Coca-Cola: a black sweet drink from Trinidad*

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The context for much of the current interest in material culture is a fear. It is a fear of objects supplanting people. That this is currently happening is the explicit contention of much of the debate over postmodernism which is one of the most fashionable approaches within contemporary social science. It provides the continuity between recent discussions and earlier critical debates within Marxism over issues of fetishism and reification, where objects were held to stand as congealed and unrecognized human labour. This is often an exaggerated and unsubstantiated fear, based upon the reification not of objects but of persons. It often implies and assumes a humanity that arises in some kind of pure pre-cultural state in opposition to the material world, although there is no evidence to support such a construction from either studies of the past or from comparative ethnography, where societies are usually understood as even more enmeshed within cultural media than ourselves. Rather our stance is one that takes society to be always a cultural project in which we come to be ourselves in our humanity through the medium of things.

This fear, at least in its earlier Marxist form, was not, however, a fear of material objects per se but of the commodity as vehicle for capitalist dominance, and this raises a key issue as to whether and when societies might be able to resist this particular form of object domination. Although this is a general issue, there are certain objects which have come to stand with particular clarity for this fear, and to in some sense encapsulate it. A few key commodities have come to signify the whole problematic status of commodities. Recently a new theory has been developed to consider this kind of 'meta-' status in the form of a book on the history of the swastika by Malcolm Quinn (1994). Quinn provides what he calls a theory of the meta-symbol. The swastika is unusual in that instead of standing as the icon for a specific reference it has tended to stand more generally for a meta-symbolic level

* D. Miller (ed.), *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter*, London: University College London Press, 1998, pp. 169–87. 1. The material for this chapter is taken in part from a larger study of business in Trinidad called *Capitalism: an ethnographic approach* (Miller 1997), which contains a wider discussion of the industry, while this chapter draws out the specific implications of Coca-Cola. A full acknowledgement of those who assisted in this project is contained in that volume. A version of this chapter has also been published in Danish in the journal *Tendens*.

that evokes the idea that there exists a higher, more mystical level of symbolization. At first after discoveries at Troy and elsewhere this was the power of symbolism in the ancient past or mystic East, but later this kind of empty but latent status allowed the Nazis to appropriate it as a generalized sign that their higher level and cultic beliefs stemmed from some deep historicity of the swastika itself. Quinn argues that the reason the swastika could achieve such importance is that whatever its particular evocation at a given time, it had come to stand above all for the general sense that there exists a symbolic quality of things above and beyond the ordinary world. This allowed people to attach a variety of mystical beliefs with particular ease to the swastika.

There may well be a parallel here to a few commodities that also occupy the position of meta-symbol. Coca-Cola is one of three or four commodities that have obtained this status. In much political, academic and conversational rhetoric the term Coca-Cola comes to stand, not just for a particular soft drink, but also for the problematic nature of commodities in general. It is a meta-commodity. On analogy with the swastika this may make it a rather dangerous symbol. It allows it to be filled with almost anything those who wish to either embody or critique a form of symbolic domination might ascribe to it. It may stand for commodities or capitalism, but equally imperialism or Americanization. Such meta-symbols are among the most difficult objects of analytical enquiry since they operate through a powerful expressive and emotive foundation such that it becomes very difficult to contradict their claimed status. So Coca-Cola is not merely material culture, it is a symbol that stands for a debate about the materiality of culture.

The title of this chapter has therefore a specific intention. It is a joke, designed to plunge us down from a level where Coke is a dangerous icon that encourages rhetoric of the type West versus Islam, or Art versus Commodity and encourages instead the slower building up of a stance towards capitalism which is informed and complex, so that any new critique has firm foundations resting on the comparative ethnography of practice within commodity worlds.

The literature on Coke that is most readily available is that which best supports the expectations raised by the meta-symbolic status of this drink. These are the many books and articles about the Coca-Cola company and its attempts to market the product. Almost all are concerned with seeing the drink as essentially the embodiment of the corporate plans of the Coca-Cola company. A good example of this is an interview published in *Public Culture* (O'Barr 1989). This is held with the head of the advertising team of the transnational agency McCann Erickson, the firm used by Coke. It focuses upon the specific question of local–global articulation. The interview traces the gradual centralization of advertising as a means to control the manner in which its image became localized regionally. In fact the advertiser notes, 'it wasn't until the late '70s that the need for advertising specifically designed for the international markets was identified.' In a sense this meant more centralization since 'the benchmark comes from the centre and anybody that needs to produce locally, for a cultural reason, a legal reason, a religious reason, or a marketing reason, has to beat it'. Many examples are given in the interview as to retakes around a core advertisement, e.g. reshot with more clothed models for Muslim countries. The interview also included discussions about the phrase 'I feel Coke' which represents a kind of Japanesed English for that market and about what attitude worked for Black Africa. Although the advertiser claims, 'I don't think Coca-Cola projects. I think that Coca-Cola reflects', the interview satisfies our desire to know what this product is by having exposed the underlying corporate strategies for global localization.

