The Joy of Eating: Food and Identity in Contemporary Cuba*

by

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Introduction

Cubans will wholeheartedly testify to the central importance of food in their life; when asked to speak of their cuisine, they tend to say that food brings a deep sense of being Cuban. In this paper, I will examine the ways in which food practices can shape, represent, and reproduce a particular collective identity (Terrio, 2000). This will be achieved by situating the socio-cultural dimension of Cuban cuisine within complex fields of power and identity struggles that have profoundly shaped this Caribbean island over the last five hundred years. Ethnographic sources for this work come from data gathered during the many visits to Cuba I have taken over the last seven years.

The Approach

Anthropologists have long acknowledged that food is more than nutrition helping individuals to form attachments to their society by engaging behaviour and relations at many levels. For instance, Levi-Strauss (1969, 1978) says that food has less to do with what is good to eat than with what is good to think. In other words, what is considered to be appropriate food is closely related to social-cultural acts of signification in which societies categorise and organise nature. Following a similar line of thinking, Douglas (1972, 1997) argues that food can act as a mental construct to bind people together creating a sense of the collective self. Fiddles (1991), Goody (1982), and Garnsey (1999) demonstrate that group eating can highlight relationships that structure social institutions, as well as collective attitudes. The repertory of associations conveyed by food provides the people who share them with meaning and a strong sense of belonging. As Fiddles (1991:33) puts it, “The food we select reflects our thought, including our conception of our actual or desired way of life and our perceptions of the food choices of people with whom we wish to identify”. The work of authors such as Pilcher (1998) and Wilk (1999) also reveals that culinary traditions translate a sense of national belonging making food an active shaper as well as a marker of collective identity formation.

Because food is so socially and culturally charged, it also impacts on the political culture of a nation. Like other goods, food acts as a positional marker within social hierarchy. That is, groups establish boundaries and class differences by internalising food as taste, in that people develop predilections for particular types of food. For Bourdieu (1984), tastes reflect social hierarchy based on economic and cultural capital. According to him, the main source of this differen-
tiation system is habitus—a set of attitudes ingrained in agents so early that they internalise predispositions such as food tastes that become rooted in their national identity as cultural capital.

In this paper, the emergence of dominant food tastes leads us to pay particular attention to the sites where these tastes developed as habitus. Pratt’s concept of “contact zone” (1992) is useful here:

[c]ontact zone is an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal co-presence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect... It treats the relations among colonizers and colonized, or travelers and “travelees,” not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power (1992:7).

To follow Pratt, dietary changes appeared to have occurred in those social spaces where everyday interactions were going on between disparate and asymmetric cultures. In such situations, Euro-dietary tastes became ideologies used to validate and sustain relationships of domination in the interest of the colonial political power (Garney, 1999). However, research indicates that while tastes transmit and translate relations of power, they could also sustain ideas opposed to the dominant power, such as African food systems during slavery. Thus, the political dimension of food in so-called “contact zones” could inform on the ways in which the superordinate and subordinate classes recreate a contact culture and confer to it a sense of authenticity. In this paper, I will examine how Cuban cooking reflects this process of transculturation and impacts on the sense of national identity construction or Cubanness.

Cuba’s Culinary Traditions

Cuban diet carries the memory of the island’s pre- and post-conquest histories. As a contact cuisine, it incorporates the dietary practices of its original inhabitants as well as those of African and Asian origins into the hegemonic cooking tradition of Spain. Today, these traditions all contribute to the richness of Cuban creolised cuisine.

Native Influence

The earliest dietary traditions come from the first known inhabitants of the islands including the Ciboney; the Taíno, and the Mayari. Unfortunately, little is known about the latter group whose culture was eventually absorbed by the dominant Taíno (Pérez, 1995:18).

The Ciboney were semi-nomadic fishers and foragers who lived on the coast in rock shelters and cave dwellings harvesting fish, shellfish, and turtles from the sea. On the beaches, they gathered mollusks and crustaceans, and they
hunted mammals, reptiles, and game trapped in deadfalls or spring snares on the land (Pérez, 1995). They also collected nuts, avocados, cashew fruit, mamey, papaya, guava, pineapple, and a variety of berries.

Eventually, the Ciboney were dislodged by successive waves of village-dweller Taino. Like the Ciboney, the Taino fished, but unlike their predecessors they had a sophisticated form of agriculture whereby, after clearing the land, they heaped up mounds of earth or conucos in the soft alluvial soil (Rouse, 1992) to grow root crops such as sweet potatoes, pumpkins, and cassava. Cassava, also called yuca and manioc, is a starchy tuber that served as the staple food of Caribbean populations in the pre-conquest period. With the cassava the Taino made an unleavened bread which could keep for several months, even in humid weather; this food was labelled “bread of the earth” by the Spaniards (Suchlicki, 1988:302). The Taino cultivated chili and annatto as condiments, and undertook extensive cultivation of tobacco and corn.

