritage but have reorganized it, scaling it up, scripting it for tourism, and distributing its economic benefits unevenly. Examining mezcal production in Matatlán, therefore, offers insight into how cultural heritage, economic development, and tourism intersect in one of the most important mezcal-producing sites in Oaxaca.

To understand how this uneven commercialization operates at the level of individual producers, it is useful to examine three palenques within Matatlán that have different positions within the expanding mezcal market. Although all three are

operating in the ‘mezcal capital of the world’, they engage global demand in distinct ways.

Palenque 1

This palenque is located roughly ten minutes off the main highway and accessible only by dirt roads through agave fields. The site consists of a large open-air production space covered by a single roof and lacks signage, decoration, or tourism infrastructure. Agave is cooked in underground pits heated through a cement air tunnel, crushed with a mechanized tahona, fermented in cement tanks, and distilled in copper stills. Production focuses exclusively on Espadín, allowing for consistent and repeated batches. Only three workers were present during my visit, none originally from Matatlán, while the owner visits the site periodically. The palenque produces both its own label and mezcal for external brands, much of which is exported outside Mexico. Mezcal sells for approximately 250 pesos per liter a granel of Espadín.

While the production methods remain within artisanal certification standards, the organization of the palenque differs from the common image of a traditional family-run operation. Labor is hired rather than intergenerational, and the exclusive focus on cultivated Espadín reflects an emphasis on scale and consistency over agave diversity. The owner, however, is local and has seemingly leveraged the mezcal boom not through tourism or heritage branding but through higher-volume production.

This palenque illustrates how economic opportunity in Matatlán is not evenly distributed even among certified producers. Without tourism access, higher-volume production becomes the primary strategy for capturing value. This higher-volume production

prioritizes scale over tradition and leaves smaller producers unable to compete on the same terms.

Palenque 2

Also located roughly ten minutes from the highway along dirt roads outside common visitor routes, this palenque operated as a multigenerational business. A father and his sons managed daily production, continuing what they described as four generations of mezcal production. The palenque had a familiar atmosphere. There were family photographs hung on the walls, and the family cat was roaming around as I conducted my interview. In this palenque, traditional production methods were passed down from one generation to the next.

Yo empecé más que nada viendo desde muy chico. Cuando iba yo a la escuela, recuerdo que ayudaba yo a mi papá, a veces pasándole las herramientas, aunque no ayudando con fuerza, pero sí viendo. Y poco a poco fuimos como que agarrando práctica, metiéndole mano al trabajo y de ahí, pues hasta ahora, pues llevo todas las experiencias y conocimientos de la elaboración del mezcal.

I started mostly by watching from a very young age. When I went to school, I remember helping my father, sometimes just handing him tools. I wasn't helping with strength, but I was watching. Little by little we got practice, started getting involved in the work, and from then until now, I carry all the experience and knowledge of making mezcal.

The palenque primarily produced Espadín, with occasional small batches of wild agave. Production remained relatively small, but the family sold mezcal to a well-known bar in Oaxaca City as its mezcal de casa (house mezcal). They were also developing their own brand, which was being sold in bars in Chicago and Arizona. The son described brand ownership as a matter of recognition and pride:

Algún día nosotros igual quisiéramos tener ese reconocimiento de tener nuestra propia marca, decir oye, esta es mi marca de fiscal, es mía, es de mi propiedad. Sí, claro, claro que sí. Y no decir pues, ah, esta es la marca de esta persona.

One day we would also like to have that recognition of having our own brand, to say, hey, this is my official brand, it's mine, it belongs to me, and not to have to say, this is someone else's brand.

In contrast, the father expressed a preference for selling directly to external brands, which removed the administrative and regulatory issues associated with commercialization and export. The Palenque received no tourism due to its distance from the highway, and the prices for a litre of Espadín were similar to those of Palenque 1.

Here, mezcal production reveals intergenerational knowledge alongside intergenerational tension. Mezcal is produced through inherited techniques, but the new generation is looking to create brand recognition and market mobility, while the older generation emphasized the value and stability of contract production. Cultural heritage here, especially in the younger generation, is also connected to market success. The son described the pride involved in having his family's name and traditions attached to a brand of their

own, indicating the way in which the concept of cultural value and pride is tied to market success. The son's ambition for brand ownership reflects a broader dynamic in which market integration increasingly shapes how tradition is understood and valued.

Palenque 3

Located directly on the main highway entering town, this palenque's focus is both mezcal production and tourism. A large colourful mezcal sign, similar to those found in the pueblos mágicos of Mexico, a restaurant, and a tasting room greet tourists arriving on guided tours. Tour buses start from Oaxaca City and bring tourists here on their way to Mitla and Hierve el Agua. Visitors are guided through the production process and then taken through agave fields in a large mezcal-bottle-shaped bus.

The palenque employed roughly 80 workers and more than 10 maestros mezcaleros who oversee production. Mezcal was produced primarily through the artisanal method, with some ancestral clay pot distillation for demonstration. The palenque manufactured mezcal for three different brands. These include two national brands and one famous export brand. The mezcal sold at this palenque was a much higher price than Palenque 1 or 2, selling at nearly double the price. However, they only sell labeled bottles instead of selling a granel. Throughout the tour, guides emphasized Oaxacan identity and labor in the production process:

Imágínesse, una botella para que esté lista, cuántas manos oaxaqueñas lo tocan para poderla obtener.

Imagine, for a bottle to be ready, how many Oaxacan hands touch it in order to produce it.

The palenque made sure to tie Oaxacan identity and labor into the value of the product. Unlike the previous palenques, cultural heritage here was formally stated and staged for visitors while production operated at high commercial capacity. Traditional mezcal practices are curated and displayed for tourist groups, while generating large-scale production for various brands and creating substantial local employment. Interestingly, this was the only palenque out of the three that used ancestral production methods, something usually associated with tradition and laborious manual production. However, in this palenque, it was used primarily for demonstrative purposes in tours and sold at a very high price. This case reveals how ancestral production, typically associated with small-scale palenques and traditional practices, can be incorporated into large-scale commercial operations, where authenticity becomes part of the marketing strategy rather than the traditional mode of production.

The three palenques in Matatlan show how symbolic value is being constructed and leveraged. Rising global demand has not erased traditional production techniques in these palenques, but it has reorganized them to focus on scale and profit. Ancestral methods that yield small batches have largely been replaced with artisanal production that allows for higher output, except in cases where it can be used as part of tourist demonstrations. Wild agave diversity has been replaced by cultivated Espadín, and tradition has been used to add value to the product. These three palenques, despite operating at very different scales, have all leveraged the features of Cook's symbolic

value, as illustrated in Figure 4, using certification, branding, and the presentation of artisanal production to construct and capture value in global markets

Market access in Matatlán has eroded a sense of tradition while simultaneously creating popularity and economic opportunity, although uneven. While large, highway-facing palenques capture tourism opportunities, smaller producers located off main routes remain excluded, which is reflected in the lower price of their mezcal. Here we see inequality playing out within the town, as larger producers and brands are able to capture more profit and bring in more tourism. However, these large palenques do provide a large amount of employment, not just for people from Matatlán but from other areas of Oaxaca as well. The visibility and market access of palenques in Oaxaca both erode and advance the culture surrounding mezcal in different ways. Matatlan produces the majority of mezcal that people drink, and most visitors on tours are visiting Matatlán, yet it is also where production has moved furthest from the ancestral methods that give mezcal its cultural meaning.

C. Santa Catarina Minas

Santa Catarina Minas represents a different relationship between cultural heritage and economic development from Santiago Matatlán. In Minas, ancestral production methods have become the foundation of market success. Here, ancestral production methods help to attract mezcal-specific tourism and command higher prices. However, this leveraging of tradition has also generated competing ideas about who has the right to define and protect that tradition.

Santa Catarina Minas is located approximately one hour south of Oaxaca City and about fifteen minutes from Ocotlán de Morelos, a larger town along the main highway. With

fewer than 5,000 residents, it is fairly small, yet it holds a significant position within Oaxaca's mezcal landscape (Secretaría de Economía, 2026). The town is known for producing mezcal almost exclusively through ancestral methods, using clay pot distillation. Many palenques in the region have been passed down through generations, and production remains closely tied to family lineage and local identity.

Although Santa Catarina Minas is not included in the government's Ruta del Mezcal, it receives substantial mezcal-focused tourism. Its proximity to Oaxaca City and relatively straightforward transportation routes make it accessible, but unlike Matatlán, tourism here is more specialized. Visitors often come specifically to observe ancestral production techniques rather than as part of a regional Oaxacan tour or stop along the way to Hierve el Agua, Mitla, or other tourist attractions in the state. Media exposure, including a 60 Minutes segment, has further contributed to the town's growing reputation as a center of traditional mezcal production (CBS, 2025).

The local economy reflects this positioning as a mezcal destination. While some producers sell to external brands, several palenques have successfully developed their own labels and export directly to the United States at high price points. Tourism infrastructure has expanded accordingly. Many palenques, while still small, have tasting rooms, printed menus (often in English), accept credit cards, and offer bottle-sealing for air travel.

Visiting Minas was noticeably easier than traveling to other production sites. Vans depart regularly from Oaxaca City to Ocotlán, and colectivos continue on to Minas once enough passengers gather. The system runs very smoothly. I had arranged to meet a well-known mezcalero, and upon arriving in town, a woman from my colectivo immediately offered to walk me to his palenque, which happened to be on her way home. She explained to

me how nearly everyone in the town had something to do with mezcal, and how she had seen the number of tour groups coming in greatly increase within her lifetime. At the palenque, I was given an extended tour and offered food from the kitchen. During my visit, multiple tour groups arrived with their own private guides. Afterward, I was able to move easily between other palenques, where producers were accustomed to answering questions and receiving visitors.

Given Santa Catarina Minas' reputation for ancestral mezcal production and its strong integration into mezcal-focused tourism, examining two palenques in this region allows for a closer analysis of how cultural heritage is actively translated into economic value. In Minas, tradition is not only preserved; it is also marketed. Comparing producers and palenques within this setting reveals how ancestral techniques and ideas of authenticity interact with tourism and branding to shape different pathways of economic development. This shows how consumer demand can support the protection of tradition, demonstrating that the homogenization and mechanization of the tequila industry is not necessarily the inevitable next step for mezcal.

Palenque 1

This palenque is small and accessed by a long dirt road. Production follows exclusively ancestral methods: agave is milled manually and distilled in clay pots. The operation is family-run, and the owner noted that several of his siblings also operate successful palenques in the same town. Alongside production, he has organized a local reforestation project intended to offset deforestation associated with agave cultivation.

The owner emphasized that economic activity and cultural preservation were inseparable. He described his business not as selling only mezcal, but the production system and history embedded in it:

Nuestro interés sí es vender mezcal, porque es de lo que vivimos, como empresa, como marca, pero más que vender el mezcal, lo que queremos vender es todo lo que el mezcal incluye, en el sistema de producción de esta comunidad, que data de hace más de cien años, entonces la misión es esa.