Most of the literature on the company, irrespective of whether it is enthusiastically in favour or constructed as a diatribe against the drink, acts to affirm the assumption that the significance of the drink is best approached through knowledge of company strategy. The literature is extensive and probably few companies and their advertising campaigns are as well documented today as Coca-Cola.

There are, however, many reasons for questioning this focus and questioning the theory of commodity power that is involved in assuming that the company controls its own effects. Indeed Coca-Cola could be argued to be a remarkably unsuitable candidate for this role as the key globalized corporation. Two reasons for this emerge through the recent comprehensive history of the company, Pendergrast's book *For God, Country and Coca-Cola* (1993). The first piece of evidence was that which Pendergrast (1993: 354–71; see also Oliver 1986) calls the greatest marketing blunder of the century. His account (and there are many others) shows clearly that the company had absolutely no idea of what the response might be to their decision to change the composition of the drink in the 1980s in response to the increasing popularity of Pepsi. The enforced restitution of Classic Coke was surely one of the most explicit examples of consumer resistance to the will of a giant corporation we have on record. After all, the company had behaved impeccably with respect to the goal of profitability. The new taste scored well in blind tests, it responded to a change in the market shown in the increasing market share of Pepsi and seemed to be a sensitive response that acknowledged the authority of the consumer. Despite this, when Coke tried to change the formula, in marketing terms all hell broke loose, and the company was publicly humiliated.

The second reason why Coca-Cola is not typical of globalization is that from its inception it was based upon a system of franchising. The company developed through the strategy of agreeing with local bottling plants that they would have exclusivity for a particular region and then simply selling the concentrate to that bottler. It is only in the last few years that Coke and Pepsi have begun centralizing the bottling system and then only within the USA. There are of course obligations by the bottlers to the company. The most important are the quality control which is common to most franchising operations and the second is control over the use of the company logo. Indeed this was one of the major early sources of contention resolved in a US Supreme Court decision. In other respects the franchise system allows for a considerable degree of local flexibility, as will be shown in this chapter. Felstead (1993) documents the relationship between the specific case of Coke and more general trends in business franchising.

Coca-Cola in Trinidad

In some ways Coca-Cola is perhaps less directly associated with the States within the USA, where its presence is taken for granted, than in an island such as Trinidad, where its arrival coincided with that of an actual US presence. Coke came to Trinidad in 1939. In 1941 the British government agreed to lease certain bases in Trinidad for 99 years. As a result US troops arrived in some force. This had a profound effect upon Trinidad, no less traumatic because of core contradictions in the way in which Trinidadians perceived these events. Trinidad was already relatively affluent compared to other West Indian islands, thanks to its oil industry, but the wage levels available on the US bases were of quite a different order, leading to a mini-boom. Furthermore the US soldiers were seen as highly egalitarian and informal compared with the aloof and hierarchical British colonial authorities. In addition there was the presence of Black American soldiers and particularly a few well-remembered Black soldiers who took a sympathetic and active role in assisting the development of local Trinidadian institutions such as education.

The Americans reflected back upon themselves this benign side of the relationship in extracting the Trinidadian calypso 'Rum and Coca-Cola', which was a tremendous hit within the USA. There was, however, another side to 'Rum and Coca-Cola' that was evident within the lyrics of the calypso itself, as in the lines 'mother and daughter working for the Yankee dollar', but are found in more detail in the resentment echoed in the book with the same title written by the Trinidadian novelist Ralph de Boissiere (1984). There were many US soldiers who looked upon Trinidadians merely as a resource and were remembered as brutal and exploitative. At the time many Trinidadians felt that it was the commoditization of local sexuality and labour that was objectified through the mix of rum and Coke.

In general, however, given the ideological needs of the independence movement from Britain that followed, it was the benign side of the American presence that is remembered today. Another legacy is the drink rum and Coke which has remained ever after as the primary drink for most Trinidadians. This not only secures the market for Coke but also makes it, in this combination, an intensely local nationalist drink, whose only rival might be the beer Carib. Before reflecting on the meaning of the drink in consumption, however, we need to examine the commercial localization of Coke.

The Trinidadian Soft Drink Industry

Since Coke always works by franchise, its localization as a business comes through the selection of a local bottling plant. In Trinidad Coke is bottled by the firm of Cannings. This is one of the oldest grocery firms in the island. Established in 1912, it was described in 1922 as follows:

> His establishment became the leading place in Port of Spain for groceries, provisions, wines and spirits. It gives employment to about one hundred and ten persons. . . . It would be difficult to find anywhere a stock more representative of the world's preserved food products. . . . An example of the firm's progressive policy in all they undertake is also found in the electrical machinery equipment of their contiguous aerated water factory, where all kinds of delicious non-alcoholic beverages are made from carefully purified waters. (Macmillan 1922: 188)

The franchise for Coca-Cola was obtained in 1939 and was later expanded with the bottling of Diet Coke and Sprite. Coke by no means dominated Cannings, which continued to expand in its own right and developed with Hi-Lo what remains the largest chain of grocery stores on the island. An interesting vicarious insight into this relationship is provided by the Trinidadian novelist V.S. Naipaul (1967). The protagonist of his book *The Mimic Men* is a member of the family that own the Bella Bella bottling works which holds the Coca-Cola franchise for the semi-fictional island of Isabella. In the book a child of the owner is shown taking immense pride and personal prestige from the relationship, viewing the presence of Pepsi as a discourtesy to his family, and showing school groups around the Coke bottling works. The novel thereby provides a glimpse into the earlier localization of Coca-Cola manufacture into local circuits of status (1967: 83–6).