The Taino used distinct cooking methods such as clay-baking and ember-burning called barbacoa, and later known to us as barbecue (Barer-Stein, 1979). Fish and birds were coated with mud and baked in an ash fire made in a pit dug into the sand (Wolfe, 1970:39). Today’s pepper-pot was originally a type of stew with meat and cassareep which used the boiled juice of the cassava root to provide a peculiar bittersweet flavour.

Although none of the native islanders survived European conquest, their rapid genocide during the first century of Spanish colonisation, did not erase their dietary traditions. For instance, one of their legacies is corn. Corn cropping survived colonialism because it was well adapted to tropical conditions and did not require a plough or horse. Eventually, corn became a major staple in the slave diet, and during the economic crisis of the 1930s, cornmeal was eaten daily — a fact that is still vivid in the memory of many Cubans (Villapol, 1993).

**African Influence**

Once African slavery replaced Native labour in the sixteenth century, over twenty ethnic groups were forced to leave their homelands to work on the sugar plantations. These groups included the Efik and the influential Lucumí from Nigeria, the Bantu also known as Congo from Angola and Cameroon, and the Arara or Dahomeyan from West and Central Africa. With the slaves came African crops such as okra (Quimbombó — a food staple from the Congo and Angola), plantains, and a great variety of cooking bananas. Today, fried pounded plantain (tachino) is considered a delicacy in Cuba.

Although the eating practices of the slave households show up only in glimpses in the literature, it is possible to imagine the interaction that went on all the time in contact zones (Pratt, 1992). This enabled African cooking traditions to be maintained to some degree. Such was the case where slave women had access to their masters’ kitchens. Furthermore, to spare the estate the expenses of provid-
ing for the slaves during the non-crop season, some plantation owners were amenable to their African labour force maintaining tiny plots of land near their shelters, a system called conucos y crías (Moreno Fraginals, 1978:202). This in turn provided an environment conducive to the perpetuation of specific African dietary practices into Cuban food culture. Many of the soup recipes in contemporary Cuban cuisine come from the rich soup and stew traditions of the African continent. For instance okra is used in soups with pork and plantain. During the era of slavery, these okra soups were prepared with jerked pork that was first deprived of its salt before inclusion.

Of particular interest is that African culinary tradition often entered Cuban colonial society through the medium of songs. Enslaved Africans, forbidden to converse while working, learned to communicate positive images of their roots through songs that were filled with references to African culinary practices. These songs form part of a rich layered musical heritage in modern day Cuba. An example of this tradition is the following song on okra (Faya, 1999:77):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qimbombó que resbala</th>
<th>Slippery okra</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>con yuca y ñame</td>
<td>with yucca and yam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Que sabroso el quimbombó</td>
<td>how delicious is okra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cocinado con harina</td>
<td>cooked with flour,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>con camarón cito seco</td>
<td>small dried shrimps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>y con carne de gallina</td>
<td>and chicken meat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senores no se que pasa</td>
<td>Sirs, I don’t know what’s happening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>con los pollos de hoy en día:</td>
<td>with chickens today:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quieren comer quimbombó</td>
<td>they want to eat okra,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>con yuca, ñame y jutía.</td>
<td>with yucca and yam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qimbombó que resbala pa’ la yuca seca.</td>
<td>Slippery okra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for the dry yucca.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not only songs, but also religious practices played a part in maintaining African food habits. This is evidenced in the extensive use of okra in ceremonial dishes. For instance, asbabah is cornmeal cooked in chicken stock and okra, ilah is okra cooked with stock, and abeggedeh is raw okra paste blended with cornmeal (Villapol, 1993). This persisting African influence in Cuban cooking points to the success of the African struggle to resist the cultural vacuum created by slavery during colonialism.

**Asian Influence**

In the middle of the nineteenth century, when planters became increasingly concerned over the effects that abolition of slavery would have on their profits, Asian contract labourers were imported from Asia including China, the
Spanish-dominated Philippine Islands, and from India. These indentured workers came to work in cane fields, sugar mills and on the railroads (Pérez, 1995:115).

Asian workers brought their love of rice, although rice had apparently come to the island much before the arrivals of these immigrants. Originally, imported from Asia and West Africa (Ulijaszek & Strickland, 1993), rice was consumed in Italy, France and Spain some 25 years prior to the conquest of the Americas. It was introduced to the Americas by a chance event in 1694 (Suchlicki, 1988, Ball, 1999). For instance Ball mentions that the planting of rice started in South Carolina circa 1695. Five years later, thirty tons of rice were shipped each year to the Caribbean, including Cuba to feed the slaves (Villapol, 1993). Its cultivation in Cuba may have been encouraged by the developments in agriculture and commerce that occurred in the Caribbean during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Suchlicki, 1988). One could speculate that the knowledge of growing rice in their native land that West Africans brought with them, completed with the arrival of Chinese contract labourers in the 1840s would have insured the successful cultivation of the crop in the Americas and the Caribbean.

