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Colonization, Food, and the Practice of Eating

22-27 minutes




The violence that accompanied the European colonization of the Indigenous people of Mesoamerica is a well-known fact. Historians have elaborated on the devastating effects such colonization had on Indigenous societies, cultures, and mortality. While the study of the conquest has generally focused on the social, political, and economic changes forced upon Indigenous populations, the matter of food—the very source of survival—is rarely considered. Yet, food was a principal tool of colonization. Arguably, one cannot properly understand colonization without taking into account the issue of food and eating.

Imagine that you are a Spaniard, newly arrived on the coasts of a foreign land. Your survival depends on two things: security (protecting yourself from danger) and nourishment (food and other substances that are necessary for survival). In terms of the former, Europeans arrived on the coast of what is now referred to as “the Americas” fully equipped with the means to protect themselves. Atop horses, armed with advanced weaponry and a slew of European diseases, Spaniards engaged Indigenous populations in the most violent of ways. Nourishment, however, was another matter.

When Spaniards arrived in Mesoamerica, they encountered the Maya, Aztecs and other prominent Indigenous groups. The land was rich, fertile, and filled with crops such as beans, pumpkins, chilies, avocados, elderberries, guavas, papayas, tomatoes, cocoa, cotton, tobacco, henequen, indigo, maguey, corn, and cassava.^[1] Europeans encountered similar agricultural plantations throughout the region. However, to the colonists this food was substandard and unacceptable for the proper nourishment of European bodies. At the time of conquest, the European diet was principally composed of bread, olive oil, olives, “meat,” and wine. While this diet was somewhat sustained on the actual voyage from Europe to the Americas, upon arrival, Europeans found themselves devoid of the foods they considered necessary for survival. As Europeans began dying off in these “new” lands, the focus of concern shifted to food. In fact, Columbus himself was convinced that

Spaniards were dying because they lacked “healthful European foods.”^[2] Herein began the colonial discourse of “right foods” (superior European foods) vs. “wrong foods” (inferior Indigenous foods). The Spaniards considered that without the “right foods,” they would die or, even worse, in their minds, they would become like Indigenous people.

The “Right Foods” vs. the “Wrong Foods”

 Cassava small for Colonial Eating smaller Europeans believed that food shaped the colonial body. In other words, the European constitution differed from that of Indigenous people because the Spanish diet differed from the Indigenous diet. Further, bodies could be altered by diets—thus the fear that by consuming “inferior” Indigenous foods, Spaniards would eventually become “like them.” Only proper European foods would maintain the superior nature of European bodies, and only these “right foods” would be able to protect colonizers from the challenges posed by the “new world” and its unfamiliar environments.

In the minds of Europeans, food not only functioned to maintain the bodily superiority of Spaniards, it also played a role in the formation of social identity. For example, in Spain, elites generally consumed bread, “meat,” and wine. The poor in Spain, however, could not afford such luxuries and instead ate such things as barley, oats, rye, and vegetable stew. Even vegetables were classified based on social status; for example, in some cases rooted vegetables were not considered suitable for elite consumption because they grew underground. Elites preferred to consume food that came from trees, elevated from the filth of the common world. Thus, food served as an indicator of class.

In addition, at the time of conquest, Spain was facing internal divisions of its own. In an effort to expel Spanish Muslims, as well as Jewish people, from Spain, King Ferdinand V and Queen Isabella I relaunched what was known as the Reconquista, the re-conquest of Spain. As a strong Spanish identity formed around the idea of the Reconquista, food became a powerful symbol of Spanish culture. For instance, consider “pork”: Among Muslim, Jewish, and Catholic people, only Catholics could eat “pork,” since for Muslim and Jewish people, the consumption of “pork” was forbidden. During the re-conquest, as individuals were being forced to prove that they were pureblooded Spaniards, they would often be offered “pork” to eat. Any refusal to consume “pork” would be taken as a sign that such people were not true Catholic Spaniards and would subsequently be expelled from Spain, persecuted, or even killed.