In 1975, Cannings was taken over, as were many of the older colonial firms, by one of the two local corporations that were becoming dominant in Trinidadian business. Unlike many developing countries which are clearly controlled by foreign transnationals, the firm of Neil & Massey along with ANSA McAl together represent the result of decades of mergers of Trinidadian firms (for details see Miller 1997: ch. 3). Both are locally owned and managed and are more than a match for the power of foreign transnationals. Indeed Neil & Massey, which took over Cannings, is clearly itself a transnational although retaining its Trinidadian base. Begun in 1958 and becoming a public company in 1975, it is now the largest firm in the Caribbean. The 1992 annual report noted assets of over TT$1.5 billion, 7,000 employees and subsidiary companies in 16 countries including the USA.[1]

Although ownership lies with Neil & Massey, the bottling section is still, in the public mind, largely identified with Cannings. This relationship is long standing and it cannot be assumed that the local company is dominated by Coke. Cannings represents reliability and quality of a kind that Coke needs from its bottlers. So while Coke would like to push Fanta as its product, and thus increase its own profits, Cannings, which makes good money on its own orange flavour, has simply refused to allow the product into Trinidad. At times it has also bottled for other companies with complementary products such as Schweppes and Canada Dry.

In effect the services offered by Coke Atlanta are largely paid for in the cost of the concentrate which is the most tax-efficient way of representing their financial relationship. In marketing, pricing, etc. the bottler has considerable autonomy to pursue its own strategies. But Cannings has little incentive to do other than follow Atlanta which will often put up 50 per cent of the costs for any particular marketing venture, and can provide materials of much higher quality than the local company could produce. As it happens McCann Erikson, which is Coca-Cola's global advertiser, is present as the sole transnational advertising agency at present operating in Trinidad.

Cannings and in turn Neil & Massey do not, however, represent localization in any simple sense, since both derive from old colonial firms. While they may therefore be seen as representing national interests as against foreign interests they may also be seen as representing white elite interests as against those of the dominant populations in the country which is split between a 40 per cent ex-African, originally mainly though by no means entirely ex-slave, and a 40 per cent ex-South Asian, almost entirely originally ex-indentured labourers (for further details on Trinidad see Miller 1994).

The importance of this identification is clarified when its competitors are brought into the picture. There are six main bottlers of soft drinks in Trinidad. Each has a specific reputation which bears on the drinks they produce. Solo is owned by an Indian family, which started in the 1930s with the wife boiling up the syrup and the husband bottling by hand. It then become one of the earlier larger firms to be outside of the control of whites and it has been either the market leader or at least a key player in the soft drink market ever since. Its main product is a flavour range called Solo and it has one franchise called RC Cola. In a sense while Solo is seen as a local "as opposed to white', the firm of S.M. Jaleel is generally regarded as more specifically 'Indian'. This is because it has the only factory in the South which is the area most dominated by the Indian population, and historically it grew from roots in a red drink that was sold mainly to Indians. Today its own flavour range is called Cole Cold but it has tried out various franchises such as for Schweppes, Seven Up and Dixi Cola.

The firm of L.J. Williams is regarded locally as the 'Chinese' bottlers. As traders and importers they are not associated with their own label but with the brand of White Rock, together with franchises for drinks including Peardrax and Ribena from Britain. The final major company is called Bottlers, though it was recently taken over by a larger firm called Amar. Bottlers have the contract for Pepsi Cola, which at times has had a significant presence in Trinidad but has been languishing with a smaller market share mainly through its inability to find ties with a reliable distributor. Its presence is mainly felt through its links with Kentucky Fried Chicken and the large amount of advertising that has continued despite its lack of market share. It also has a flavour range called USA Pop.

Marketing materials suggest that brand share would be around 35 per cent Coke, 20 per cent Solo, 10 per cent each for Cannings and Cole Cold, with the rest divided between both the other brands mentioned and various minor brands. The industry was probably worth around TT$200 million with a bottle costing 1 dollar to the consumer. The industry sees itself as an earner of foreign currency for Trinidad. This is because the only major imported element is the concentrate. Trinidad is a sugar producer; it also has a highly efficient local producer of glass bottles which manufactures for companies around the Caribbean and sometimes even for Florida. The gas is also produced as a by-product of a local factory. Soft drinks are in turn exported to a number of Caribbean islands, for example nearby Grenada is largely dominated by Trinidadian products and there is some exporting to expatriate populations in, for example, Toronto, New York and London. All the main companies involved are Trinidadian. Indeed even the local Coca-Cola representative is a Trinidadian who is responsible for the company's operations not only in Trinidad but also in five other countries including Guyana in South America. There is also a representative from Atlanta based in Puerto Rico.