Our interest is to sell mezcal, because that's what we live from as a company and brand, but more than selling mezcal, what we want to sell is everything the mezcal includes. The production system of this community that goes back more than a hundred years. That is the mission.

He has deliberately chosen not to certify his product as ancestral mezcal. Although he previously held certification and gained recognition from it, he now considers certification primarily beneficial to the government rather than producers. He also formerly sold to other brands but has since built enough recognition to sell exclusively under his own label, both domestically and internationally, as well as directly from his tasting room.

He explained this position in explicitly political terms:

Vino el gobierno y nos quiere cobrar por usar nuestra palabra, porque la palabra es de nosotros, no es del gobierno, y ahora el gobierno dice, bueno, si quieres usar la palabra mezcal, paga, y yo digo, yo por qué te voy a pagar aquí, si bien tú

no has hecho nada para que esa palabra exista, eso es de nosotros, nosotros le teníamos que cobrar a ti por generar economía, por hacer que el país conserve la diversidad que es tan importante, porque la gente se mantenga en las comunidades y no tenga que emigrar, porque haya atracción turística.

The government came and wants to charge us for using our word, because the word belongs to us, not the government. Now they say, if you want to use the word mezcal, pay. And I say, why would I pay you if you did nothing for that word to exist? It belongs to us. We should charge you for generating the economy, for helping the country preserve its diversity, for allowing people to remain in their communities instead of migrating, and for creating tourist attractions.

The palenque also receives significant tourism. Tour guides bring visitors from Oaxaca City specifically to Santa Catarina Minas to observe ancestral production. Up to five tour groups per day visit the site, where guides lead the experience and visitors purchase directly from the producer. The tasting room offers more than ten varieties of mezcal, with prices around 600 pesos per liter of Espadín, and much more for other rarer types of wild agave.

In this palenque, ancestral production and tradition are the foundation of economic success. The emphasis on clay pot distillation and long-standing community practice attracts tourism to Santa Catarina Minas, specifically to see this form of production, which in turn allows the mezcalero to charge significantly higher prices than producers in Matatlán. He speaks about mezcal as his inheritance, explaining that he has a duty to protect this tradition, but he has also been able to build a successful independent brand around that identity. Here,

cultural preservation and economic development seem to reinforce one another, as through continuing his traditional practices, he has been able to build a successful brand and business.

Palenque 2

This palenque is small and, like the previous site, produces exclusively through ancestral methods. Agave is processed and distilled using traditional techniques, and production volume remains limited. The producer sells locally, maintains his own domestic label, and also supplies external brands, including one exporting to the United States and another recently exporting to India. He noted that tourism to Santa Catarina Minas has significantly increased his visibility and sales, as multiple tour groups now visit daily and purchase directly from him. In addition to the outdoor production area, the palenque includes a tasting room where visitors can purchase directly. As in the first Minas site, prices were high, with a bottle of Espadín costing 550 pesos. The producer identified himself as a third-generation mezcalero following both his father and grandfather and emphasized continuity through his children:

Pues cuando llegue el momento que yo termine, pues seguiré a alguno de mis hijos en la cultura y la herencia de la cuarta generación en el proceso de mezcal.

When the time comes that I end, one of my children will continue in the culture and inheritance of the fourth generation in the mezcal process.

He stressed the importance of protecting tradition, explaining that increased demand has led many palenques to expand production and reduce quality, whereas he maintains small-scale

ancestral production consistent with his grandfather's methods. Unlike the previous producer, however, he viewed certification and denomination of origin as essential protections for regions historically dedicated to mezcal production.

Like the first producer, he talks about mezcal as inheritance, something that belongs to his family and needs to be carried forward. But unlike the previous palenque, he believes protecting that tradition means working with certification, not against it. For him, denomination of origin isn't just bureaucracy; it's a way to prevent mezcal from being produced anywhere. He believes that removing certifications would lower the quality of mezcal and hurt producers in places like Santa Catarina Minas, who benefit from the protections of ancestral certifications and denomination of origin protections. Tourism and export sales bring in high income, but certification helps protect that income by tying mezcal to this specific region.

Symbolic value in Santa Catarina Minas is leveraged differently than in Santiago Matatlán. Rather than being reorganized and constructed for scale, it is used to attract a specialist market of visitors who come specifically for ancestral production methods, which in turn has allowed producers to command higher prices for their mezcal. In Minas, protecting ancestral methods works in tandem with increased economic opportunity. Clay pot distillation and generational knowledge are what attract visitors who come specifically to see traditional mezcal production, meaning that producers have no economic incentive to mechanize or scale up production. Market access in this case has therefore strengthened rather than undermined the production practices that form mezcal's symbolic value. It has also allowed producers to largely resist exploitation, as they sell to consumers directly

through tourism or are able to negotiate with brands, due to their fame as an ancestral mezcal-producing town.

At the same time, the two palenques reveal very different ideas about how tradition should be protected. One producer sees certification and state regulation as unnecessary interference, arguing that mezcal belongs to the community and should not require government approval to be authentic. The other views regulation and denomination of origin as essential tools to defend Oaxaca's mezcal from expanding competition in other states or even other countries. Examining these differences within the context of Santa Caterina Minas, a site in which producers have been able to leverage tradition and tourism for economic gain, allows us to understand how ideas of cultural heritage can generate real economic opportunity, but also how producers disagree about the best way to protect and define that tradition in an expanding global market.

D. Sola de Vega

Sola de Vega exemplifies part of this thesis's central argument - that economic opportunity in the mezcal industry is not brought on by quality or tradition, but by visibility and market access. Producers in Sola face both inequality, due to their geographic isolation, and exploitation, due to lack of resources and institutional knowledge. Producers here use the same ancestral techniques as those in Santa Catarina, Minas, but its location and limited tourism infrastructure mean that these traditional production methods generate significantly lower prices and far fewer economic opportunities. Many producers also do not have certifications, leading them to be more vulnerable to intermediaries and exploitation.

Sola de Vega is a small town in the Sierra Sur of Oaxaca with a population of just over 10,000 residents (Secretaría de Economía, 2026). For the purposes of this study, this

analysis also includes the neighboring municipalities of Santa María Sola and San Francisco Sola, which share similar economic and production conditions.

The town is located approximately two and a half hours from Oaxaca City. While it lies along what was once a main highway connecting the capital to the coast, the opening of a newer autopista has diverted most traffic away from this route. As a result, infrastructure along this highway has deteriorated, particularly in the mountainous final hour leading into the town, resulting in a very bumpy and windy ride.

Mezcal production is the primary industry in the area. The majority of palenques produce mezcal using ancestral methods; most are small, family-run operations, and many are not certified. Tourism to the region is limited. The distance from Oaxaca City and the difficulty of access reduce the likelihood of organized day trips, and the town does not have the infrastructure for tourists to comfortably spend the night. In contrast to Santa Catarina Minas, most palenques do not have dedicated areas for visitors and often distill only at certain times of year, which makes it difficult for guides to bring tour groups, even if they were able to brave the long and mountainous trip.

Prices for mezcal in Sola de Vega are significantly lower than in Santa Catarina Minas, often around one-third of the price, despite being produced through similar ancestral techniques. This price disparity highlights how geographic isolation and limited market access shape economic opportunities, even when production methods are comparable.

Visiting Sola de Vega required a different level of logistical commitment during my research. I originally thought that Sola would be the easiest site to conduct field work in, as I already had several contacts in the area. However, this did not end up being the case. Due to the distance from Oaxaca City, I stayed several nights during each visit. Reaching many

palenques involved traveling by moto-taxi along uneven dirt roads through agave fields. Unlike in Minas or Matatlán, it was common to arrive at a palenque and find no one present. Even if they had confirmed ahead of time that they would be there, I would arrive to situations like being greeted by the producer's 13-year-old cousin instead. The region also revealed social challenges like alcoholism that were less visible in other sites. However, staying so much time in Sola allowed me to experience the cultural significance of mezcal outside of palenques. I was able to partake in calendas, go to jaripeos, and see fiestas patronales in the town. In these situations, mezcal was ever-present and shared among the community, poured from small gasoline containers into plastic copitas. These moments, outside of tourism markets or branding for exports, showed how mezcal serves as a shared cultural practice embedded into the everyday life of a community.

Examining three different palenques in Sola de Vega allows for a closer look at how mezcal functions as a tool for economic survival in a region with limited alternatives. In a town where employment opportunities are limited, a palenque represents one of the few viable income-generating paths. At the same time, many producers operate outside the formal certification system. Comparing these three palenques reveals how the mezcal boom is experienced unevenly within the same region and is impacted by geographic isolation.

Palenque 1

Located close to the old highway connecting Oaxaca City and Puerto Escondido (prior to the opening of the newer autopista), this palenque benefits from relatively easier access compared to more remote sites in the region. The producer makes exclusively

ancestral mezcal. The palenque has been passed down through his family, although he does not have children to continue the lineage.

His brand is certified, and he sells both in Oaxaca City and Mexico City. However, he explained that most of his sales come from Mexico City, since the Oaxaca market has become oversaturated. He also sells to a buyer who exports to the United States. Compared to other palenques in Sola de Vega, this one is relatively large. In addition to the production and distillation areas, there was a bar space under construction where his friends come to drink, and he is hoping to build into a bar for the public. With income generated from mezcal, he has also built several rental rooms on the property with a communal bathroom, intending to lease them to students attending the local technological university.

Despite this relative success, he expressed frustration about the broader position of mezcaleros in the supply chain, particularly when selling to external brands that later resell the product at much higher prices.

La persona que está destilando tiene que salir por leña para seguir manteniéndole el fuego en sus ollas donde está destilándolo, el calor, el humo, todo lo que, o sea, pobre gente está, está sufriendo porque es día y noche, día y noche, entonces como que es muy injusto una persona que tanto se sacrifica por destilar ese mezcal, que es día y noche, día y noche. Y quien llega y te dice “véndeme un litro de mezcal.” Entonces ahí ya empieza la injusticia de decir “oye y te doy 450 500 un litro”. Y te dicen “si me llevo 20 litros, bájale un poquito.

The person who is distilling has to go out and get firewood to keep the fire going under the pots where it's being distilled, the heat, the smoke, everything. I mean, poor

people suffer because it's day and night, day and night. So it feels very unjust that someone sacrifices so much to distill that mezcal, day and night, then someone comes and says, sell me a liter. That's where the injustice begins, when they say I'll give you 450 or 500 pesos a liter. And if I take 20 liters, lower the price a little.

Even given his relative success within the region, as he is able to sell under his own certified label and maintain relative autonomy, he recognizes the exploitation built into the market. When producers sell to intermediaries at lower prices, those buyers rebrand the mezcal and capture significantly greater profit later in the export process. There is little option for them to sell at a higher price, as producers in Sola have fewer buyers than those in Matatlán and Minas, leading to less negotiating power.