Today, rice is Cuba's most important staple, perceived as versatile, durable and filling. In times of scarcity, if rice and beans are stockpiled, Cubans do not fear hunger. During the harsher years of the Special Period (1992, 1993 and 1994) when rice was extremely scarce, Cuban women created a substitute out of cut spaghetti to preserve the illusion of serving rice at their tables. The presence of rice in Cuban households distinguishes a meal from a snack, for instance at breakfast. Rice and black beans (congrí), and rice and kidney beans (moros y cristianos translated as Moors and Christians) are the dishes most Cubans associate with their culture. The term congrí, according to Villapol (1993), was probably adopted from neighbouring Haiti, for it appears to be a combination of the words “Congo” and “rice” (riz, French). This would suggest that the term originated when rice was the main staple of slave consumption, and beans one of their major sources of protein. Although emblematic of Cuban cuisine, congrí, a combination of rice and a legume, is not exclusive to Cuba, but rather a Caribbean dish that was established with the African and Asian diasporas. For this reason there are similar “congrí” recipes in Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti.

A Cuban variation of congrí is known as moros y cristianos, which suggests the association of the dish with Spain. Europeans were obsessed with racial purity and associated the colour white with high rank (Farb & Armelagos, 1980). In Latin America, vestiges of this obsession were expressed in colonial notions of raza pura (race purity) and limpieza de sangre (blood cleanliness), a legacy of Spain’s contact with Northern Africa. This helps to explain how white rice relates to Christians, a metaphor based on the premise of the natural superiority (purity) of the Spaniards and kidneys with the tainted (subaltern) Moors. Today, the expression of moros y cristianos has been replaced by congrí, which
seems to reflect a certain distancing from the dichotomous European thought and a movement towards a more inclusive Caribbean attitude.

**Spanish Influence**

Cuba’s strongest culinary influence comes from southern Spain, including Galicia, Andalusia, Asturia, and the Canary Islands. The hegemony of Spanish cooking evolved with the colonial development of the plantation system for sugar, and livestock ranching for meat. Whenever possible Europeans imitated cosmopolitan cuisine and only incorporated local ingredients at the periphery of their diets (Pilcher, 1998). This ambivalence toward native food can still be seen in a dislike of spicy food and the total absence on the island of the American domesticated chilli pepper — particularly striking since this condiment has existed for over nine thousand years in the region (Farb & Armelagos, 1980). Instead, Cubans use garlic, onion and cumin all coming from a European taste. Also, Spanish colonists were bread-lovers and bread was of enormous symbolic importance to Europeans, who considered wheat to be the food of the civilised Christian world. Bread was also sacred in both the Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions, which regarded the ritual use of bread as the flesh of Christ. However, Spanish colonists were forced to adjust this preference with an environment where wheat was hard to grow under tropical conditions. They adopted instead rice, corn, and root crops, including the potato, which was brought to the Caribbean by the Spaniards who first encountered the crop during their conquest of Peru.

Cubans love their meat: a distinctly European taste, meat is a preference that originates in the colonial assumption that “without meat in the diet the human brain [would stop] functioning and civilisation [become] impossible” (Bulnes cited in Pilcher, 1998:82). In Europe meat has traditionally been associated with masculinity (Bourdieu, 1984:190). Today, regardless of the tropical climate and the proximity of the ocean, Cubans prefer meat to fish. Evidence of this is seen in the fact that a meatless meal is considered eminently unsatisfying and a vegetarian diet lacking in nutrients.

For a long time beef was the most common meat. The rearing of livestock on the island started as early as 1493 when Columbus brought Spanish husbandry to the New World. Cuba had good natural conditions for cattle raising. Initially, stock rearing developed in a haphazard manner in the areas of Santiago, Trinidad, and Baracoa, and later in the vast central grasslands of Camaguey and Villas Clara where the animals could be turned loose to graze. Conducted in small-and medium-size ranches (poterros), it was an activity that required only limited capital investment and very little labour—perhaps one slave to fifty head of livestock. By the end of the colonial period in 1895, there were nearly 3 million head of cattle grazing on Cuban pastures (Pérez, 1989). Because of the high demand for working animals, the industry continued to occupy an important economic role even after the island shifted to sugar cane.
In fourteenth-, fifteenth- and sixteenth-centuries Europe, Flandrin (1999) tells us that the status of beef was low; cattle were considered a lower, heavier type of animal and their meat was perceived as tough, cold, and dry — thus difficult to digest. As a result, the aristocracy depreciated beef and preferred to eat veal, which was viewed as more refined, having a more delicate flavour, and a lighter colour. Meanwhile, European peasants were the beef-eating class for whom it was nourishing as well as affordable. This was an attitude that seems to have been transferred to the New World through the Spanish colonists, most of whom came from modest backgrounds.