When sitting in the offices of the companies concerned, the overwhelming impression is of an obsession with the competition between these firms. Indeed I argue elsewhere (Miller 1997) that it is the actions of rival companies rather than the actions of the consumers that is the key to understanding what companies choose to do. Money spent on advertising, for example, is justified in terms of one's rival's advertising budget rather than the needs of the product in the market. The competition is intense, so that the price in Trinidad is significantly lower than in Barbados where there are only three soft drink companies.

In studying the industry in detail a number of generalizations emerge that seem to command the logic of operations almost irrespective of the desires of particular companies. The first is the cola-flavours structure. Virtually all the companies involved consist of a range of flavours usually made by the companies and a franchised Coke such as Coca-Cola, Dixi Cola, RC Cola or Pepsi. The cola product has become essential to the self-respect of the company as a serious operator, but being a franchise the profits to be made are somewhat less than the flavour ranges where the concentrate is much cheaper.

The second feature seems to be the law of range expansion. Since the 1970s each year has tended to see the entry of a new flavour such as grape, pear, banana, etc., but also a more gradual increase in choice of containers, from bottles to cans to plastic, from 10 oz to 1 litre and 2 litre to 16 oz. In general the company that starts the innovation makes either a significant profit as Solo did with canning or Jaleel did with the litre bottle, or the innovation flops and a loss is incurred. Where there is success all the other companies follow behind so that the final range for the major companies is now very similar. Taking all combinations together they may produce around 60 different products.

This logic is actually counterproductive in relation to the third law, which seems to be that the key bottleneck in company success is distribution. Some of the major advances made by companies have been in finding better ways to distribute their products to the countless small retailers, known as parlours, which are often located as part of someone's house in rural areas. Jaleel, which was a pioneer here through using smaller 3 ton trucks, developed the slogan 'zero in on a Cole Cold' precisely to draw attention to its greater availability. This need to streamline delivery is, however, undermined by the increasing diversity of product, since the latter means that a greater number of crates are required to restock the needs of any particular location. This is only one example of the way in which the imperatives within the industry may act in contradiction to each other rather than as a streamlined set of strategic possibilities.

What is Trinidadian about these business operations? Well, if, as in some anthropology, local particularity is always something that derives from some prior original diversity that somehow resists the effects of recent homogenized tendencies, then the answer is 'very little'. If, however, one regards the new differentiation of global institutions such as bureaucracy and education as they are manifested in regions, as just as an authentic and important form of what might be called a posteriori diversity, then the case is not without interest. Although the various details of how business operates may not be tremendously surprising, it is actually quite distinct from any generalized models that business management with its reliance of universalized models from economics and psychology would like to promote.

In almost any area of business, for example, the conditions that control entry of new companies to the market, the situation in the Trinidadian soft drink industry would be quite different from the situation described in the business literature in, for example, the USA (e.g. Tollison et al. 1986). Partly for that reason I found that executives with business training abroad often pontificated in a manner that clearly showed little understanding of their own local conditions.

Some of the particularities, for example the degree to which the public retains knowledge about the ownership of companies or as another example the fluctuating between competition and price fixing, may have to do with the relatively small size of the market and indeed the country. Others, such as the constant link between franchised colas and local flavour groups, have to do with more fortuitous aspects of the way this industry has been developing locally. Overall this industry, as so much of Trinidadian capitalism, no more follows from general models of business and capitalism than would the particular operation of kinship in the region follow from knowing general models and theories of kinship. Profitability, like biology in kinship, may be a factor but only as manifested through politics, personal prestige, affiliation, particular historical trajectories and so forth.

To give one last example, ethnicity alone might seem an important consideration, but Solo, although Indian, is not seen as ethnic in the same way as Jaleel, which is Indian and operates in the South. Yet in terms of politics the positions are reversed. The family that owns Solo has been associated with opposition to a government that has largely been dominated by African elements and severe difficulties have been put in its way from time to time as a result, for example preventing it from introducing diet drinks; while Jaleel, being Muslim and thus a minority within a minority, has historically been associated politically with the government against the dominant Hindu group of the dominated Indian party.

To conclude – to understand the details of marketing Coke in Trinidad demands knowledge of these local, contingent and often contradictory concerns that make up the way capitalism operates locally, together with the way these affect the relationship between local imperatives and the demands emanating from the global strategists based in Atlanta. Often the net result was that Coke representatives in Trinidad were often extremely uncertain as to the best marketing strategies to pursue even when it came to choosing between entirely opposing possibilities such as emphasized its American or its Trinidadian identity.