Palenque 2

Palenque 2 is located in San Francisco Sola, a rural municipality within the Sola de Vega region. Access to most palenques requires navigating a bumpy dirt path, most easily reached by a good vehicle, moto taxi, or even a horse. There is no signage outside indicating the presence of a palenque, but once you reach the end of a dirt path, you can see the telltale signs of clay pots set up for distillation. The operation is run by a large family. The father is the primary mezcalero, while his daughter, her husband, and their children assist with production. Mezcal is made using ancestral techniques, and production remains small in scale.

The palenque is not registered. They explained that groups have given talks in the municipal building to describe the certification process and the potential benefits of creating

their own brand. However, the father has not pursued certification or brand development. Their mezcal is sold primarily within the region, to local families and for community festivities. They also sell to buyers who come to purchase mezcal for export, although they are unsure where it ultimately goes.

Personas vienen a comprar. No sé qué fin le dan ellos, pero lo vienen a comprar así.

Mi papá le vende a un señor de la frontera que viene a comprar y se lo lleva. Supongo que él tiene su marca.

People come to buy. I don't know what they ultimately do with it, but they come and buy it like that. My dad sells to a man from the border who comes to buy it and takes it away. I suppose he has his own brand.

When asked about the economic impact of mezcal in the region, they noted that there has not been significant community-wide economic growth, particularly in San Francisco, where few palenques are certified. However, mezcal has provided some personal income.

Sí hemos visto el crecimiento personal. Económicamente, no digo que mucho, pero sí algo muy bueno, que sí llega algo de ingreso. Está bien así.

Yes, we have seen personal growth. Economically, I wouldn't say a lot, but something good, some income does come in. And that's okay like that.

In this palenque, ancestral techniques are still central to production. The knowledge, labor, and family ties that define mezcal as a cultural practice remain intact. However,

without certification or direct access to larger markets, that tradition does not translate into significant economic gain. They sell locally or to intermediaries who likely resell it at much higher prices under their own labels. Unlike in Minas, these producers' ability to capture the added value from their traditions and ancestral production is limited by geographic isolation and restricted market access. The inequality that this isolation creates also allows for the exploitation of producers due to an asymmetry of knowledge. As seen in the example of this palenque, the isolation of Sola means that many producers don't know where their mezcal ends up being sold.

Palenque 3

This palenque is very small, one of the smallest I encountered, and is located at the entrance of Santa María Sola, a municipality within the Sola de Vega region known for mezcal production. The mezcal is produced using ancestral techniques, distilling in clay pots.

Unlike the majority of producers in the region, this palenque was not inherited through generations. It was started by four men who met while completing Santa Maria's required police service. They described how limited economic opportunities in the region inspired them to start this palenque.

Si no eres músico, panadero o palenquero en esa región, no hay nada. En vez de hacer nada, mejor nos pusimos a trabajar. Queríamos un ingreso.

If you're not a musician, a baker, or a mezcal producer in that region, there's nothing. Instead of doing nothing, we decided to get to work. We wanted an income.

They received initial investment from another palenque in the region and are currently producing for that brand while also selling locally. They are in the process of obtaining certification, although they described the process as slow due to financial and bureaucratic limitations. Their goal is to eventually sell under their own label. They have observed that other producers in the region have been able to generate income from mezcal and recognize the growing demand for it.

While they do not come from a long line of mezcaleros, they are drawing on the established cultural identity of the region to create an economic opportunity for themselves. Their experience highlights how the symbolic value attached to Sola de Vega's ancestral production tradition can function as a resource even for producers, even if they themselves do not come from families involved in mezcal production. However, without certification or direct market access, that symbolic value remains difficult for them to capture, and remains concentrated in the brand they sell to.

Comparing the three palenques in Sola de Vega highlights how global markets have had little and uneven impact in the region in terms of both cultural heritage and economic development. The town's geographic isolation and difficult transport access shape both the price and visibility of its mezcal. All three palenques operate outside established tourism circuits, and none are able to receive regular tour groups. As a result, mezcal is sold at significantly lower prices than in regions such as Santa Catarina Minas, despite being produced through similar ancestral techniques. At the same time, economic opportunity remained central for all three producers. Each viewed mezcal as one of the only income sources in the region. However, their ability to translate production into economic success varied. Certification status and access to external buyers shaped different levels of income.

While some were able to sell under their own labels or access export markets indirectly, others remained dependent on intermediaries and informal sales. The comparison shows that in Sola, although traditional methods are practiced, economic success is difficult to achieve and uneven.

Sola de Vega demonstrates the limitations of institutionalized symbolic value. Producers here have a genuine cultural connection to mezcal ancestral techniques yet are largely unable to leverage this in global markets. Certification systems and tourism infrastructure, the mechanisms through which symbolic value is constructed and captured elsewhere, remain inaccessible due to geographic isolation and limited market access. Sola experiences inequality among agave-producing communities due to its isolated location. Producers in Sola also experience significant exploitation, as many do not have certifications or the knowledge to brand and sell their own products, leading them to be reliant on intermediaries who buy their mezcal for very low prices.

The example of Sola de Vega exposes a structural problem with how symbolic value operates in the mezcal industry: it rewards producers who can access the institutions that recognize tradition, not necessarily those who practice it most authentically. Unlike in Matatlán, where market access has reorganized tradition for scale, or in Santa Catarina Minas, where it has reinforced it, in Sola de Vega the market has largely bypassed producers altogether. Traditional methods persist not because the market supports them, but because there is no market pressure to change them

E. Regional Comparison

Comparing Matatlán, Santa Catarina Minas, and Sola de Vega allows us to examine how global demand reshapes cultural heritage differently across the state and how visibility

and tourism, regulations, and economic leverage structure the possibilities for economic development in each region. The palenques visited in each community reflect these differences, as summarized in Figure 10 below. The table demonstrates how much variety there is between and within mezcal-producing regions and communities. It also shows that high prices do not necessarily correlate with ancestral production or wild agave but instead with tourism, and direct market access, as seen in Matatlán's Palenque 3, and Minas Palenque 1 and 2.

Figure 10. Fieldwork Palenque Profiles

	Santiago Matatlán (Central Valleys)			Santa Caterina Minas (Central Valleys)		Sola de Vega (Southern Sierra)		
	Palenque 1	Palenque 2	Palenque 3	Palenque 1	Palenque 2	Palenque 1	Palenque 2	Palenque 3
Type of Production	Artisanal	Artisanal	Artisanal Ancestral	Ancestral	Ancestral	Ancestral	Ancestral	Ancestral
Certified	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Type of Agave	Espadin	-Primarily Espadin - Some Wild	-Primarily Espadin - Some Wild	- Variety (including wild)	- Variety (including wild)	- Variety (including wild)	- Variety (including wild)	- Variety (including wild)
Employees	Yes <10	Yes <10	Yes >50	No	No	No	No	No
Family-run	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Export	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Types of Sales	-Bars -External Brands -Own Brand	-Bars -External Brands -Own Brand	-Bars -External Brand -Own Brand	-Bars -Own Brand	-Bars -External Brands -Own Brand	-Local -External Brands -Own Brand	-Local -External Brands	-Local -External Brands
Price	Low	Low	High	High	High	Low	Low	Low
Tourism Presence	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No

Source: Author's own

1. Cultural Heritage

The expansion of the global mezcal market and rising demand have reshaped the cultural heritage and identity surrounding mezcal in different ways across the three regions. In some contexts, heritage becomes commodified, in others, it adds significant value to the product, and in others, it remains deeply embedded in practice but generates limited economic return.

In Santiago Matatlán, increased international consumption of mezcal has led to shifts in production. The widespread cultivation of Espadín and the movement from ancestral to primarily artisanal techniques reflect how land use and production practices have adapted to market pressures. And while traditionally, palenques and knowledge were passed down through generations, in order to match demand, palenques in the region have begun to employ workers to help increase production, changing not only the traditional structure of palenques but also the demographics of the town itself. Tourism further amplifies this dynamic of a shift in cultural heritage. In Matatlán, heritage is highlighted and narrated for different tour groups, becoming part of the product's appeal. As seen in Palenque 2, cultural identity and family lineage are also tied to branding and recognition, showing how market success can become intertwined with cultural pride. Thus, we can see how cultural heritage has not only been changed by market demands but has also been commodified to add value to the product.

In Santa Catarina Minas, ancestral production methods remain the primary mode of production, and cultural heritage is intentionally highlighted. Here, culture directly adds symbolic value to mezcal. Visitors come specifically seeking authenticity and tradition, allowing producers to have more agency in their practices as well as their prices. As Brulotte notes, "All tourism—and the people it mobilizes as tourists and 'locals'—actively shapes the

way that places are toured and their continued evolution as a result” (Brulotte, 2025).

Therefore, although the tourism to Minas is marketed as traditional and authentic, the very presence of tourism is inherently shaping and impacting the cultural heritage of mezcal in the region. At the same time, there are differing opinions about how best to protect that heritage, whether through formal certification or by remaining outside state regulation. This highlights how not only has market pressure impacted mezcal's sense of cultural heritage, but also how government regulations have done the same, defining what and where mezcal is.

In Sola de Vega, a strong sense of cultural heritage also surrounds mezcal, but it does not translate into an economic advantage. Symbolic value, therefore, does not translate to increased exchange value here. Ancestral production remains the regional norm, and mezcal is a part of everyday cultural life. However, limited tourism and restricted access to formal markets mean that this heritage often generates lower prices and fewer opportunities. While a small number of producers have been able to build brands that highlight cultural identity, most remain economically constrained.

Taken together, these cases show that the global mezcal market has not erased cultural heritage, but it has reshaped it, especially in terms of how it is practiced, presented to others, and valued economically. What Cook's triangulation of value reveals across these three cases is that symbolic value is a central driver in the mezcal industry. However, the ability to construct and capture that symbolic value is unevenly distributed. In Matatlán it is leveraged and constructed for tourism, in Minas it reinforces tradition, and in Sola it exists without the institutional infrastructure to convert it into economic gain.

Market access, therefore, does not have a uniform effect on tradition. Whether visibility and market integration erode or reinforce tradition depends on what the demand is

in each region. In Matatlán, demand is generally focused around volume, so tradition is reorganized toward scale. Production methods are more mechanized which in turn erodes ancestral techniques. In Santa Catarina Minas, tourists come specifically to witness clay-pot distillation, so producers have no incentive to mechanize, and market access reinforces tradition. Where market access is largely absent, as in Sola de Vega, tradition persists by default rather than by market support. The relationship between market access and tradition is thus conditional.