However, not only class cultural practices but also utilitarian factors must have influenced the shift to a preference for beef. The low production and market costs of cattle provided the plantation owners with the necessary jerked (salted) meat that was part of the daily food ration assigned to feed their slaves. Initially, when it was suggested that fish could replace jerked beef, the landed aristocracy refused on economic grounds since beef was cheaper than fish (Villapol, 1993). The dominance of Spanish culinary culture in colonial Cuba suggests the power of food to legitimate European authority that coincided with changing social divisions in the region.

North American Influence

During the U.S. protectorate, Cuba went through a period of Americanisation in which beef — the all-American food — took on a new prestige. After the 1959 revolution, beef was produced primarily for the tourism industry and export. Cattle raising was modernised and the crossing of Zebu and Holstein breeds was a huge success. Improved genetic stocks as well as imported feed and better infrastructure increased production threefold between 1963 and 1989. From the outset — of the Special Period (1990-2000), which started after the fall of eastern Europe in 1989, more than 50 percent of the stock of breeding cows disappeared, which was mainly due to a shift in the 1990s from imported feed to natural pastures. Although there are signs of recovery, milk production — the most important indicator in cattle raising — has not increased.

Since 1959, there has been a prohibition on the killing of beef for consumption by Cubans. Only animals that have died from natural causes or accidental deaths can be butchered for domestic use, and violations are severely punished with stiff fines or detention. The proscription against eating beef is stricter now that the island desperately needs its cows for milk and calf production. Furthermore, the shortage of gasoline and tractors have led to the introduction of bullock farming, making oxen essential animals for ploughing fields and pulling carts. Interestingly, at the symbolic level this taboo against beef killing in contemporary Cuba conveys a clear political distancing from past colonial and republican years.
Although a number of other animals are consumed, pork is now the preferred meat and its fat is widely used for cooking. Unlike cattle, pigs are adaptable and can share their habitats with humans. Usually Cuban households like to keep a pig or two in their yards — an activity that was legalised in 1990 at the beginning of the Special Period. In times of scarcity, pigs maintain themselves on what the household rejects and would otherwise waste. Furthermore, pigs are among the most efficient converters of plant food into flesh, producing about twenty pounds of meat for each hundred pounds of feed, which is three times the average for cattle and twice that for poultry (Farb & Armelagos, 1980:172).

**Contemporary Cuban Dietary Practices**

**Meal structures**

Usually, men and women work closely together outside the home, but in the privacy of the family a marked division of labour continues to exist in food related activities. Men tend to be in charge of bringing the food to the home while women are responsible for getting the meals ready. Since the severe economic crisis of the last decade, food acquisition and preparation have added a tremendous burden to the daily workload of the Cuban working household.

As a general rule, the Cuban day begins with a simple breakfast of milk with coffee and a slice of bread; or simply a cup of coffee — a custom that originated with slavery (Moreno Friginals, 1986:59). Lunches and dinners are usually hot meals. Lunches at the refectory (comedor) begin around mid-day and are subsidised by the state.

At home as well as at the refectory, the Cuban meal structure is synchronous in nature, with dishes placed either in the centre of the table for all to share (at home), or on a tray (at work). When Cubans sit down to eat there is little or no formality to start the meal. Ordinarily, individual intakes are unrestrained and food is not measured. Neither are thanks expressed after a meal, for it would be an insult not to eat. Water or a soft drink is served.

At work, lunches tend to be bland and usually consist of a ration of rice, dry legumes such as chicharos, some root vegetable, and a serving of sweet rice. Although basic and repetitive, these meals are nutritionally sound.

Salad vegetables are used at home and tend to be simple greens with tomatoes, cucumber, and avocado dressed with lemon and salt. However, for Cubans who usually want the feeling of heaviness from food, salad vegetables are generally considered "side" dishes rather than "real" food — an accompaniment to a meal, but never the base of it. Fruits are much appreciated. Fresh, they are usually served as appetizers to a meal because of their vitamin contents and digestive qualities. Cooked, they are consumed as desserts and frequently served with cheese. Fruits are used to flavour ice creams, such as the famed Copelia.
The cooking of sweet dishes is a colonial practice that is understandable for a country whose main industry has been sugar since the middle of the nineteenth century (Mintz, 1986). Sugar cane, the engine of late colonial expansion, grew in vast plantations located in the flatter provinces that stretched across the island such as Ciego de Avila, Cienfuegos, Matanzas, and Sancti Spiritu. The non-alcoholic, gayapo (the juice of the sugar cane) was the only food given to slaves working under the scorching tropical sun.