The Consumption of Sweet Drinks

The companies produce soft drinks. The public consume sweet drinks. This semantic distinction is symptomatic of the surprising gulf between the two localized contexts. The meaning of these drinks in consumption can easily be overgeneralized and the following points may not apply well to local elites whose categories are closer to those of the manufacturers. But to understand how the mass middle-class and working-class population perceive these drinks, one needs a different starting point. For example, sweet drinks are never viewed as imported luxuries that the country or people cannot afford. On the contrary they are viewed as Trinidadian, as basic necessities and as the common person's drink.

Apart from this being evident ethnographically it is also consistent with the policy of the state. For many years the industry was under price control. This meant that prices could be raised only by government agreement and, since this severely restricted profitability, price control was thoroughly opposed by the industry. The grounds given were that this was a basic necessity for the common person and as such needed to be controlled. The reality was that to the extent that this was true (and still today consumption is around 170 bottles per person per annum), the government saw this as a politically astute and popular move. Furthermore until the IMF (International Monetary Fund) recently ended all protectionism, Coke was protected as a locally made drink through a ban on importing all foreign made soft drinks.

As a non-alcoholic beverage, sweet drinks compete largely with fruit juices and milk drinks such as peanut punch. All are available as commodities but also have home equivalents as in diluted squeezed fruit, home-made milk drinks, and sweet drinks made from water and packet crystals. Water competes inside the home, but no one but the most destitute would request water per se while ordering a meal or snack. Unlike their rivals sweet drinks are also important as mixers for alcohol.

The importance of understanding the local context of consumption as opposed to production is also evident when we turn to more specific qualities of the drinks. From the point of view of consumers, the key conceptual categories are not the flavours and colas constantly referred to by the producers. In ordinary discourse much more important are the 'black' sweet drink and the 'red' sweet drink.

The 'red' sweet drink is a traditional category and in most Trinidadian historical accounts or novels that make mention of sweet drinks it is the red drink that is referred to. The attraction of this drink to novelists is probably not only the sense of nostalgia generally but the feeling that the red drink stands in some sense for a transformation of the East Indian. While the African has become the non-marked population, the Indian has been seen as an ethnic group with its own material culture. The red sweet drink was a relatively early example of the community being objectified in relation to a commodity as opposed to a self-produced object. The red drink is the quintessential sweet drink inasmuch as it is considered by consumers to be in fact the drink highest in sugar content. The Indian population is also generally supposed to be particularly fond of sugar and sweet products and this in turn is supposed to relate to their entry into Trinidad largely as indentured labourers in the sugar cane fields. They are also supposed to have a high rate of diabetics which folk wisdom claims to be a result of their overindulgence of these preferences.

Indian - red drink particular. Community as objectified in terms of a particular commodity

The present connotation of the red drink contains this element of nostalgia. Partly there is the reference to older red drinks such as the Jaleel's original 'red spot'. There is also the presence of the common flavour 'Kola Champagne' which is itself merely a red sweet drink.[2] Adverts that provide consumption shots will most often refer to a 'red and a roti' as the proper combination; the implication being that non-Indians also would most appropriately take a red drink with their roti when eating out, since the roti[3] has become a general 'fast food' item that appeals to all communities within Trinidad.

The centrality of the black sweet drink to Trinidadian drinking is above all summed up in the notion of a 'rum and Coke' as the core alcoholic drink for most people of the island. This is important as rum is never drunk neat or simply on the rocks but always with some mixer. Coke does not stand on this relationship alone, however. The concept of the 'black' sweet drink as something to be drunk in itself is nearly as common as the 'red' sweet drink. Coke is probably the most common drink to be conceptualized as the embodiment of the 'black' sweet drink, but any black drink will do. This is most evident at the cheapest end of the market. In a squatting community where I worked, a local product from a nearby industrial estate called 'bubble up' was the main drink. This company simply produced two drinks: a black (which it did not even bother calling a cola) and a red. People would go to the parlour and say 'gimme a black' or 'gimme a red'. At this level Coke becomes merely a high status example of the black sweet drink of my title.

This distinction between drinks relates in part to the general discourse of ethnicity that pervades Trinidadian conversation and social interaction (see Yelvington 1993). Thus an Indian talked of seeing Coke as a more white and 'white oriented people' drink. The term 'white oriented' is here a synonym for Black African Trinidadians. Many Indians assume that Africans have a much greater aptitude for simply emulating white taste and customs to become what is locally termed 'Afro-Saxons'. Africans in turn would refute this and claim that while they lay claim to white culture Indians are much more deferential to white persons.

Similarly an African informant suggested that '[a certain] Cola is poor quality stuff. It would only sell in the South, but would not sell in the North'. The implication here is that sophisticated Africans would not drink this substitute for 'the real thing', while Indians generally accept lower quality goods. In many respects there is a sense that Black culture has replaced colonial culture as mainstream while it is Indians that represent cultural difference. Thus a white executive noted that in terms of advertising spots on the radio 'we want an Indian programme, since marketing soft drinks has become very ethnic'.