2. Economic Development

Economic development across Oaxaca has been uneven, and visibility and tourism have played a major role in shaping these differences. In both Palenque 3 in Matatlán and the palenques in Santa Catarina Minas that regularly receive tour groups, the ability to attract visitors directly translated into higher mezcal prices. Tourism increases not only sales volume but also the value attached to the product. While tourism looked different in Matatlán and Minas, in both cases, the presentation of cultural heritage added economic value to the mezcal. In contrast, the three palenques in Sola operated entirely outside tourism's reach, and this absence was reflected in significantly lower prices. However, tourism in Matatlán also acted as a form of exclusion, as tour groups only went to the larger palenques on the highway, taking away tourism opportunities from smaller palenques in the town. Whereas in Minas, tourism seems to be spread more evenly, and producers have more agency in creating ties with tour groups.

Certification and regulatory knowledge also shaped economic outcomes. While not in all cases, generally certification, or at least knowledge of the regulatory system, allows

producers more autonomy and agency in their deals, leading to more economic success. While Palenque 1 in Santa Catarina Minas appears to negate this, given its lack of certification and its high prices, this is an exception. Although the producer now rejects formal certification, he was originally certified and used that recognition to build his brand and gain market success. Only after establishing economic stability was he able to step outside the regulatory framework. In Sola de Vega, by contrast, many producers remain uncertified not by choice but because of the financial costs and the bureaucratic complexity involved. This proves part of the concern expressed by Palenque 1 in Minas, that regulations can exclude families who have been making mezcal for generations from full participation in the market, as they have to go through bureaucratic processes to prove that what they are making is mezcal. Thus, certification systems do not simply regulate quality, they also determine who and what is recognized as legitimate. At the same time, Palenque 3 in Sola spoke of certification as something they were actively pursuing in hopes of securing more stable and profitable deals, demonstrating that certification is often linked to more economic success.

These examples show how producers who are able to combine cultural heritage with market visibility and knowledge are better positioned to capture the economic benefits of rising global demand. Others, like the palenques in Sola, remain economically constrained because they are generally not able to direct the market directly due to lack of certifications and tourism.

The exclusion of rural producers from direct market access in the mezcal industry reflects structural patterns of extraction that have historically characterized Oaxaca's regional economy. Sociologist Andre G. Frank, in his analysis of Tlaxiaco, Oaxaca, demonstrates how

urban commercial centers often extract value from surrounding rural and indigenous communities through dense networks of intermediaries (Frank, 1967). In Tlaxiaco, Frank observed that rural producers received minimal compensation for their goods while layers of middlemen captured the majority of value, using the example of eggs to show how prices rose over 300% between producer and consumer. The structural conditions Frank identified, including asymmetry of knowledge, lack of bargaining power, and dependence on outside buyers who control pricing, are all visible in the contemporary mezcal industry. In Sola de Vega, as described by Palenque 1, producers sell to buyers who arrive from outside the region and, due to little competition, often sell for excessively low prices. As described by Palenque 2, producers are sometimes unaware of where their mezcal ultimately goes or at what price it is resold. Thus, producers in Sola are exploited in the same way as those selling eggs in Tlaxiaco. In contrast, producers in Santa Catarina Minas and Santiago Matatlán, who have developed direct market access through tourism and certification, have been able to partially escape the issue of intermediaries, capturing more of the value of their mezcal. Frank's framework, therefore, helps explain that uneven development in the mezcal industry is not accidental but structural. It is influenced by a commodity chain that concentrates value away from producing communities, through intermediaries who exploit producers directly and certification institutions whose barriers leave producers exposed to that exploitation.

By comparing the palenques within each region, and then placing the regions in conversation with one another, it becomes clear that the expansion of the global mezcal market has not necessarily erased cultural heritage. Instead, it has reshaped and reorganized it. When culture becomes part of marketing and tourism, some degree of transformation is inevitable. The nature of that transformation differs across Matatlán, Santa Catarina Minas,

and Sola de Vega, where heritage is presented in distinct ways. In terms of development, the mezcal boom has created real economic opportunities for some rural producers, allowing them to leverage growing demand. However, these opportunities remain very uneven. Greater economic success is most visible among larger producers located closer to Oaxaca City or those able to attract tourism. Access to tourism networks, market knowledge, and certification systems therefore function as structuring mechanisms that shape who benefits from the mezcal market and who remains excluded.

Analysed together, the three sites show that the mezcal boom has produced both inequality among producers, as well as exploitation. In Sola de Vega, the two work in tandem. Producers face inequality through their exclusion from tourism and certification infrastructure, and exploitation through their dependence on intermediaries who buy at low prices. The conditions of inequality reinforce the conditions of exploitation, since exclusion from direct markets is what forces producers to work with intermediaries. In Santa Catarina Minas, producers there have largely escaped intermediary exploitation, selling directly and setting their own prices. This has created inequality in the industry, as producers in Minas earn far more than those in Sola for mezcal made by the same ancestral methods. Matatlán presents an example of inequality within the town, as highway palenques capture tourism while other producers are excluded.

Cook's triangulation of value helps explain this unevenness within the field sites. Symbolic value does not automatically translate into exchange value for all producers. Whether symbolic value adds to exchange value depends on access to the institutions and mechanisms that construct and define this symbolic value. For producers in Sola de Vega, symbolic value exists in practice but cannot be captured, like it is in Matatlán and Minas. The

relationship between market access and tradition is equally complex. In Matatlán, market access has eroded tradition in the sense that production has shifted toward scale rather than technique. Yet the global popularity that Matatlán has helped generate is also what has allowed Santa Catarina Minas to thrive, attracting a specialist market willing to pay for ancestral methods. The popularity of mezcal has also given producers in Sola de Vega a reason to continue making mezcal on a larger scale, providing economic options in a region where many have migrated out of economic necessity.

The following chapter will focus on the issue of the uneven development in the mezcal industry. It will examine the organizations and initiatives attempting to address disparities within rural mezcal-producing communities as well as what the limits of their interventions reveal about the commodity chain as a whole.

IV. Chapter 3

The previous chapter examined eight palenques across three mezcal-producing regions - Santiago Matatlán, Santa Catarina Minas, and Sola de Vega - showing how rising global demand has reshaped cultural heritage, marginalised smaller producers, and produced uneven economic outcomes across producers and communities. While the mezcal boom has created economic opportunities for some producers, it has reinforced structural barriers for others, particularly those with limited market access or limited knowledge of certification systems. This chapter will focus on three different organisations that are responding to these problems in the mezcal industry, arguing that while each offers a meaningful intervention, the structural design of the mezcal commodity chain, which concentrates value away from producing communities, ultimately limits what any organisation can achieve. The three organisations are:

SACRED: a not-for-profit based out of the United States that uses heritage agave spirits to improve the quality of life in the rural Mexican communities where those spirits are produced. Sacred essentially raises money from larger tequila and agave companies, including 818 Tequila, one of their biggest sponsors. They then use that money for development projects, often focused on water security, reforestation, or education.

Aventureros de Mezcal: a market intermediary based out of Oaxaca. Aventureros de Mezcal is an organisation that connects producers with buyers while helping producers ensure they are getting paid fairly for their mezcal. They have a 360-degree model approach to the industry, helping producers with branding, certification, export, retail, and education.

Agamarga: a Mexican mezcal brand focused on culture and sustainability, as well as increasing the visibility of women in the mezcal industry. They use biodigester technology to

transform vinasses (waste from production) into clean energy and biofertilizer and work exclusively with female producers in the San Baltazar Chichicapam region of Oaxaca.

Not only do these organisations work in different ways and have different focuses, but they are also coming from different understandings of the main issues in the mezcal industry. Thus, analysing these three organisations reveals competing visions of what development in the mezcal industry looks like.

This chapter will first define what each organisation sees as problems within the industry. It will then analyse where each of these organisations positions themselves within the market and how they define cultural heritage, whether defending it, constructing it, or commercialising it. Finally, the chapter will look at the different understandings of development, seeing how each organisation seeks development for which groups, what impact this has, and the limits of this development.

A. Defining the Problem in the Mezcal Industry

As introduced in Chapter One and unpacked through real examples in Chapter Two, there are many issues within the mezcal industry. Each of these organizations understands and defines these problems in distinct ways. SACRED identifies the root problem of the mezcal as extractive capitalism. In my interview with the founder of the nonprofit, he explained the way in which the very production of mezcal is environmentally destructive and extracts resources from the communities that produce it, pointing to issues like loss of biodiversity of agave and the deforestation that comes from not only the planting of agave but also the wood needed to cook the agave and fire up stills.

His solution to the problem, therefore, focuses on those who are able to extract value. He works with brands, receiving funding from them to undertake development projects in

agave-producing regions.

If the reason that we love mezcal is the diversity of flavours and the story connected to the cultural heritage, we want to see that exist in 50 years. I think we have to put that compensation back into the community so that they can find ways to replace the resources that have been, in essence, agro-extracted for the consumption that led to the monetary gain.

These are community-led initiatives, in which community members propose and are often hired to work on the projects. Most recently, SACRED funded a well in Chacala, a small raicilla-producing town in rural Jalisco, with the project managers including two men from the region. When asked about the way these development projects address the issues of extractive capitalism in the industry, the founder of SACRED expressed that he felt like he was delaying the inevitable.

I think capitalism is too strong a force to defeat. But if you can delay the inevitable long enough, maybe something important outlives the inevitable collapse that follows capitalism.

Thus, he sees the major problem as an issue of resource extraction from rural Mexican communities without a significant return. The communities bear the costs of the mezcal boom, like water depletion, agave loss, and deforestation, while the majority of the capital produced from this boom flows outwards. His solution is connecting communities

with the resources to solve these problems, returning some of the extracted value of mezcal from the brands that have gained from the boom, essentially mitigating the harm of the growing mezcal industry.

While SACRED takes a very zoomed-out approach to the mezcal industry, identifying the problem as extractive capitalism, Aventureros de Mezcal focuses on producers and value chains. To them, the major problem is that producers are being excluded from value chains due to their lack of knowledge around costs, branding, and access to markets. They explained that this allows larger brands to take advantage of smaller producers, and those same smaller producers aren't able to capture the value of what they produce. They noted that most producers have little knowledge about what happens to their mezcal after selling it.

No saben a dónde va su mezcal y no saben si lo venden al grado al que lo compraron o si lo adulteraron.

Most do not know where their mezcal goes and do not know if they sell it at the grade at which they bought it or if it has been adulterated.

This was a sentiment reflected by Palenque 2 in Sola de Vega, who told me that someone from the border came to buy their mezcal, but they were not sure where or how it was sold afterwards. Palenque 2 in Sola de Vega was an uncertified palenque, leaving them more vulnerable to exclusion from markets. Aventureros de Mezcal's solution to this problem, therefore, is the professionalization of producers, allowing for their integration into the market. By helping producers with certifications and branding, they are allowing producers

to gain more autonomy in their production and sales. This will also have ripple effects, helping to solve the other issues in the market, like environmental pressures and loss of tradition.