Special occasions such as the New Year, weddings, birthdays, or the end of a young girl’s childhood at her Quince Años (15th birthday), are marked by a large meal taken in a climate of conviviality with lots of puns and jokes. To be regarded as satisfying, this type of meal should be copious, high in fat, and rich in carbohydrate. Such festive meals follow a diachronic structure. They start with a plate of fresh fruit (bananas, watermelon, grapefruit, oranges, mangoes, pineapple or papaya) followed by a centrepiece (such as meat) congri (black beans), and a side salad of tomatoes, cucumber and lettuce with avocado when in season. The final course or “sweet” might be in the form of cooked fruit served with a slice of cheese, baked custards (flan), or a cake. Coffee is served afterwards to signal that the meal has come to an end. In Cuba, where coffee and sugar have traditionally been the exports at the core of the economy, a cup of very strong and sweet black coffee has come to symbolise neighbourliness, social inclusion, and Cubanness.

Beer has become an important social drink; tapped beer is sold in large barrels at affordable prices. On special occasions, such as a celebration for work achievements and important national events, beer drinking is allowed at the workplace to make the transition from work to leisure and from normal to special time. Cubans also love rum and rum-based drinks, such as Cuba libre (rum and coke), and mojito — rum and water or soda poured over a base of lime juice with a sprig of mint to enliven the drink. Any public expression of Cubanness includes beer and rum, along with music — the latter two being by-products of the sugar and slave economy.

Alcoholic drinking is usually not excessive and seldom solitary. In fact, cultural circumstances largely determine when alcoholic consumption is considered appropriate. During celebrations, glasses are freely passed around to make it clear that drinking has a strong social component. However, although drinking remains an important expression of conviviality, alcoholic consumption is done in moderation and most people find intoxication unacceptable, especially if the drinker is a woman.

Individual eating behaviours such as nibbling are not much practised since they lack social significance for the group, and overeating is considered to be in poor taste. Unlike North Americans, whose eating habits tend to be regarded as an assertion of individual tastes and lifestyles, contemporary Cubans exhibit cultural uniformity in their gastronomic tastes.
This uniformity in tastes has been strengthened by the refectory culture, which appeared after the revolution. Since then, comedores have functioned as institutionalised forums where the same food is shared with everyone at work disseminating and reaffirming a sense of commonality among people. Pitt-Rivers (1977:10) writes that "food and drink always have ritual value, for the ingestion together of a common substance creates a bond". Workers and management alike eat the same meals — a powerful metaphor of shared values which establishes communion through commonality. This sharing creates bonds, blurs social differences, and dramatises inclusion, suggesting that comedores are sites that express and reproduce Cubanness, or a collective sense of national identity. As well, it prevents the transformation of social relationships into "commodities" by bringing leisure and work closer together (Rosenzweig, 1991).

**Food Acquisition**

Today, food acquisition includes a variety of methods such as the use of the state libreta, the purchasing of food at farmers’ markets, the reliance on black market channels and food exchange networks, as well as the dollar stores. After its introduction in 1962, the libreta ration usually included 6 pounds of rice per person per month, 1 1/4 ounces of coffee per week, 5 pounds of sugar per month, and 1/2 pound of lard and 1 pound of meat per person per month (Suchlicki, 1988:237). However, in the 1990s rationing quotas frequently failed to supply enough food for more than two weeks each month, driving vast numbers of people into the black market to supplement official allotments (Pérez, 1995:385). The recently re-opened farmers’ markets now enable people to purchase their necessary garden vegetables and fruits, but for Cubans to find meat, coffee and cheese at reasonable prices, they need to access networks of relatives and friends through black market channels. Essentials such as milk and oil can be bought at dollar stores, but these stores are far too expensive for many tables. When people can, they produce their own meat (pork and chicken) and garden vegetables, selling surplus for cash or using it tends to be used as a medium of exchange with network members. The regularity of food acquisition depends, of course, on the market availability of products and a family’s financial status as well as access to US dollars. Food gift items are frequently used in exchange for labour. Ready-to-eat food stands near bus stops or on busy streets are found everywhere on the island today.

**Food and Identity Construction**

**Cubanness as Ajiaco**

Research demonstrates that the vocabulary of eating has long been used to characterise transcultural identity construction (Gregg, 1998; Pilcher, 1998; Wilk, 1999). Cuban history suggests that the desperate need for a coherent national ideology and cultural identity is the result the long experience of dependency ranging from being the last Spanish colony in the Americas to becoming a neo-colony of the United States (Chomsky, 2000). Nation-building required a
certain level of perceived cultural unity that Cuban nationalists ideologically expressed in food imageries.