The semiotic may or may not become explicit. One of the most successful local advertising campaigns in the sweet drink industry to occur during the period of fieldwork was for Canada Dry, which was marketed not as a ginger ale but as the 'tough soft drink'. The advert was produced in two versions. One had a black cowboy shooting at several bottles, as on a range, and finding that Canada Dry deflected his bullets. The other had an American Indian having his tomahawk blunted by this brand, having smashed the others. As the company told me, the idea was to cover the diversity of communities and the (as it were) 'red' Indian was adopted only after marketing tests had shown that there would be empathy and not offence from the South Asian Indian community of Trinidad.

I do not want to give the impression that there is some simple semiotic relationship between ethnicity and drinks. What has been described here is merely the dominant association of these drinks, red with Indian, black with African. This does not, however, reflect consumption. Indeed marketing research shows that if anything a higher proportion of Indians drink Colas, while Kola champagne as a red drink is more commonly drunk by Africans. Many Indians explicitly identify with Coke and its modern image. This must be taken into account when comprehending the associated advertising. In many respects the 'Indian' connoted by the red drink today is in some ways the African's more nostalgic image of how Indians either used to be or perhaps still should be. It may well be therefore that the appeal of the phrase 'a red and a roti' is actually more to African Trinidadians, who are today avid consumers of roti. Meanwhile segments of the Indian population have used foreign education and local commercial success to sometimes overtrump the African population in their search for images of modernity and thus readily claim an affinity with Coke.

In examining the connotations of such drinks we are not therefore exploring some coded version of actual populations. Rather, as I argued in more detail elsewhere (Miller 1994: 257–90), both ethnic groups and commodities are better regarded as objectifications that are used to create and explore projects of value for the population. These often relate more to aspects or potential images of the person than actual persons. What must be rejected is the argument of those debating about 'postmodernism' that somehow there is an authentic discourse of persons and this is reduced through the inauthentic field of commodities. Indeed such academics tend to pick on Coca-Cola as their favourite image of the superficial globality that has replaced these local arguments.

Nothing could be further from the Trinidadian case. Here Coca-Cola both as brand and in its generic form as 'black' sweet drink becomes an image that develops as much through the local contradictions of popular culture as part of an implicit debate about how people should be. If one grants that the red sweet drink stands for an image of Indianness then its mythic potential (as in Lévi-Strauss 1966) emerges. This is an image of Indianness with which some Indians will identify, some will not, and more commonly some will identify with only on certain occasions. But equally for Africans and others the identity of being Trinidadian includes this presence of Indian as a kind of 'otherness' which at one level they define themselves against, but at a superordinate level they incorporate as an essential part of their Trinidadianness. The importance of the ethnicity ascribed to drinks is that individual non-Indians cannot literally apply a piece of Indianness to themselves to resolve this contradiction of alterity. Instead they can consume mythic forms which in their ingestion in a sense provide for an identification with an otherness which therefore 'completes' this aspect of the drinker's identity. To summarize the attraction of such adverts is that Africans drinking a red sweet drink consume what for them is a highly acceptable image of Indianness that is an essential part of their sense of being Trinidadian.

Ethnicity is only one such dimension, where Coca-Cola as myth resolves a contradiction in value. Drinks also carry temporal connotations. Coke retains a notion of modernness fostered by its advertising. But it has actually been a presence in Trinidad for several generations. It has therefore become an almost nostalgic, traditional image of being modern. For the Indians or indeed for any group where the desire not to lose a sense of tradition is complemented by a desire to feel modern, this is then an objectification of the modern that is literally very easily ingested. Solo retains its high market share precisely because it provides the opposite polarity. Although as a mass product it is less old than Coke, it is perceived as nostalgic. The Solo returnable is the old squat variety of glass bottle, and I cannot count the number of times I was regaled with the anecdote about how this was the bottle used a generation before to give babies their milk in. The desire for particular commodities are often like myth (following Lévi-Strauss 1966, rather than Roland Barthes 1973) an attempt to resolve contradictions in society and identity. This is nothing new; it is exactly the conclusion Marchand (1985) comes to with regard to his excellent study of advertising in the USA in the 1930s.

Consumption v. Production

These are just examples from the complex context of consumption which often frustrate the producers who are looking for a consistency in the population that they can commoditize. The problem was evident in a conversation with a Coke executive. He started by noting with pleasure a survey suggesting that the highly sophisticated advertising campaign currently being run by Coke was actually the most popular campaign at that time. But he then noted that what came second was a very amateur-looking ad for Det insecticide which had a particularly ugly calypsonian frightening the insects to death. His problem was in drawing conclusions from this survey that he could use for marketing.

In discussing this issue of production's articulation with consumption, it is hard to escape the constant question of 'active' or 'passive' consumers, i.e. how far consumers themselves determined the success of particular commodities. For example, I do not believe that the idea that sweet drinks are considered a basic necessity to be the result of a successful company promotion that results in people 'wasting' their money on what 'ought' to be a superfluous luxury. Nor was it an invention by government that became accepted. This assertion as to the past autonomy of the consumer derives partly from historical evidence in this case but also on the basis of what can be observed of the response to current campaigns.