Si no hay canales de comercialización adecuados, se vuelve complicado pensar para ellos, pues en temas de medio ambiente o de tradición o de otras cosas. Realmente lo que quieren es vender.

If there are no adequate marketing channels, it becomes difficult to think for them, whether on issues of the environment, tradition, or other things. Really, what they want is to sell.

Therefore, by addressing these problems of exclusion from the market through professionalisation, Aventureros de Mezcal is also able to drive change in other areas of the industry while allowing producers to compete in the market on their own terms.

While SACRED and Aventureros de Mezcal focused more on issues within value chains, Agamarga operates from the brand side and is focused on a loss of cultural meaning and gender invisibility within the mezcal industry. The founder of Agamarga is a Oaxacan woman living in Mexico City. She described the experience of drinking mezcal since the mezcal boom, noticing a loss of quality and tradition within mezcal production as a result of the increased commercialisation of the industry.

A probar ese mezcal, digo, esto no es mezcal, o sea, yo no sé qué sea, pero esto no es el mezcal, pues, que yo he tomado toda mi vida. Uno cree que está tomando un

mezcal artesanal cuando eso no es cierto. Estás tomando mezcal industrializado y estandarizado y con químicos.

When I try that mezcal, I say, this is not mezcal, I mean, I don't know what it is, but this is not the mezcal that I have drunk all my life. You think you are drinking an artisanal mezcal when that is not true. You are drinking industrialised and standardised mezcal, with chemicals.

Beyond the loss of tradition, she identified a second, intersecting problem of gender. Women, she told me, are very important parts of the culture surrounding mezcal, as well as its production. However, they are often marginalised.

Mujeres siempre están atrás... aunque por todas las generaciones han estado presentes en el mundo del mezcal, el que figura y el que pone la cara y el que se lleva todo el crédito, pues normalmente es el esposo o el padre de familia.

Women are always behind... although for all generations they have been present in the world of mezcal, the one who appears and the one who shows his face and the one who takes all the credit, is normally the husband or the father of the family.

What she describes is a problem of double invisibility, where women are often sidelined within power structures of rural Mexican communities, and also sidelined within the mezcal industry. Her solution, therefore, is to increase the visibility and autonomy of women by creating a brand that works exclusively with female producers. Through this, she

is also working to protect tradition, the environment, and resist the industrialisation of the mezcal industry.

In the different ways that these organizations define the problem in the mezcal industry, they are also defining different forms of exploitation. SACRED locates the problem in the general extractive and exploitative nature of capitalism. Aventureros de Mezcal locates the problem in the intermediaries, within the mezcal supply chain, and Agamarga sees the exclusion of women and the brand side's inauthentic capturing of symbolic value as exploitation.

B. Market Access and Certifications

These examples, therefore, demonstrate how the mezcal industry is not defined by a single problem but by competing interpretations of what is at stake and what issues need to be addressed. They also take different approaches to their involvement within the market to address these problems. SACRED works outside of the supply chain, after value has already been extracted from the mezcal. Aventureros, on the other hand, inserts itself directly into the market from all sides, working with both producers and brands, from production to export and sales. Agamarga also works within the value chain, but more selectively, operating on the brand side while sourcing exclusively from female producers in a single community and selling to a niche consumer base that prioritises tradition. This gives each of the organisations a different perspective on certifications, one of the most contested issues within the mezcal industry.

To SACRED, certifications are exclusionary. SACRED works with many mezcal producers, most in very rural areas that have suffered from the extraction of the industry without reaping the benefits of profits. Many of these producers are not certified. The

founder of SACRED explained that a lack of certification doesn't only happen when producers lack the funding or the knowledge about certification, but because certifications can be inherently exclusionary. They set boundaries on where and how mezcal can be produced, despite the fact that many communities were making mezcal long before these standards existed. He has noticed producers having to change the way their families have been making mezcal for generations, in order to comply with certification standards. Echoing the sentiments of Palenque 1 in Santa Catarina Minas, he explained that many mezcaleros did not like how outsiders to the industry could dictate how mezcal could be made and have control even over its name. Thus, to him, certifications do not protect culture and producers in the way they claim. He therefore works outside of certification systems completely. They are not central to his intervention, as he works with producers who are both certified and uncertified.

Aventureros de Mezcal, in contrast, is deeply engaged within the certification process. They help producers navigate these bureaucratic hurdles, as they see certification as a tool for entry into the marketplace. They have a department dedicated to helping producers submit their forms for certifications and all the other logistical details to bring an unlabeled bottle of mezcal to a branded bottle that is able to be labeled as "mezcal" with the certification hologram. This process creates a direct link between certification and independence within the market. They explained that certification and branding can give producers more autonomy in their sales and increase their profits.

Sin marca es más fácil que la gente se aproveche de los productores.

Without a brand, it is easier for people to take advantage of producers.

While acknowledging that certifications can be exclusionary, part of their goal is to work within the system to help include more producers in the mezcal market.

Given that Agamarga is a brand trying to achieve export success, they also work within the certification system. They understand the purpose of the certification system to protect Oaxacan industry while recognising the bureaucratic barriers that exclude smaller producers. In fact, they described how, even with the resources and knowledge they had of the system, they struggled to certify their brand.

Yo me tardé dos años y sigo sin poderlo hacer... llevo dos años intentando poderlo certificar.

It has taken me two years, and I still haven't been able to do it... I have spent two years trying to get it certified.

However, once they do achieve certification, these certifications will inherently benefit them, as they give the consumers they are marketing towards a sense of authenticity. These certifications will show that their mezcal is produced artisanally and indicate tradition and cultural heritage. Agamarga thus helps to represent the tension between certification as a form of protection and indicator of value and certification as a barrier to entry into the market.

These three examples, therefore, further show how certifications operate as gatekeeping mechanisms that both enable market participation while reinforcing existing inequalities within the industry.

C. Cultural Heritage and Commodification

Each organisation places the cultural heritage of mezcal at the center of their mission, but in distinct ways. The founder of SACRED has been working with mezcaleros for over 20 years. He described what he saw as a push and pull that was happening in the mezcal industry. With commercialization and economic development also came a loss of tradition, or an adaptation of culture to increase commercial success. Speaking about a producer he has been visiting for over a decade, he explained how the producer had begun to change their production to meet demand, not just in terms of quantity, but also in terms of taste.

He's suddenly offering me spirits distilled through marijuana... And the question I asked him was, is this something that you're going back to, like a tradition? And he said, no, people showed up asking for marijuana in their mezcal. So I figured I could sell them extra if I had some. And so that's, to me, that is literally the illustration of the conversion from cultural heritage to commerce.

This example shows how it's not only the growth of the industry and the need for more industrialized production techniques to meet demand that have changed mezcal production. There is also a sense of change to meet the interests of consumers. Consumers now like to see things like marijuana, mezcal, scorpions in their mezcal, or fruity flavours, changing the methods of producers. He also complicated the idea of cultural heritage itself,

describing two producers he has worked with closely. Both come from generations of mezcaleros, one in Matatlán and the other in Santa Catarina Minas (two of the sites discussed in Chapter 2). The producer in Matatlán produces his mezcal using artisanal methods but is able to produce nearly 500,000 liters of mezcal per year, while the other (Palenque 1 in Santa Catarina Minas), using ancestral production methods, produces significantly less.

Carlos is making a significant percentage of the mezcal that's being made in the world, right. And he's still doing it using this method of cooking underground in a stone-lined earthen oven; milling, using a tohona; fermenting in open-air wooden barrels; and distilling in wood-fired copper pot stills, which is crazy. And so he's managed to maintain what I would say is cultural heritage and still developed the market. And yet Lalo would look at what he's doing, and he would say he's sold out; he's trading our cultural heritage for money. And yet he's doing something that's, I would argue, more artisanal than 99.9% of all major spirits in the world, you know?

Here, the founder of SACRED touches on the idea of who can define cultural heritage. Both palenqueros come from family traditions of making mezcal while adapting to the growing market in different ways. They both make mezcal, selling it with ideas of tradition at the center of their brand while having competing views of what cultural heritage looks like. Therefore, while one of SACRED's goals is to give back to agave-producing communities and protect their sense of tradition and heritage, he does not try to define it. Instead, he looks to protect culture through projects that focus on community development and environmental sustainability.

Where SACRED is reluctant to define cultural heritage, Aventureros de Mezcal takes a more pragmatic position, seeing it primarily through the lens of the market. Aventureros de Mezcal noted the same change in the production of mezcal as SACRED. They described the increased number of producers entering the market, saying that newer producers do not have the quality of mezcal as those whose families have been producing it for generations.

No es lo mismo alguien que sea de familia mezcalera de hace muchos años, a alguien que sea nuevo.

Someone who has been from a mezcalero family for many years is not the same as someone who is new.

This statement directly tied cultural heritage and tradition to quality. It is those whose families have been producing mezcal for generations who are generally able to produce the highest-quality mezcal, but this is getting diluted by those entering the industry since the industry's boom. Aventureros de Mezcal, due to their position as market intermediaries, see cultural heritage as it relates to the market. Culture provides a competitive advantage for mezcal. It is used for branding, marketing, and differentiation from other spirits on the market. When discussing the threat of agave spirits being produced in the United States, they argued:

Qué nos hace diferentes a nosotros como mezcales de México contra los mezcales de allá. Realmente, es más que el agave, el proceso o el sabor, es la tradición.

What makes us different as mezcals from Mexico versus the mezcals from there.

Really, it is more than the agave, the process or the flavour, it is the tradition

They are explaining the way in which culture and tradition are an inherent part of mezcal while also being an economic tool. It is something that needs to be protected to ensure mezcal remains a sought-after product, and it is also something that can be leveraged to increase the value of mezcal on the market.

Agamarga, through its branding, more strictly defines what cultural heritage in mezcal looks like. They advertise themselves as 100% authentic mezcal from Chichicapam, Oaxaca, where they employ completely traditional and sustainable practices (Agamarga, 2026). Agamarga promotes themselves through their connection to tradition and actively constructing a definition of heritage through their marketing choices. They are defining cultural heritage as being tied to forms of production and the lineage of the producers. The founder spoke about how mezcal has always been a part of her life and how she has experienced the industry change through industrialisation.

El mezcal ha sido parte de mi cultura todo el tiempo... desde que me daban un dedito de mezcal para que no me diera gripa... desde ahí estaba mi contacto con la parte de mezcal. Estas grandes industrias llegan, compran estos magueyes o compran el mezcal y ya, pues nada más lo terminan de igualar y listo... con este tema, pues se pierde toda esta parte de la tradición.

Mezcal has been part of my culture all the time... ever since they gave me a little bit of mezcal so I wouldn't get the flu... from there was my contact with mezcal. These

large industries arrive, buy these magueys, or buy the mezcal, and that's it, they just standardise it, and that's it... with this, this whole part of the tradition is lost.