Several significant peculiarities distinguish Cuban culture from other Hispanic colonies. One of Spain’s richest possessions, Cuba was colonised in the late fifteenth-century (1492), as part of the rapid overseas expansion of commercial capitalism in Europe. From the outset, Cuban culture was an import that filled the vacuum created by the early decimation of its indigenous population. Furthermore, because Cuba had no gold or silver to satisfy the Spaniards’ obsession with metallic riches, the island was not considered valuable except in strategic terms: positioned at the entrance of the New World, Cuba was the logical way-station for the Spanish colonists who penetrated the continental mainland. Cuba’s role was therefore primarily commercial until the beginning of the nineteenth-century — “for the most part a cross-roads, a temporary haven for "migratory birds" on their way to some other destination” (Pérez Firmat, 1989:2). Pérez Firmat (ibid.) argues that under Spanish domination “Cuban culture was doubly lacking: if the extermination of aboriginal civilisations erased its past, the restlessness of its Spanish colonisers undermined its future”. Cuba had become essentially a contact nation accentuated by the fact that the aboriginal voice was all but missing, or what Phaf (1996) calls the “genocide of the authentic”. These historical circumstances gave Cuban culture “a provisional makeshift character” (Pérez Firmat, 1989:2) and prevented the development of a sense of national belonging because of the overwhelming prevalence of what was “foreign”. Speaking about Cuba, Manach sums up the issue in the following manner:

Cuba had to start from little more than a tabula rasa. The Cuban Indian, as is know, did not surpass the infracultural level. No traditional stock of autochthonous images nourished the initial creole sensibility. Our means of expression, from the beginning, had to adopt European forms, principally of course Spanish ones (cited in Pérez Firmat, 1989:2).

The development of the plantation system further stressed this sense of deracination. The Haitian revolution, which made Cuba the single largest producer of sugar in the Caribbean, opened the door to virtually unlimited expansion. Slave imports reached staggering proportions. Some of the greatest fortunes of the nineteenth century were based on the exploitation of the slave economy in terms of the slave trade, sugar cultivation, railroad construction and shipping (Schmidt-Nowora, 1998). Creole reformist leaders increasingly sought greater autonomy from the Spanish colonial regime so firmly entrenched on the island. As a result, the need to reach economic and political sovereignty and develop an authentic Cubanness (cubanidad), started to emerge among the plantocracy.

Among the popular sector, the movement for nationalism (cubanidad) was created by the tumult of the wars of independence (1868-78 and 1895-98). Decolonisation and slave emancipation followed by thousands of former slaves joining the liberation armies gave rise to an ideology of transculturation — a
concept of *mestizaje* not imagined from the interests of the Spanish metropolis but from the standpoint of the Cuban colony (Ortiz, 1940). This was cut short by the military occupation of the United States (1899-1902), which resubjected the island once again to foreign rule by converting the new republic into a U.S. protectorate. However, intellectuals, continued to debate the issue of cubanidad, citizenship, and national identity. Ortiz’s (1940) concept of transculturation — a phenomenon of the contact zone — validated the construction of a unified national identity. However, it was not a movement that could dissolve racial prejudice because it promoted African assimilation into the Euro-Cuban culture. Although conceived from the periphery, transculturation was based on a vision of a monoculture.

Ortiz’s ideological position was exemplified by the culinary imagery of the ajiaco. The term *ajiaco* is an Tiano word for stew or pot soup, frequently applied to Afro-Cuban recipes for boiled meat (beef, pork, and hen), and vegetable (plantains, tomatoes, sweet potatoes, and malanga). Pérez Firmat (1989:23) informs us that in its aboriginal version, the ajiaco was prepared by making a hole in the ground, putting in whatever ingredients were available, adding the condiments, and letting the whole stew baked in the sun. As the contents simmered away and were depleted, new and perhaps different ingredients were added. The ajiaco is seen metaphorically by Ortiz not as conveying ethnic diversity, but as a blending of culture. Because the author does not contextualize the ajiaco as a product of the contact zone, he de-emphasises the unequal relations of ethnic power and coercion that have driven the process of transculturation. Other scholars have since used similar pot soups imageries to describe the Caribbean contact zone cultures. For example, Nunley and Bettelheim (1988) use the metaphor of callalou, a local soup of diverse ingredients to define the “pan-Caribbean aesthetic” based on racial and cultural blending in the region. Pérez Firmat (1989) sees such a blending as enabling a receptivity to unpredictable cultural permutations, and though he recognises its creative potential, he also notes its chaotic nature:

> The essence of Cuba lies...in that constant *cokedura*, in the incessant simmering of the *ajiaco*, an image that denotes the lack of a stable, enduring core of cultural *indicia*. Cubans are always cooking. Occupying a liminal zone or ‘impassioned margin’ where diverse cultures converge without merging. Cuba lives in a trans-, in a trance... In Cuba the raw and the cooked give way to the half-baked (1989:26).”

Before the revolution of 1959 very few intellectuals were willing to envisage a future in which blackness would be recognised as a building element of the national panorama (Chomsky, 2000), and Ortiz’s work was no exception. Although based on inclusiveness, it was an illusion, for the concept of cubanidad proposed during the republican years was predicated upon asymmetrical relations of power and was therefore racist and classist. The image of the *ajiaco* was
rhetorical rather than manifest. Evidence of this lack of social unity was brought to the forefront by the 1959 revolution.