Perhaps the primary target of soft drink advertising in 1988–9 was the return of the returnable bottle. Here what was at issue was precisely the industry attempting to second-guess the consumer's concern, in this case for thrift and price. The industry reasoned that its own profitability would be best served by trying to save the consumer money. But it was the executives who felt that the public 'ought' to respond to the depths of recession by favouring the returnable bottle. The problem was that despite heavy advertising by more than one company, the consumers seemed unwilling to respond to what all the agencies were loudly announcing to be the inevitable movement in the market. The campaigns were generally a failure, especially given that they were intended to collude with a trend rather than 'distort' public demand.

Companies can, of course, often respond well to complexity. They also compensate for those attributes that have become taken for granted. Thus Jaleel as a highly localized company used the most global style high-quality advertising, while Coke often tried to compensate for its given globality by emphasizing its links to Trinidad through sponsorship of a multitude of small regional events or organizations.

That, however, a gulf can exist between producer and consumer context is most evident when each rests upon different conceptualizations of the drinks. A prime example is the distinction between the sweet drink and the soft drink. Localisms such as sweet drink are not necessarily fostered by company executives who come from a different social milieu, and whose social prejudices often outweigh some abstract notion of profitability. The producers are part of an international cosmopolitanism within which high sugar content is increasingly looked upon as unhealthy. In connection with this, sweetness increasingly stands for vulgarity and in some sense older outdated traditions. The executives would wish to see themselves, by contrast, as trying to be in the vanguard of current trends.

There were, therefore, several cases of companies trying to reduce the sugar content of their drinks, and finding this resulted in complaints and loss of market share. As a result the sugar content remains in some cases extremely high. A good proportion of the cases of failure in the market that were recorded during fieldwork seemed to be of drinks with relatively high juice content and low sugar content. As one executive noted, 'we can do 10 per cent fruit as in Caribbean Cool. We are following the international trend here to higher juice, but this is not a particularly popular move within Trinidad. Maybe because it not sweet enough'.

Indeed while the executives consider the drinks in relation to the international beverages market, this may not be entirely correct for Trinidad. The term 'sweet' as opposed to 'soft' drink may have further connotations. The food category of 'sweets' and its associated category of chocolates is here a much smaller domain in the market than is found in many other areas such as Europe or the USA. Although sweets are sold in supermarkets and parlours they do not seem to be quite as ubiquitous as in many other countries and there are virtually no sweet shops per se. Given that the most important milk drink is actually chocolate milk, there is good reason to see drinks as constituting as much the local equivalent of the sweets and chocolates domain of other countries as of their soft drinks. But once again this emerges only out of the consumption context and one would have a hard time trying to convince local Trinidadian executives that they might actually be selling in liquid form that which other countries sell as solids.

It is this that justifies the point made earlier that to endeavour to investigate a commodity in its local context, there are actually two such contexts, one of production and distribution and the other of consumption. These are not the same and they may actually contradict each other to a surprising extent. There is an important general point here in that Fine and Leopold (1993) have argued with considerable force that consumption studies have suffered by failing to appreciate the importance of the link to production which may be specific to each of what they call 'systems of provision', i.e. domains such as clothing, food and utilities. What this case study shows is that while production and consumption should be linked, they may be wrong to assume that this is because each domain evolves its own local consistency as an economic process. Quite often they do not.

The reason that this is possible is that, although the formal goal of company practice is profitability, there are simply too many factors that can easily be blamed for the failures of campaigns. At best companies have marketing information such as blind tests on particular brands, and point-of-sale statistics. But even this information is little used except as *post hoc* justification for decisions that are most often based on the personal opinions and generalized 'gut' feelings of the key executives. Given peer pressure based on often irrelevant knowledge of the international beverage market, producers often manage to fail to capitalize on developments in popular culture that are available for commoditization.

Similarly consumers do not regard companies as merely functional providers. In a small island such as Trinidad consumers often have decided views, prejudices and experiences with regard to each particular company as well as their products. As such the reaction of consumers to a particular new flavour may be determined in large measure by those factors that make the consumer feel that it is or is not the 'appropriate' firm with which to associate this flavour. So there are cases of several firms trying out a new flavour until one succeeds. What the ethnography suggests is that there are often underlying reasons that one particular company's flavour tasted right.

Conclusion

This case study has attempted to localize production and consumption separately and in relation to each other. The effect has been one of relativism, using ethnography to insist upon the local contextualization of a global form. It follows that Coke consumption might be very different elsewhere. Gillespie (1995: 191–7) has analyzed the response to Coke among a group of West London youths from families with South Asian origins. The attraction to Coke is if anything greater in London than in Trinidad, but the grounds are quite different. In London, where immigration from South Asia is a much more recent experience, the focus was on the portrayal of the relative freedom enjoyed by youth in the USA as a state to be envied and emulated. There is no local contextualization to the consumption of the drink comparable to Trinidad. Furthermore the primary emphasis in London was on the advertisements rather than the drink itself.