She explained that creating this brand was a form of protecting Oaxacan identity and resisting the commercialisation of Oaxacan culture. This resistance to industrialisation is also inseparable from her focus on gender. Her brand has a focus on uplifting women and creates a political statement about the role of women within a male-dominated industry. Cultural heritage is tied to the lived experience of these women who have been working with mezcal for generations and are now able to profit from it.

Si seguimos manteniendo el mezcal tradicional, la tradición, pero hecho por mujeres... este proyecto, pues es apoyar a las mujeres, mezcal tradicional hecho por mujeres, y promover la tradición del mezcal.

If we continue to maintain traditional mezcal, the tradition, but made by women... this project, then, is to support women, traditional mezcal made by women, and promote the tradition of mezcal.

By supporting female mezcaleras and marketing mezcal as traditional, encouraging consumers to support traditional mezcal, she hopes to help protect mezcal from over-commercialisation and industrialisation.

Thus, neither of these three organisations has a neutral relationship to cultural heritage. While they all agree that the growing demand for mezcal has changed the industry

and affected the traditions associated with mezcal production, each is making a choice about how it defines heritage and how it should be protected.

D. Development Approaches and Outcomes

Having established how each organisation defines the core problems of the mezcal industry, how they position themselves within the market, and how they engage with notions of cultural heritage, the question of how they pursue economic development and for whom can be examined. Chapter 1 described the way in which the mezcal industry has created economic opportunity in Oaxaca while marginalising some producers. This was further examined in Chapter 2, looking at the regional differences within Oaxaca and the way different palenqueros have adapted to the market. This section will now examine how these organisations pursue economic development and whether their interventions are able to address the structural inequalities that the previous chapters identified.

In their study of San Juan del Río, Oaxaca, Lira, Robson, and Klooster wrote that mezcal and agave producers “see the growing demand for mezcal as an economic development opportunity. Among other benefits, it has enabled a traditional activity and an important source of cultural identity to be maintained. It has created employment and development opportunities in a relatively impoverished and marginalised rural region” (Lira et al., 2022). As they noted, Oaxaca is a very poor state, with little economic opportunity. In 2020, the government reported that 24.3% of the population of Oaxaca lives in extreme poverty, and 39.6% of the population lives in moderate poverty (Data México, 2020). Much of this poverty is concentrated in rural regions of the state. Therefore, the mezcal boom provided hope for the economic development of the state, especially in rural regions where mezcal is produced, due to increased production, exports, and tourism. According to

COMERCAM, 265,000 people are employed within the mezcal industry. Direct employment opportunities account for 55,000, and indirect employment opportunities, like those involved in tourism, account for 210,000 (COMERCAM, 2025). Thus, it would appear that the growing mezcal industry could stimulate significant economic development in rural mezcal-producing regions of Oaxaca.

Brulotte describes this idea of economic development, saying that “the mezcal boom has brought about a reappraisal of Oaxaca’s rural sector.” She writes that rural Oaxaca was once “a place consigned to be another casualty of decades of neoliberal reforms—landscapes comprised of fallow fields and villages emptied out of working-age adults.” Since the growth of the mezcal industry, it has now been “selectively reimagined as a site for economic development built around increasing mezcal production for the new market” (Brulotte, 2025). Economic growth does not necessarily mean that there has been tangible community development or that rural Oaxaca has reaped the benefits of this development. As depicted in Chapter 2, while there has been an increase in employment as a result of the growing mezcal industry, and some producers have been able to make a profit, this economic development has been uneven. Each of the three organisations examined in this chapter offers a distinct response to this uneven development, and together, they reveal both the possibilities and the limits of intervention within the mezcal commodity chain.

SACRED works specifically with development, funding community projects in agave-producing regions of Mexico. They ask communities what their problems are, what solutions they imagine for these problems, and what resources they need. They then fundraise and assist with the implementation of these projects. Most recently, they finished a well project in Chacala, Jalisco, funded by 818 Tequila. In addition to building a well, the

community constructed a 120,000-liter cistern, which allows water to be pumped directly to the town. This project helped to increase the water security of a region that has been experiencing droughts, in part due to the water consumption necessary for raicilla production.

It's something like 2,700 people who have access to water now because of SACRED, because we've been able to connect the people and places that want to solve a problem with people who have money that want to support people who want to solve a problem.

SACRED, therefore, has very concrete examples of how it has promoted development. However, the founder acknowledged that this was very limited, only impacting certain communities. It is also a direct response to the damage being done by the mezcal industry, as, for example, water insecurity and deforestation in this region are directly related to increased mezcal production. Thus, he explained that instead of development, he is mitigating damages. He makes sure to focus on projects that bring about community benefits, as he argues that the money from the mezcal industry may reach producers but rarely reaches the communities where production is based.

I'm told that a lot of money was made from the sale of Del Maguey to Pernod Ricard... but when I go to a place like Chichicapam or I go to a place like Minas, I'm not seeing that.

His response is therefore to put the money from larger brands back into community initiatives like water security, reforestation, or education projects. However, he frames this as delaying the inevitability of capitalism's damages. SACRED's intervention is therefore real and impactful, but only partial, as it is not enacting any larger structural change on the industry.

Aventureros de Mezcal focuses on individual economic development. They work with producers individually to help them professionalize their businesses and, through this, avoid the exploitation of intermediaries. They have seen success with this method, as many producers have been able to achieve greater monetary success by certifying and selling their mezcal.

En Minas conozco un productor... desde que lo conocí para acá, pues sí ha mejorado su palenque, se hizo de una camioneta para ya traer agave, pues todos sus hijos están en la escuela.

In Minas I know a producer... Since I met him, he has improved his palenque; he bought a truck to bring agave. All his children are in school.

Therefore, the success of a producer also trickles down to the greater economic success of their family. The producer they spoke of in Santa Catarina Minas was able not only to improve his mezcal production, but he was also able to ensure his children received an education, indicating increased success and opportunities for his future generations. However, they added that they have seen little broader community transformation. One of the reasons they pointed to was alcoholism, which is prevalent in much of rural Oaxaca,

especially in communities dedicated to mezcal production.

Realmente pocos son los casos en los que yo veo que sí les ha ido bien en el mezcal. Pues mira está complicado porque al final todas las tradiciones o sea todas las fiestas todo está íntimamente ligado al alcohol. Pues dentro de los núcleos familiares, pues no sabes qué problemas hay o qué problemas ha habido. El alcohol es detonante de abusos y otras cosas, maltratos, etcétera. Entonces también los niños crecen con eso y al final, pues replican lo mismo bebiendo. Entonces se vuelve complicado.

In reality, there are very few cases where I have seen people truly succeed in the mezcal industry. It's complicated, because ultimately all traditions - festivities, celebrations - are closely tied to alcohol. Within families, you don't always know what kinds of problems exist or have existed. Alcohol can trigger abuse and other forms of mistreatment. Children grow up in these environments and often end up reproducing those same patterns through drinking. So it becomes complicated.

Economic development does not automatically translate into social well-being. Aventureros de Mezcal highlights how alcohol is embedded within certain social and cultural practices, at times to the point of abuse. This was a trend observed in Chapter 2 when discussing Sola de Vega, but can likely also be attributed to many mezcal-producing regions. Alcohol abuse can also have intergenerational effects. Patterns of alcohol abuse can be passed down, especially when alcohol production remains the family's primary form of income. Aventureros de Mezcal also explained that alcohol-related issues can prevent producers from fully benefiting from their economic success or reinvesting in their families

and communities. Even when income increases, there are other social barriers that limit greater community development. Therefore, like SACRED, Aventureros de Mezcal points to larger structural and social challenges that impede the economic development of mezcal-producing communities. They work with producers to increase individual success and improve their position in the market, but broader social conditions like alcoholism can shape the outcomes of economic development.

Agamarga, in a similar vein, highlighted how money from the mezcal industry rarely went back into the community. They had a different perspective on this, given their status as a for-profit small brand. They explained that, as a brand, they have various taxes that they have to pay. However, these taxes are not for the benefit of the communities where mezcal is made.

El productor sigue teniendo las mismas condiciones de siempre. Tú llegas a una comunidad mezcalera y la infraestructura no es la adecuada. O sea, las grandes corporaciones o los que tienen mucho dinero, pues se van a volver muy ricos y los que no, pues ahí se van a quedar porque el IEPS, o sea, los impuestos, tampoco llegan a los poblados.

Producers continue to live under the same conditions as always. You go to a mezcal-producing community and the infrastructure is not adequate. In other words, large corporations or those with a lot of money will become very wealthy, while those who do not will remain where they are, because taxes like the IEPS do not reach these communities.

The IEPS is a 53% special tax on special products and services for alcohol that is over 20% alcohol content. This is in addition to the 16% IVA tax. These high taxes are especially difficult for small brands to pay, and are a barrier for producers when wanting to create their own brand (Santiago, 2026). These taxes show how value is being extracted from mezcal, but not being redistributed to the producing communities.

Alongside these structural inequalities is the marginalisation of women. As Agamarga emphasises, the work of women is often invisible within the mezcal industry. However, women in the industry can also help support community development. Agamarga is part of a nonprofit organisation called Mujeres del Mezcal, which is a national organisation with a main chapter in Oaxaca. Its goal is mutual support and to provide a forum where women in the industry can connect and build community. Angélica, one of the producers that Agamarga works with, is an important member of Mujeres del Mezcal. In her town of Chicicapam, Oaxaca, she has opened a community palenque where people pay what they can to use it. This has helped other members of the community enter the industry and provides an example of how the individual success of one person in the mezcal industry can also translate to community benefits.

Agamarga wants to help support women in mezcal from the brand side of the market. Part of their mission is to support the female producers that they work with and have Agamarga be used as a community project for women to learn and grow within the industry. Through this, they are changing what a traditional relationship between a brand and its producers looks like, focusing less on profits and more on producer development.

Que ellas y nosotras nos ayudemos. Que podamos alzar su voz y que ellas se den a conocer a través de Agamarga no quiere decir que solo usen la marca de Agamarga; por el contrario, o sea, promover que ellas puedan tener su propia marca, que puedan vender, que se puedan insertar en la formalidad y que a través de Agamarga, pues también puedan ser ellas conocidas.

They and we can support one another. We can help amplify their voices and that they can become known through Agamarga does not mean that they should only use the Agamarga brand. On the contrary, it is about promoting their ability to have their own brands, to sell their products, to enter into formal markets, and, through Agamarga, to also gain recognition in their own right.

Agamarga has raised funds to create a biodigester, which helps to recycle the waste created as part of the mezcal production process. This liquid waste can be very toxic and often is allowed to reenter soil or nearby waterways. They hope that the introduction of this biodigester will help contribute to the environmental sustainability of the community, thus contributing to its sustainable development. Given that much of the value in the mezcal industry is captured further along the supply chain, Agamarga also emphasises the role of consumers in shaping these outcomes. Part of their mission is to educate consumers about the importance of supporting small producers, thereby also supporting traditional production and resisting the industrialisation of the industry. By targeting consumers, they are trying to influence how value is distributed in the commodity chain. Agamarga, therefore, like Aventureros del Mezcal, works within the value chain to help support development, working especially with individual producers. However, through their work with female producers,

community infrastructure like Angélica's palenque, and environmental sustainability, Agamarga gestures toward a model of development that is collective rather than solely individual.