As the Spanish arrived in the “new world” and initiated the European colonization of the Americas, they also brought with them the notion of cultural and class based distinctions that were founded on the types of food people ate. For example, upon their arrival, the Spaniards determined that guinea pig “meat” was a fundamentally “Indian” food, thus anyone who consumed guinea pig was considered “Indian.” The same was true for other staple Indigenous foods, such as maize and beans. The Spanish considered such Indigenous fare “famine foods,”^[3] fit for consumption only if all other “right foods” had been thoroughly exhausted.

The symbolic nature of food was also seen in the imposition of religion, another destructive aspect of the conquest. The Eucharist, the holiest rite among Catholics, was

composed of a wafer made of wheat, which signified the body of Christ, and wine, which signified the blood of Christ. Initially, before wheat was harvested in the Americas, it was difficult to obtain wheat from abroad, since much of it spoiled in transit. The wafers that were necessary for this rite could easily have been made from the native maize, but Spaniards believed that this inferior Indigenous plant could not be transformed into the literal body of Christ, as could European wheat. Similarly, only wine made from grapes was acceptable for the sacrament. Any potential substitute was considered blasphemy.

If Spaniards and their culture were to survive in these foreign lands, they would need to have readily available sources of the “right food.” Often, as Spanish officials reported back to the crown on the suitability of newly conquered lands, the “lack of Spanish food” was mentioned. Frustrated with what the “new world” had to offer, Tomas Lopez Medel, a Spanish official, reported that, “...there was neither wheat, nor grapevines, nor any proper animal...” present in the new colonies.^[4] Hearing this, the Crown commissioned a number of reports that were to elaborate on which European plants grew well in the colonized lands, as well as details as to where they grew best. It was soon determined that the most suitable arrangement would be for colonists to grow their own foods, and it was not long before Spaniards began to rearrange agriculture to meet their own needs. Although wheat, wine, and olives only thrived in certain regions of Latin America, the Spaniards considered this a success. Colonists were elated that their own foods were successfully growing in foreign lands, and while crops were important, the Europeans’ most significant success was with farmed animals, which thrived in ways that were unparalleled.

The Arrival of Cows, Pigs, Goats, and Sheep

A number of domesticated animals were present when Europeans arrived in what is now known as Latin America. Among them were dogs, llamas and alpacas, guinea pigs, turkeys, Muscovy ducks, and a type of chicken. In Mesoamerica, any “meat” and leather that was consumed or utilized usually came from wild game, and generally, there were no animals exploited for labor, with the exception of dogs, who were at times used for hauling.. Europeans considered this lack of proper animals for work and consumption unacceptable. Thus, the first contingent of horses, dogs, pigs, cows, sheep, and goats arrived with Columbus’ second voyage in 1493.^[5] The arrival of these hoofed immigrants would fundamentally alter Indigenous ways of life forever.

To begin, considering the domesticated animals who existed in Latin America prior to the conquest, these imported animals had little to no predators to deal with. These animals did not succumb to any new diseases, and food sources for these animals were vast. The Spanish literally left the animals to feed on any of the rich grasses, fruits, and other food they could find in these new lands. With a plethora of food and no real threats to their existence, these animals reproduced at astonishingly rapid rates. By the 17th century, herds of cows, pigs, sheep, and goats numbered in the hundreds of thousands and roamed throughout the entire continent. As a result, “meat” prices plummeted and the consumption of “meat” exponentially increased. In Spain, the consumption of “meat” was a luxury, but in the “new world,” the sheer availability of these animals made this luxury accessible to all. This point in time marked the commodification of these animals in the Americas, a natural consequence of which was an ever-expanding “meat” industry. In fact,

at this time, “livestock” ranches were so well established and were producing such large quantities of domesticated-animal “meat” that almost everyone was consuming substantial amounts of animal protein. Eating “meat” was considered an economic benefit of keeping animals, but it wasn’t the only one. Records also show an increase in dairy consumption, as well as lard as a replacement for the traditional use of olive oil in colonial cooking. In addition, the demand for “hides” and “tallow” (often used for candles) was even greater than the demand for “meat.”