**Cubaness as Caldoza**

Years of longing for independence helped to shape Cuban sense of nationhood. However, it was only after 1959 that Cuba’s search for national authenticity was constructed from the inside out. The political shift of the 1959 revolution went to the very core of Cuban domestic culture and history. From very early on, the revolutionary government took pains to validate its power not only domestically as part of the struggle against U.S. imperialism but also internationally, presenting itself to the world as a full-fledged political model. Cuba was not to be considered any longer a “subordinate other” that had characterized its long colonial history as well as the fifty years of its republican period. Instead, Cuban leaders strove to demonstrate to detractors that the island was standing on an equal footing with the developed world in fields such as education, health, agriculture and research. The new food programme was at the centre of the enterprise.

The subsidised food rationing programme cannot be underestimated as an ideology of positive nation-building. Internationally, this programme not only increased nutrition levels to the highest in all of Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s, but significantly reduced social disparities within Cuba. Even during the Special Period (1990-2000), life expectancy levels for the whole population were comparable to those of the most developed countries — 73 years for men and 75 years for women — and infant mortality rate continued to be the lowest in all of Latin America (Thériot, 1982; Ubell, 1983; Valdes-Brito & Henriquez, 1983; Figueroa & Plasencia Vidal, 1994).

After 1959, the politics of cultural and ethnic integration were regarded as an essential step to ease the way into a socialist state. In this respect, the caldoza furnishes an interesting culinary imagery of Cuba’s search for social and political cohesion. Once a year, Cubans celebrate the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR). In 1961, as the revolutionary government asserted its dominance in a highly contested political context, CDRs were created in every city block and village to guard against attacks and sabotage by counter-revolutionaries. Since then, throughout Cuba on the eve of September 28, a feast is organised in each neighbourhood, with meat and beer subsidized by the state. In the late afternoon of September 27th, the caldoza — an enormous stew of green and root vegetables — is cooked together with pork for consumption during the night. The caldoza, like the ajiaco, is blended or stirred until it becomes a thick soup. Eaten at night, the caldoza is shared among neighbours; beer is served, and popular music (guaracha) is always played into the wee hours of the next day. This annual event is a recurrent reminder of the ongoing struggle for an authentic revolutionary Cuba. Symbolically, it is a commemoration that validates the revolution, with the caldoza as a transformative element linking state, neighbourhoods, households, and races together. If we accept Terio’s (2000:237) statement that the choice,
consumption, and representation of foods play a dynamic role in identity construction and in marking the boundaries between self and Other, then the caldoza can be read as a powerful imagery of changing social relations. Interestingly, while the ajaico was rhetorical and a creation of the intellectual elite of the republican years, the caldoza is an ideological cultural practice that is sponsored by the state and shared by all Cubans in a ceremony of socialist togetherness.

Special Period in Peacetime (1990-2000)

Forging a strategy of food sustainability became part of Cuba’s political thinking in the 1990s when the collapse of the Soviet bloc sparked the need to re-assess contemporary economic and environmental policies. The economic blockade imposed by the United States in 1960 as a vain attempt to crush the revolution made it necessary for Cuba to reorganise trade relations with the socialist countries. Thus for many years commerce with the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) enabled Cuba to rely on a stable market for its primary exports of sugar, citrus, and nickel. Sugar, the leading cash commodity, was favourably priced by the CMEA, or exchanged for oil and technological support. Although this arrangement permitted domestic expansion and gave the country a strong currency, it also encouraged massive food imports which amounted to some 3 million tones per year by the end of the 1980s (Figueroa, 1993; Pastor, 1992; Perfecto, 1994; Rosset & Benjamin, 1994).

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1989, Cuba lost its leading trade partner and the subsidies from Moscow. Cuba was confronted with the urgent need to find ways to achieve food self-sufficiency in basic agricultural commodities. Such radical changes placed the island in an exceedingly precarious political and economic position, with food production declining by nearly 40 percent between 1990 and 1994. The loss of imports in the form of chemical fertilisers, pesticides, and feeds, as well as gasoline, machinery, and spare parts brought production almost to a halt. Since Cuba did not grow much local food for its own consumption but, rather had grown cash crops for the world market, it was left extremely vulnerable, lacking access to foreign currency for the purchase of food imports. At the same time, a tougher U.S. trade embargo hit Cuba’s economy hard. To make things worse, the country suffered from devastating hurricanes in 1993, 1996, and 2001 which further aggravated an already critical food situation.