E. Analysis and Conclusions

SACRED, Aventureros del Mezcal, and Agamarga are three organisations in the mezcal industry, each taking a distinct approach to development. Analysing these organisations reveals that there is no single solution to the challenges within the industry. Instead, they present competing visions of what the problems are, how heritage should be protected, and what development should look like. SACRED works outside of the system and is focused on mitigating the harms of the market. Aventureros del Mezcal works inside the system and is focused on professionalising producers and helping them achieve market integration. Agamarga also works inside the system, but in more of a hybrid way, attempting to restructure traditional relationships between producers and brands.

SACRED is a nonprofit organisation, while Aventureros del Mezcal and Agamarga are for-profit, something that helps to account for their different logics surrounding development. The tension between these organisations is that SACRED thinks the market and capitalism as a whole are destructive forces and the root of the problems in mezcal-producing communities. They therefore try to work around the market, accepting its structural issues and instead mitigating its harms by returning the money extracted from mezcal by larger companies back into the production communities. Aventureros del Mezcal and Agamarga, on the other hand, see the mezcal market as a means for the economic development of these communities. Aventureros del Mezcal tries to get the producers deeper into the market, thereby increasing their autonomy and economic potential. Agamarga is also

encouraging producers in their community to professionalise and enter the market, but doing so with a community-led focus. These organisations, therefore, reflect different assumptions about whether the mezcal market can be made fair or only mitigated.

These three distinct approaches offer us three different conclusions about the mezcal industry. The first is that broad economic development does not necessarily equate to community development. As mentioned earlier, the growth of the mezcal industry has led to significant economic stimulation in Oaxaca, with over 200,000 people working within the industry. However, this economic growth has not had meaningful effects on the communities that produce mezcal. All three of the organisations mentioned that the profits generated from mezcal are rarely reinvested back into production communities. The majority of mezcal-producing communities are underdeveloped. They have low levels of education, lack adequate infrastructure, and many are experiencing environmental problems exacerbated by the extraction of natural resources for mezcal production. In many of these communities, while individual producers have been able to achieve economic success, the community rarely benefits. Therefore, the growth of the mezcal industry has not reduced the inequality between or within producing communities.

The second conclusion that can be drawn is that the individual success of producers or other actors within the industry does not necessarily lead to development, as social barriers continue to exist. While an individual producer may achieve success and escape exploitation within the mezcal chain, this does not equate to reducing inequality at a community level. The increased value of mezcal has not returned to the community as a whole, and limiting social structures persist. Social structures can shape how and whether economic gains translate into development. For example, even if a producer is able to achieve success within

the mezcal market, alcoholism can impede economic advancement for them and their family, as it can change decision-making and limit reinvestment. Gendered power structures also influence who can access and control the economic benefits of the industry. Therefore, development is shaped by more than just market forces; it can also be shaped by existing social structures.

The third conclusion is that the structure of the mezcal commodity chain directs value away from producers and their communities, even when interventions exist that try to correct this. All the organisations discussed the way in which producers are often taken advantage of, selling their mezcal for low prices, sometimes even less than the cost of production. Brands and exporters are the ones who capture the majority of the value. This problem is exacerbated by the high taxes that smaller producers struggle to pay, and the money from the taxes isn't reinvested into the community. While certification allows for access to these higher-value markets and protects Mexican industry, it also excludes many producers. Therefore, even when there are interventions and producers are able to improve their position in the market, the highest-value stages of the commodity chain are concentrated outside of the producing communities.

These conclusions show that the three organisations analysed all have a limited response to the issues within the mezcal industry. All three of the organisations recognise the importance of protecting the cultural heritage of mezcal, be it for its tradition and history or for the symbolic value it adds to mezcal on the market. The three organisations also see the mezcal industry as offering potential for the economic development of producers in rural areas of Oaxaca; however, their strategies only achieve partial success. They each only address specific venues of extraction within the industry.

Partial success does not imply it is ineffectual, as each organisation addresses part of the problem; they just cannot fully tackle all the issues identified within the industry that exclude and marginalise producers. SACRED is successful in extracting profits from larger companies and redistributing them back to communities. Aventureros del Mezcal is successful in working within a system that excludes producers and helping them to professionalise. Agamarga is successful in supporting community growth from the brand side and protecting tradition by appealing to consumers through its marketing. These three strategies have improved the position of producers and mezcal-producing communities. However, together they also reveal the limits of organisational intervention within a large commodity system. These organisations can improve conditions locally, but they cannot fundamentally transform the structure of the mezcal commodity chain.

V. Conclusion

A. Research Questions

The limits of intervention in the mezcal industry reflect a commodity chain structurally designed to extract value from producing communities. Mezcal is a cultural commodity, originally produced for local consumption and now primarily produced for foreign export. The central tension that runs through this thesis is that the cultural and traditional aspects of mezcal contribute significantly to its value in the global market. However, people from mezcal-producing communities, where these cultural traditions originate, often do not benefit from the mezcal industry. Instead, they experience the negative consequences of its extraction.

I presented three main questions in this thesis.

1. How is global demand reshaping mezcal production and cultural heritage in Oaxaca?
2. Can mezcal function as a tool for economic development for rural producers in Oaxaca, and how does the cultural importance of mezcal shape development outcomes?
3. What do differing organizational responses to inequality in the mezcal industry reveal about the possibilities and limits of development intervention?

Through my research and fieldwork, I answered each of these questions.

1. Global demand is reshaping mezcal production and cultural heritage in Oaxaca. My analysis of my three field sites showed that cultural heritage has not been erased by globalization and demand. Instead, it has been reorganized. Production has been scaled up, and traditions are often being scripted for tourism in larger mezcal tourism

hubs. Many producers have moved from ancestral production methods to artisanal methods to allow for larger batch sizes, and some are introducing mechanization to their production processes. Following the trend of the tequila industry, some large companies are moving to further industrialize their production. Wild agave is overharvested, and Espadín is increasingly being cultivated as a monocrop in many agave-growing regions. Tradition is increasingly becoming commodified as a marketing tool, with tours and mezcal labels emphasizing the authenticity, connection to place, and cultural heritage of mezcal. However, this reorganization has not been uniform. The nature of the reorganization of heritage varies in different regions of Oaxaca. Within my three fieldwork sites, Santiago Matatlán, the mezcal capital of the world, had experienced the largest reorganization, especially in terms of mechanized production techniques, large batches, and tourism. Santa Catarina Minas has maintained ancestral methods but has oriented them toward mezcal-specific tourism, generating significant economic gains for producers. Sola de Vega, on the other hand, experienced little of this reorganization of culture due to its distance from the city and limited market access. However, it has also experienced few economic gains from the growing mezcal industry.

2. Mezcal has functioned as a tool for economic development for rural producers in Oaxaca, but this development has been uneven. Some mezcal producers have been able to achieve success and avoid exploitation by gaining market access, certifying their mezcal, and having direct buyers through branding and tourism. However, reducing exploitation for an individual producer does not reduce inequality at the

community level. Even in regions where producers have been successful, this development rarely moves past the producer to the community. The symbolic value of mezcal contributes significantly to development opportunities and the ability of producers to achieve success. This symbolic value is defined and constructed through denomination of origin regulations, production method certifications, agave varieties, and narratives of authenticity. These features, especially the denomination of origin regulations and production certification, often exclude small producers, as they can be expensive and require knowledge of bureaucratic processes. Economic opportunity for producers is therefore generally structured not around the quality or tradition of their mezcal but instead around their market knowledge, their certification status, and their visibility for tourism. Producers, like many in Santiago Matatlán and Santa Catarina Minas, have this knowledge, as well as the ability to leverage narratives of authenticity through tourism and branding, thus benefit most economically. Those who cannot leverage this symbolic value, like many in Sola de Vega, remain economically constrained despite producing good-quality small-batch mezcal using traditional production methods.

3. Examining three different organizations - SACRED, Aventureros del Mezcal, and Agamarga - revealed that while organizational responses to inequality in the mezcal industry were very meaningful, they could only achieve partial effectiveness. Each of these organizations identified different problems within the industry, including the extractive nature of capitalism, the bureaucratic exclusion of producers, and the invisibility of women working with mezcal. They had distinct approaches to issues of

cultural heritage. All three organizations emphasized the importance of protecting mezcal's cultural heritage. However, SACRED connected it to community needs, while Aventureros del Mezcal focused on cultural heritage as something that economically protects Mexican spirits, and Agamarga constructed it through branding. They also positioned themselves differently within the mezcal value chain, with SACRED finding it most effective to work outside of the chain, Aventureros del Mezcal with producers, and Agamarga as a brand. Their varying approaches showed that there is no single fix to the issues in the mezcal industry. Organizational intervention, while producing positive results for many producers and mezcal-producing communities, cannot fix the mezcal commodity chain. The mezcal commodity chain is structured toward extracting value from producing communities and concentrating it at the branding and export end. Organizational intervention is therefore effective, but at a limited scale.

Overall, the mezcal boom has created significant economic opportunity in Oaxaca. However, the structure of the commodity chain means that the communities whose culture, traditions, and knowledge help give mezcal its value are those who are least likely to capture this value. This dynamic is produced by the way symbolic value is constructed and captured within cultural commodity chains. Applying Cook's triangulation of value helps us understand how the symbolic value attached to mezcal is being actively constructed in a way that most benefits those at the end of the commodity chain, like exporters and larger brands. While there are organizations working to address issues of exclusion and help producers and

their communities, their interventions are limited by a commodity chain that is structurally designed to concentrate value away from producing communities.

A theme running through this thesis is the impact of globalization. How has globalization impacted the mezcal industry and the commodification of culture associated with it? Globalization has allowed for the scale at which mezcal has spread around the world and the rate at which it has become increasingly mechanized. However, it did not create these conditions. Instead, it amplifies structures of capitalism that already exist like exploitation and the extraction of value. What globalization does add is the extraction of symbolic value, using it for its added exchange value. It signals to high-paying foreign audiences that what they are drinking is authentic. Globalization in the case of mezcal, therefore, doesn't necessarily mean homogenization, given that what the market sells successfully is the differences and traditions of mezcal. As seen in Santa Catarina Minas, advertising mezcal as ancestral, single-village, and made from wild agave can be very profitable and sought after.

Globalization, then, hasn't homogenized mezcal so much as standardized it. In order to sell mezcal in this way, it needs to be institutionalized in a legible, certifiable, and priceable form for a globalized audience. This has led to legislation like denomination of origin and production certifications discussed throughout this thesis. Globalization has therefore reshaped mezcal not by erasing its culture but by institutionalizing it.

