



The multifunctionality of heritage food: The example of pinole, a Mexican sweet



Dr. Alexandra Zeldá Littayé

School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford, South Parks Road, Oxford OX1 3QY, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 10 March 2016

Received in revised form 23 August 2016

Accepted 25 August 2016

Keywords:

Food
Heritage
Transmigration
Mexico
Corn
Place-making

ABSTRACT

Pinole is a heritage foodstuff whose analysis provides the lens to understand the plight of Mexican farmers and the role translocal actors play in the articulation of global food heritage. To preserve and sell pinole, the pinole project was created from two groups of Mexicans born in Ozolco - a small rural village - and who now reside on either side of the Mexican and US border. By analysing members' discourses, this article demonstrates how pinole is essentialised or commodified, and how it provides the platform for actors to formulate a variety of identities according to their socio-economic and geographical contexts. Bridging the literatures on food-studies and place-making, the multifunctionality of pinole transpires as inherently linked to the emergence of differing notions of place embedded in Ozolco. Exploring members' varying priorities, from perpetuating rural lifestyles to preserving their hometown and its native blue corn, the project epitomises the struggle of farmers with Mexico's migration drain and their efforts to economically engage with global markets of corn by circulating an added-value corn product within translocal networks as well as re-appropriate corn's socio-cultural meaning.

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1. Introduction

Pinole, a Mexican sweet, is increasingly difficult to find. It is made from cornmeal ground from toasted kernels to which is usually added sugar and cinnamon.¹ It is a flour with a light blue and grey hue that can be eaten in its powdery form though is usually prepared in hot drinks with water or milk. Pinole is an old Aztec food, a legacy from the Mesoamerican pre-Hispanic era. Made from toasted corn, it can keep for up to five years without refrigeration, a considerable benefit in contrast to dried corn which can be preserved for up to a year. It was used as a travel food (in its powdery form) as well as a safety net in times of food shortages. Pinole is also known to be a 'superfood' consumed by the Tarahumara community of north-western Mexico, renowned for its long-distance runners. As urban migration grows in Mexico, fewer households prepare or eat traditional foods, relegating pinole to growing obscurity. A group of campesinos (peasant farmers) in the indigenous village of Ozolco, perched on the volcano of Popocatepetl in the region of Puebla in Mexico, is now striving to counter this growing erasure and promote their local variety made with the region's native blue corn. This endeavour, though based in Mexico, was first initiated by a group

of migrant workers in the Philadelphia to reaffirm their Mexican identity (Littayé, 2015).

The 'pinole project' is a heritage-based food initiative formed from two distinct organisations that were both founded in 2008: the business Amigos de Ozolco (hereafter Amigos) in Mexico, and the cooperative Blue Corn Alianza (hereafter Alianza) based in Philadelphia that seeks to revive the production of pinole and distribute the sweet in markets across North America. The project is comprised of Mexican members living on either side of the border of Mexico with the US. Through a process referred to as the heritagisation, 'the concept of cultural/immateral patrimony is being applied to local foods in diverse ways and market circuits' (Grasseni, 2011). As argued in this article, the heritagisation of pinole is rooted in the plight of displaced migrant workers, and the impoverishment of their rural community. The process is given different meanings by actors on both sides of the border, who construct a discourse around pinole according to their (economic and social) interests which creates differences and ultimately, the weakness of the project. As this article argues, these discourses are tied to – and articulate – divergent notions of place that Ozolco represents.

Based on ethnographic research, this article provides a discursive comparison of local farmers in Ozolco with those of trans-migrant workers in Philadelphia, US. Following Cristina Grasseni's central hypothesis that 'within circuits of heritagisation food is

E-mail address: alexandra.littaye@ouce.ox.ac.uk

¹ Pinole can also refer solely to ground toasted corn in Mexico and other Latin American countries.

being rediscovered and reinvented' (2011), this article integrates the study of translocal actors into its analysis of 'alternative geographies of food' (Whatmore and Thorne, 1997), bringing into conversation the 'economy of qualities' (Callon et al., 2002; Ponte and Gibbon, 2005) literature with that of translocality (McFarlane, 2009; Conradson and McKay, 2007; Brickell and Datta, 2011).

The first section provides a brief description of the methodology used in this article. The following reviews the literature, situating the current study amongst the extant body of research. In so doing, it develops its theoretical framework, bridging conceptual tools from anthropology studies on the heritagisation of food borrowed from Jacinthe Bessi re (1998, 2013) and Cristina Grasseni (2011), and geographical tenants of Doreen Massey's conceptual lens on place (1994, 1995). In identifying the gaps in the literature, this section outlines the contribution it makes. In the next sections, the article provides a discursive analysis of the two organisations of the pinole project. It underlines how, despite shared origins, members of the pinole project view the foodstuff differently: they rediscover, reinvent, essentialise or commodify pinole according to their socio-economic, and geographical contexts. In so doing, various 'senses of place' (Massey, 1994, 1995) emerge from the discourses articulated. Through a comparative analysis of these discourses, this article seeks to tie constructions of place with interpretations of the past, underlining the role that translocal actors play in the construction of the 'alternative geographies of food' (Whatmore and Thorne, 1997). This research responds to the 'need to "ground" the study of transnationalism in specific empirical research' (Crang et al., 2003, 438) by giving an 'analysis of commodity culture (that) provides an alternative way of advancing our understanding of contemporary transnationality' (Crang et al., 2003). Following a summary of this article's findings, several suggestions for further research are detailed in the concluding section.

