

**Lina Britto, *Marijuana Boom: The Rise and Fall of Colombia's First Drug Paradise***

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In this fascinating book, Lina Britto combines methods employed by journalists, anthropologists and historians to tell the forgotten story of the rise and decline of marijuana trafficking in Colombia's Guajira Peninsula and the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta during the 1970s. Although the more notorious cocaine industry has overshadowed this earlier regional bonanza carried out by local smugglers known as *marimberos*, Britto argues that it was this boom that was a dramatic turning point in Colombia history, transforming the country into the main supplier of US drug markets and later the principal target of the US war on drugs in South America.

Britto divides her analysis of the boom into three phases: Ascendance, Peak, and Decline. During the Ascendance period between the mid-1960s to 1970, the *marimberos* transformed deeply-rooted traditions of contraband commerce into the basis of a new regional economy. This modest and creative process was confined to seaports near Riohacha and Santa Marta and was restricted to contrabandistas who were already exporting coffee to the US through Aruba and Curacao without paying taxes.

During the Peak phase (1972-1977), however, local marijuana crops destined exclusively for export in the valleys of the Sierra Nevada turned the inchoate micro traffic into a full-fledged export sector. As with bananas, coffee, and cotton in previous decades, a confluence of regional and international trends made marijuana cultivation the fastest growing activity in the former greater Magdalena Region. Similar to the cattle economy, which worked through integrated chains of breeders, raisers, fatteners and merchants, the marijuana boom operated via networks of growers, drivers, guards, intermediaries, exporters and US buyers, offering employment to a generation of rural and urban youth. Loyalty, respect for hierarchy and one's word of honor was indispensable, while prestige, status, and reciprocity were three essential principles for accumulating economic capital from the bottom up. When the boom reached its peak in the mid-1970s, many sectors of the population had amassed small fortunes, an achievement that modernizing reforms had failed to provide them.

It was during this period that *marimberos* discovered that vallenato music—an autochthonous genre characterized

by vocalists backed by a combo of accordion, *caja* (drum) and *guacharaca* (scratching instruments) when accompanied by the *parranda*, a social gathering “understood as a group of numerous friends having fun to the rhythm of folkloric music mixed with jokes, anecdotes and tales” (117)—was a potent vehicle to project an idealized image of themselves as men of stature and successful entrepreneurs. The emotional, financial, and social investments that *marimberos* lavished on vallenato artists helped to promote a more danceable and commercial sound, until the expanding national market for this immensely popular music eventually coalesced into the Vallenato Legend Festival held annually in Valledupar. Even more important, the notoriety it prompted brought about national support for the creation in 1967 of Cesar, a new department with its capital in Valledupar and Alfonso López Michelsen as its first appointed governor.

Regrettably, this happy state of affairs began to decline in 1978, when the producers and traffickers became targets of criminalization, and the territories where they carried out their smuggling became the setting for militarization. Circumstances within both the US and Colombia pushed for recognition of a growing drug problem. The introduction of a campaign of crop eradication and trafficking interdiction carried out between November 1978 and March 1980 would constitute the first chapter of the “war on drugs.” Before long the unraveling of rumor, envy, fierce competition and terror ravaged the circuits of marijuana production and commercialization and brought about the decay of the entire export sector.

In the end, Britto confesses that calling the marijuana boom a “paradise” is a misstatement. In fact, it “was the bastard creature of the discontents of a series of reforms in pursuit of agrarian development, a creative response to modernization on its very own terms.” (218). Nevertheless, one its most significant legacies was cultural modernization through the vallenato music and the *parrandero*. Their promotion, that was done with originality and ardor, struck a chord with popular classes all over Colombia and contributed to making vallenatos and *parranderos* key elements of late-twentieth-century Colombian culture.

*The Marijuana Boom* is a significant accomplishment –a monograph on an important topic that, by combining archival information with extensive oral history, offers insight into a neglected Colombian region and a little-known phase of the country’s seemingly interminable drug trafficking history. Best of all, Britto writes with a journalistic flair that will make

her book accessible to undergraduate and graduate students, their professors, and the public at large.