Does this commodification and institutionalization destroy the value of the mezcal Doña Flora poured me from her Coke bottle, my first day in Sola? My answer is no. The lived and local value of mezcal persists in calendas, celebrations, and people's homes. However, globalization and commodification have extracted its symbolic value and dispossessed people of definitional control of their traditions. This is why the organizations

examined in Chapter 3 can help but not reverse these dynamics. Efforts like SACRED address the consequences of extraction, while those like Aventureros de Mezcal and Agamarga improve individual producers' position within the chain, but neither alters the structure that dispossesses communities of definitional control. Therefore, what we can see through the example of mezcal, a local product booming on the global market, isn't necessarily the destruction of culture but a dispossession of those who create and live that culture.

B. Contributions

This thesis has contributed to the studies of mezcal and spirits in Mexico through my fieldwork. Few studies concerning mezcal have done comparative analyses of different mezcal-producing communities in Oaxaca. Many focus on either one community or the mezcal industry as a whole. However, there is value in comparing three different communities, as it demonstrates the variation within the mezcal industry in Oaxaca.

The case of mezcal also deepens Scott Cook's theory of symbolic value. The example of mezcal shows how symbolic value can be defined and constructed. What makes mezcal valuable on the international market isn't just its use value or its exchange value. Instead, it's the culture and tradition behind mezcal - its symbolic value. However, as explained throughout this thesis, this symbolic value has been defined and constructed by legislation, certifications, marketing, and branding. This thesis, therefore, deepens the understanding of symbolic value and how it can be shaped and constructed. Scott Cook uses the example of metates, explaining that while there are more mechanized ways to grind corn, metates are still sold in local markets due to their symbolic value and people's connection to tradition.

Mezcal adds to this example because while it does have a symbolic value locally, like metates, there has also been a symbolic value that has been constructed to increase its export value globally. This thesis, therefore, shows how we can understand symbolic value when looking at cultural products made for an export market.

Beyond mezcal specifically, this study contributes to the broader understanding of cultural commodities as distinct from raw materials. This is especially important in the context of Oaxaca. Much of Oaxaca's economic production comes from tourism, which is based on its cultural identity and traditions. Therefore, it is important to understand how culture is being reorganized in Oaxaca to accommodate and encourage this growing tourism market. Oaxaca is known for its gastronomy, Dia de Muertos celebrations, its annual Guelaguetza event, its artesanías, and its mezcal. All of these are connected to tradition and culture, and all are being reorganized and shaped for foreign consumption. If the model of development being applied to mezcal allows for the extraction of value from producing communities while concentrating it in branding and export, the same logic could be operating across other sectors of Oaxaca's cultural industries.

In Chapter 1, I referenced Andy Robinson, who argued that extraction in Latin America occurs not only through the removal of raw materials but also through the commodification of culture itself, describing this as a looting of the soul of communities whose traditions are being annihilated (Robinson, 2021). This thesis has argued that a similar dynamic occurs in the mezcal industry, where cultural identity and tradition are extracted and reconstructed for global markets. However, the producers encountered in this research did not describe their experience in these terms. Rather than expressing a sense of cultural dispossession, each was actively working within the market, with many seeking to build

brands, attract tourism, and capture more of the value their mezcal generates. What many of them did express was a sense of financial injustice, of being underpaid by intermediaries, excluded by certification costs, and unable to capture the value that their labor and traditions produce. In doing so, they were pointing to both the exploitation and the inequality of the mezcal industry. Exploitation in the underpayment by intermediaries and inequality in the barriers that exclude producers from higher-value markets. The way the producers spoke about this financial injustice as opposed to cultural dispossession suggests that when analyzing cultural commodities, it is important to take into account both of these dimensions: the structural extraction of cultural value and the agency of producers who are actively navigating, resisting, or reshaping that process. This dynamic is not unique to mezcal but can be applied to other cultural goods. When cultural goods are produced and sold in global markets, the same tension between cultural extraction and producer agency is likely to exist, making it important to analyze cultural commodities on their own terms rather than through frameworks designed for raw materials.

C. Limitations

There are various limitations to my research, which may have affected my findings. The first is that my research was limited to three mezcal-producing communities across Oaxaca. Other important mezcal-producing communities were not included in my analysis and findings, which could affect certain conclusions. However, I chose the three sites specifically to get a range of perspectives, as these three communities represent different production techniques and access to the markets and are geographically distinct.

Another limitation is that I have far more familiarity with Sola de Vega and spent much more time in Sola de Vega than in my other two field sites, which could have impacted

my interpretation of the results. However, interview material helped to mitigate this. When visiting Santa Catarina Minas and Santiago Matatlán, I made sure to speak to community members, not just palenqueros, which helped me to gain an understanding of community life and the impacts of the mezcal industry in these sites.

Finally, this thesis focuses primarily on the production side of the commodity chain. While it mentions the consumer perspective, this discussion is fairly limited. To have a fuller understanding of the mezcal industry, an analysis of the consumer perspective is important. To further unpack the symbolic value of mezcal, it would be beneficial to study how and why consumers are attracted to the cultural elements of mezcal. This perspective is largely absent from my research and would therefore be an important dimension for future research.

D. Broader Implications

The case of Mezcal has implications for other Mexican spirits, which account for an important part of the Mexican export market. Mezcal, and the way in which the industry is structured, is not an isolated example but a visible instance of a pattern that is already replicating itself across other cultural spirits in Mexico.

The growing raicilla industry demonstrates the denomination of origin and certification tensions that exist in the mezcal industry. Raicilla is an agave spirit produced in areas of Jalisco and Nayarit. Given that it is outside of the denomination of origin restrictions for mezcal, it cannot be labeled and sold as mezcal. However, in 2022 a bill for the denomination of origin of raicilla was prepared (Hernandez, 2023). The goal of giving raicilla denomination of origin protections is that it would allow raicilla producers to further commercialize and be able to export, growing the market for raicilla and emulating the success of mezcal. This could also potentially help to protect the biodiversity of agave in

Jalisco. Currently, due to the tequila industry and its cultivation of blue weber agave, there is little agave diversity in tequila. Raicilla, instead, is made from several different types of agave. Therefore, a growing raicilla industry would encourage the cultivation of different agave species within Jalisco. However, the denomination of origin for raicilla has many of the same issues as the one for mezcal. It geographically restricts producers, it standardizes methods of production, and it would exclude producers without the market knowledge and funds to certify their product. Like mezcal, this new legislation could draw from the symbolic value of raicilla and mezcal spirits, prioritizing foreign consumers while marginalizing Mexican producers.

The tensions related to the denomination of origin and certifications of Mexican spirits have crossed the border, with the production of sotol and agave spirits now occurring in the United States. Sotol is a Mexican spirit made from *Dasylirion wheeleri*, or desert spoon. Desert spoon grows primarily in northern Mexico, in places like Chihuahua and Sonora, but can also be found in areas of West Texas and New Mexico. While it is not technically made from agave, it looks very similar to agave, a spiky plant growing in the desert, and is therefore often thought of in the category of agave spirits. Sotol has a denomination of origin, limiting its production to certain states in northern Mexico. However, this denomination of origin isn't recognized in the United States (Coss 2019). This has allowed companies in the United States to start producing and selling Sotol to the US market. These companies are therefore able to profit from the tradition, success, and aesthetics of Mexican spirits while keeping all production and profits in the United States. A similar thing is happening with agave spirits in California. The United States does recognize the denomination of origin of tequila and mezcal. However, this only prevents US producers

from labeling their products as tequila or mezcal but doesn't prevent them from producing functionally identical drinks under a different name. Producers in California, where conditions allow for the cultivation of agave, are therefore able to use similar techniques used for mezcal and tequila production and market their drinks as 'distilled agave spirits' (Kettmann, 2025). These are both examples of US-based producers and companies capturing the symbolic value of Mexican cultural traditions. Sotol and California agave spirits are leveraging the existing consumer demand for Mexican spirits and hoping that consumers can instead be marketed to buy a Texas-produced sotol or a California-produced mezcal. Both of these industries could potentially divert demand from mezcal, tequila, and sotol in Mexico, further marginalizing Mexican mezcal producers.

Just as understanding the growth and issues with the tequila industry is important for understanding mezcal, understanding mezcal is important in understanding and protecting the future of Mexican spirits and the cultural heritage that they represent. The same pattern emerges across tequila, mezcal, raicilla, sotol, and California agave spirits. The cultural heritage and tradition that give these spirits their value in global markets originate in producing communities. However, the economic benefits of that value are captured by brands, exporters, and now, foreign producers. The communities whose knowledge and traditions underpin these industries are the least likely to benefit from them.

Doña Flora pouring me a shot of mezcal into the small cross-engraved candle holder was her way of welcoming me to Sola de Vega. Throughout my time in Sola, I drank mezcal at numerous different community celebrations, from town-wide fiestas patronales to celebrate Saint Francis to small rosaries on Doña Flora's front patio. This is what gives mezcal its value, this symbolic element of tradition and community, which is so hard to define.

At the end of my Fulbright exchange, before I returned to the US, I stopped by the barbershop in Sola de Vega and bought a bottle of Tobalá mezcal. I had to wait for the barber to finish a little boy's haircut before he could funnel the mezcal he kept in large gas containers into a Bonafont water bottle for me. I bought the mezcal as a present for my uncle in Indiana. Pouring himself a shot from the Bonafont water bottle, he had a sip. Echoing my sentiments when I tried it for the first time from a Coke bottle, he wasn't the biggest fan.

A few days later, we were running some errands and stopped in at a liquor store to pick up some wine. Out of curiosity, I checked to see if there was any mezcal in the aisles. Carmel, Indiana, is far from the craft spirits hubs of New York and Los Angeles, so I didn't have much hope. However, under the sign for tequila, I found a few bottles of mezcal. I picked up a bottle of Bozal mezcal, seeing that it was an ancestral Tobalá mezcal. The label announced that it was produced in Sola de Vega, with a denomination of origin sticker proclaiming its tradition and connection to place. The bottle was a green, earthy colour with an aesthetic label, more impressive than the Bonafont bottle I had brought back. Yet the ancestrally produced Tobalá I bought in the barber shop in Sola cost me 300 pesos (approximately \$15 USD) while here, in a liquor store on the corner of a strip mall in Indiana, it was being sold for \$130 USD. My uncle suddenly seemed much more impressed with the plastic bottle that had been pushed to the back of his pantry.

I knew that the \$130 paid by Indiana customers would not return to Sola de Vega. The added value came from the bottle. It came from the marketing of cultural heritage, authenticity, and ties to rural Mexico, rather than the communities and traditions that produced it. That gap, the gap between the cultural reality of mezcal in Sola and its symbolic representation in global markets, is what this thesis has attempted to understand and explain.

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