The point of engaging in these demonstrations of relativism was declared at the beginning of this chapter to be an attempt to confront the dangers of Coke as meta-symbol. I confess I wanted to localize Coke partly because I was disenchanted with tedious anecdotes, often from academics, about Coke and global homogenization and sensed that the kind of glib academia that employed such anecdotes was possibly serving a rather more sinister end.

Anthropology seemed a useful tool in asserting the importance of a posteriori diversity in the specificity of particular capitalisms. A critical appraisal of capitalism requires something beyond the lazy term that ascribes it a purity of instrumentality in relation to profitability as goal seeking which does not usually bear closer inspection, any more than kinship can be reduced to biology. I therefore felt that prior to embarking upon a reformulated critique of capitalism it was important first to encounter capitalism as a comparative practice, not just a formal economistic logic (see Miller 1997).

But such a point could be made with many commodities. Coke is special because of its particular ability to objectify globality. This chapter has not questioned this ability, it has argued only that globality is itself a localized image, within a larger frame of spatialized identity. As has been shown within media studies (Morley 1992: 270–89), an image of the global is not thereby a universal image. The particular place of globality and its associated modernity must be determined by local setting. Indeed Caribbean peoples with their extraordinarily transnational families and connections juxtaposed with often passionate local attachments well exemplify such contradictions in the terms 'local' and 'global'. Trinidadians do not and will not choose between being American and being Trinidadian. Most reject parochial nationalism or neo-Africanized roots that threaten to diminish their sense of rights of access to global goods, such as computers or blue jeans. But they will fiercely maintain those localisms they wish to retain, not because they are hypocritical but because inconsistency is an appropriate response to contradiction.

So Coke and McDonald's are not trends, or symbolic of trends. Rather like whisky before them, they are particular images of globality that are held as a polarity against highly localized drinks such as sorrel and punch a creme, which unless you are West Indian you will probably not have heard of. Mattelart's (1991) *Advertising International* showed the commercially disastrous result when Saatchi & Saatchi believed its own hype about everything becoming global. The company nearly collapsed. In an English pub we would also find an extension of the range of potential spatial identifications from international or European lagers to ever more parochial 'real ales'. No doubt many aspiring anthropologists would choose one of the new 'designer' beers which typically derive from some exotic location, such as Mexico or Malaysia where anthropologists have a distinct advantage in boring other people with claimed knowledge of the original homeland of the beer in question. The point this brings home is that semiotics without structuralism was never much use, as Coca-Cola found when it tried to change its formula and was humiliated by the consumer.

Finally we can turn back to the meta-context of this chapter, which asserts the scholarship of such contextualization against the common academic use of Coca-Cola as glib generality. There are many grounds for favouring theoretical and comparative approaches in anthropology against a tradition of ethnography as mere parochialism, which is hard to justify in and of itself. In this case, however, there are specific grounds for an ethnography of localism because here localism makes a particular point. Vanguard academics seem to view Coca-Cola as totalized, themselves as contextualized. This chapter shows, by example, how ordinary vulgar mass consumption is proficient in sublating the general form back into specificity. By contrast, in much of the academic discussion of post-modernism as also in political rhetoric we find the totalizing of Coca-Cola as a meta-symbol. This discourse when detached from its historical and localized context comes to stand for the kind of anti-enlightenment irrationalism and aestheticism that was once the main instrument used by fascism against the rationalist tradition of the enlightenment. The point is not dissimilar to Habermas's (1987) argument in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* against these same trends in modern academic thought.

The concept of meta-symbol certainly fits postmodern assertions about nothing referring to anything in particular any more. I do not accept at all that this is true for commodities such as Coke when investigated in production or consumption contexts, although this is what the academic asserts. But it might just be true of the way academics themselves use the image of Coke. First accepting its globality in a simple sense, Coke then becomes a general Capitalism, Imperialism, Americanization, etc. Then in discussions of postmodernism it may emerge as a kind of generalized symbol standing for the existence in commodities of a level of irrationalized meta-symbolic life (Featherstone 1991 provides a summary of these kinds of academic discussions). This parallels what Quinn (1994) sees happening to the swastika:

> Returning to the definition of the swastika as the 'sign of non-signability', we can see that here the image comes to represent the symbolic realm or the symbolic process per se, as a meta-symbol or 'symbol of symbolism', a status that Aryanism reflected by naming the image as the 'symbol of symbols' set apart from all others and representable only by itself (Quinn 1994: 57).

Both the Coca-Cola corporation but even more a trend in academics and politics would wish to push Coca-Cola onto this kind of plateau. In collusion with the drinkers that consume it and often the local companies that bottle it, this chapter is intended to form part of a counter movement that would push Coca-Cola downwards back into the muddy dispersed regions of black sweet drinks.

Notes

1. At the time the exchange rate was approximately TT$4.25 to US$l.
2. This particular marketing ploy of calling fizzy drinks champagne is found in Britain in the nineteenth century, when drinks were made from a syrup called twaddle. This may well be the origin of the expression 'a load of twaddle', a fact entirely unrelated to the rest of this chapter!
3. Roti is the traditional Indian unleavened bread, sold in Trinidad wrapped around some other food to make a meal.

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