2. Methodology

The research presented in this article emerges from extensive multi-sited ethnographic research on the organisations Amigos and Alianza. Between 2013 and 2014, data was collected over an aggregated five months spent in Ozolco living with my host family, shadowing various members as they went about their daily activities to the *campo* (farm), helping with the cultivation of corn and other vegetables. I also carried out participant observation in the Amigos workshop, learning to make pinole, paying close attention both to the methods involved in production, and the stories producers told of the foodstuff. I spent two weeks interviewing members of Alianza in Philadelphia. The primary objective of this research was to examine the role of members of Amigos and Alianza in the heritagisation of pinole through their own narratives. The research focused on a sample of Ozolcans currently or formerly involved with the pinole project in Mexico and the US. Questions focused on recollections of pinole as a childhood sweet, perceptions of its significance for Mexican culture, Ozolco's community, indigenous heritage, and of its role in Amigos and Alianza.

I carried out informal, semi-structured and in-depth interviews with members of Amigos and Alianza. Interviews were supplemented by textual analyses of the official discourse of the pinole project, sourced from their website, Facebook page, pinole's entry in the Ark of Taste (a list of heritage food of the Slow Food movement), and brochures. Using a snowballing technique, I interviewed 21 individuals and households. Most respondents were current or former farmers between 30 and 50 years of age, with active roles in one of the two organisations. Respondents were

predominantly male due to the snowballing exercise, and the preponderance of male actors in the pinole project, though efforts were made to interview as many women as possible. This bias in the sample reflects the nature of both migration and of farming communities in Mexican rural areas, and could not be overcome due to the financial and time constraints of the research project. All interviews were conducted in confidence and the names of interviewees were withheld by mutual agreement.

3. Literature review

Till recently, research on heritage foods was skewed towards Europe (Bowen and de Master, 2011). Heritage products are strongly linked to their place of origin (see Massey, 1994, 1995; Bessi re, 1998). Heritage can thus act as an anchor in societies relatively distanced from their origins through urbanisation and population migration (McIntosh and Prentice, 1999, 590). Studies also demonstrate how heritagisation can be a source of economic revival in marginalised rural areas, notably through the development of rural tourism (Bessi re, 1998, 29). Projects to promote these foods tend to affect rural spaces, leading to new development policies, tourism, or the restructuring of the agricultural sector.

Heritage-based food projects can thus be interpreted as

[an] attempt by rural areas to localise economic control by increasingly adopting cultural markers as key resources in the pursuit of territorial development objectives ... [and] revaloris[ing] place through its cultural identity.

[Ray, 1998]

Some scholars celebrate these initiatives as platforms for indigenous or rural identity reaffirmation, as these initiatives can embed or create pride and reaffirm a sense of place through their perceived 'authenticity' (McIntosh and Prentice, 1999, 590). They demonstrate how the heritagisation of food can enable the conservation and transmission of skills as well as the revival of a common memory associated with a particular place (Bessi re, 1998). Studies of typical products (Bauman, 1998) underline how foodstuffs also allow producers to reaffirm territorial and indigenous identities (Brulotte and Di Giovine, 2014; Waitt, 2000). Others have taken a more nuanced stance, arguing that the notion of 'authenticity' linked to heritage foods has attracted adverse, though lucrative, tourism and media exposure as well as the commodification of communities, and their traditions (Jenkins et al., 2002; Bowen and de Master, 2011; Grasseni, 2003; Lind and Barham, 2004; Lotti, 2010). Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's seminal work theorising heritage underlines how the process of heritagisation is interwoven to that of commodification (1995). That which is considered heritage is typically commodified, and conversely, commodities often taken on the aura - or are marketed - as the heritage of a particular group. Heritage, as a platform for the meanings and values of identity, is also a platform for 'degree of self-folklorisation and the acceptance of a performed identity of the authentic peasant' (Grasseni, 2011).

Stanford (2012) observes the effects of Mexican governmental projects in support of *gastronom a tradicional* on indigenous rural communities. Mexican women market themselves by wearing folk costumes at food fairs and other touristic events where they were invited to perform traditional cooking skills. These costumes are no longer commonly worn as they hinder everyday activities such as farming and gardening. In these studies, the heritagisation of food tends to lead to the commodification of culture, creating new discourses and circuits of image-construction:

there is a thin line between the genuine sense of loss that local operators bring up when they mourn the disappearance of unique recipes, regional products and traditional know-how,

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