When Cuba came close to starvation in 1992, 1993, and 1994 malnutrition, which had been eradicated after 1959, returned. Young children between 6 and 12 months and pregnant women were at high risk for anaemia. In 1993, an epidemic of optic neuropathy related to vitamin B complex deficiency affected some 50,000 Cubans (Pérez, 1995:385). It was later established that this deficiency had been caused by the absence in the diet of fat that prevented absorption of oil-based vitamins.
In the year following the emerging crisis, the government designed an adjustment programme to assist with long-term recovery, while trying for the first time in the history of the country to make Cuba truly self-reliant in food production. Pérez-López (1994:xiv) identifies the new strategies in the following manner:

- A programme of import substitution, including a food production programme (PA) aimed at achieving self-sufficiency in foodstuffs;
- Energy substitution, replacing oil consumption with the use of animals (ox carts), and human power (bicycles), as well as the reduction of oil-intensive lines of production;
- Major efforts at export promotion, including the cultivation of new markets for traditional exports (especially sugar), and the development of new sources of foreign exchange, in particular biotechnology exports and tourism;
- Greater efforts to attract foreign investment;
- Management reforms to increase efficiency and productivity, and
- Toleration of higher degree of decentralisation, autonomy and improvisation in the actual functioning of enterprises.

Notwithstanding the lack of fertilisers and chemicals, it was essential to improve agricultural productivity. Fortunately, Cuban agronomists had been working on organic farming since the mid-1980s, but their research had achieved only modest results prior to the Special Period, which forced the government to seek a simple, inexpensive, and more sustainable approach to agricultural development. Consequently, the leadership promoted the use of local technologies, improved structural flexibility of rural institutions, and the importance of integrating both environmental science and socio-structural concerns in agricultural reform. A land management system based on the Integrated Farm Model stressed crop diversification, fertiliser reduction, and organic farming without renouncing mechanised agriculture and scientific/technological advances in key export sectors. Crop rotation, inter-cropping, crop-livestock combinations, animal feeding on crop residues, animal manure, and tillage are now widely used —practices that minimise soil erosion by improving ground cover.

Great improvement in agricultural production has come from urban agriculture, an industry that relies primarily on organic gardens (organoponicos), and intensive orchards (huertos intensivos), greatly increasing the availability and variety of fresh home-grown produce. Urban agriculture focuses on a variety of vegetables such as tomatoes, cucumbers, lettuce, garlic, green beans, cabbage, water cress, radishes, onions, carrots, parsley, and beets that are cultivated in beds irrigated with fresh water. Municipalities provide extension services and facilitate access to land and marketing assistance. Research on horticulture and small-scale
composting for soil improvement is ongoing in Cuban universities (Socorro Castro, Castelero Igarza & Paredes Selva, 1997).

Urban gardens will very likely impact on Cuba’s culinary culture. Slowly, the islanders are acquiring a new taste for fresh vegetables. To paraphrase Levi-Strauss (1978), people have extended their category of “real food” to include foods that were not part of their traditional diets, as for instance the legumes soya and chicharos. Soya-based cheese (requesón) as a substitute for dairy cheese is winning acceptance, and chicharos (a type of split peas) long considered as a low status food, has gained tremendous ground largely due to the fact that during the crisis chicharos were cheaper to buy than beans. Also, their consumption was much encouraged by the government as an important source of protein, as well as being an energy-saver with a cooking time much shorter than what is needed for black beans. The legume increasingly constitutes the fundamental diet of present-day Cuba, so much so that people frequently comment that famine was avoided in 1993 and 1994 thanks to the chicharos. Because of their enormous consumption, chicharos now belong to the post-Special Period Cuban cuisine and form a crucial part of the national identity.

It is important to bear in mind that the Special Period has led to changes not only in dietary habits but also in social practices. La temporada de vaca flaca, or the “skinny cow period” as it is referred to in Cuba, has brought a high level of food anxiety. At the height of the crisis, people turned away from sharing to providing only to their own immediate families. The arrival of a visitor to the household was seen as a chaotic situation: si una visita no avisa, es un caos político; no se puede atender de la manera que quieres (an unannounced visit is a political chaos; it can’t be looked after as one would wish it). Not only has eating become a constant preoccupation but it represents a moral dilemma as people are torn between feeding their family or sharing with friends and neighbours. Frequently, feelings of shame are expressed at not having sufficient food to offer as a form of hospitality — a social gesture that has long defined the Cuban sense of honourable behaviour.

Although competition has increased, so have local strategies to obtain quality produce at affordable prices, and to gain access to reliable sources of food. That the Special Period has led to social tensions is undeniable; however, in terms of dietary habits, it has created as well an opening for new possibilities that are entirely consistent with the Cuban cultural character of continuous cocedura.

Conclusion

To summarise, this case study highlights how historical moments affect dietary practices that parallel changing social relations. In the case presented here, food changes display a process of transculturation at work. Cuba’s cultural stew, be it the republican ajiaco or the revolutionary caldoza is the paradigm for a continuing collective struggle for self-definition. If Cuban cuisine owes its exist-
ence to the forced encounters between races and cultures which colonization engenders, it has also become a strong expression of strands of cultural identity. Although current food shortages present the potential threat of social disruption, the sharing of a Cuban meal remains for the islanders one of the greatest sources of pleasure, celebration, and connection.

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