The most devastating consequence of this new “meat” industry was that its extraordinary proliferation was accompanied by an equally extraordinary decline in Indigenous populations. Spaniards anxious to establish the “right foods” to ensure their own survival delineated large sections of lands for grazing, with no regard for the way the land was being used prior to their arrival. These vast herds often wandered onto Indigenous croplands, destroying their primary means of subsistence. The situation became so severe that in a letter to the Crown, a Spanish official wrote, “May your lordship realize that if cattle are allowed, the Indians will be destroyed...”^[6] Initially, many Indigenous people in this region became malnourished, which consequently weakened their resistance to European diseases. Others literally starved to death as their agricultural plots were trampled, consumed by animals or appropriated for Spanish crops. In time, many Indigenous people, left with limited options, began to consume European foods.

As devastating as this was, it is important to note that Indigenous populations in the “Americas” did not passively deal with this change. There are a number of clearly documented instances in which Indigenous people, during the process of colonization, specifically resisted European foods. For instance, in North America, the Pueblo people launched a revolt against the Spaniards in which Spanish food was a primary target. During this rebellion a Pueblo leader was said to have ordered the people to “...burn the seeds which the Spaniards sowed and to plant only maize and beans, which were the crops of their ancestors.”^[7] Although resistance to European culture was not uncommon, in time, Indigenous people went on to adopt many European foods into their diet. Similarly, many colonists eventually went on to incorporate Indigenous foods into their daily eating.

Food Acculturation in the “New World”

Several factors contributed to the acculturation of food of both Indigenous people and Europeans in the “new world.”

First, in the process of colonization, Europeanization was rewarded. Initially, conversion to Catholicism and the adoption of Spanish culture, customs, and beliefs was a forced matter. In time, the Spanish attempted other methods for converting Indigenous people to their way of life. For example, priests attempting to convert young Indigenous men to Catholicism would offer them “livestock” in return for their conversion.^[8] Owning “livestock” was attractive: animals were a source of income, and consuming such animals was a sign of elevated status, by Spanish standards. Since food was an indicator of status and Indigenous people could enhance their status with colonists by taking on Spanish culture, many Indigenous people adopted Spanish practices, cuisine included, as a way of securing a higher status in colonial society.^[9]

Another important factor that shaped the adoption of European foods into Indigenous diets was related to the role of women in colonial society. An integral part of colonization was carried out through Iberian women who arrived shortly after their men settled in the “new world.” As Spanish settlers began the task of establishing structured colonies, the Crown was made aware of wanton behavior taking root in their new lands. Spanish men were said to be out at all hours of the night, frolicking with different women, displaying drunkenness and disorder in the streets of new Spain. The Crown determined that logically, this behavior was the consequence of men left to their own devices without their wives to maintain the structure of family and civility. Thus, the Crown demanded that Iberian women be sent to join their husbands in order to civilize society in the “new world.” As these women arrived, Spanish  Colonial Eating comal households were reunified and Iberian women began to solidify the role of the Spanish family in the colonies. This reunification of Spanish families paralleled the destruction of the Indigenous household, as many Indigenous women were forced into working as domestic workers, cooks, nannies, and wet-nurses in Spanish homes. Part of the role of these Indigenous women was to learn to cook European foods and reproduce colonial practices in the home; Iberian women were present to make sure it was done properly. The presence of Spanish women was meant to provide an example of how a “civilized” woman looked and behaved, and much of this “civilization” took place in the kitchen. If Indigenous women were to reproduce Spanish cooking—the source of superior Spanish bodies—they would need to be instructed by a Spanish woman who could teach them how to make “civilized” food. Thus, many Indigenous women began reproducing Spanish cuisine as a result of their new role in the European household. However, there is also documentation of the introduction of Indigenous foods and cooking practices into European diets. This was a consequence not only of Indigenous women working in Spanish households, but also a result of mestizas who married Spanish men and began integrating aspects of their mixed heritage into these mixed households. For example, the use of the comal is markedly Indigenous, yet archeological records indicate that it was used in most Spanish households. Also, we see Indigenous variations in cooking with, for instance, the use of chili. Europeans accepted the use of chili in their food since it was similar to pepper. This similarity allowed for its widespread acceptance among Europeans. Alterations to Spanish diets were most common during times of famine, where famine meant a lack of Spanish foods. During these times, Indigenous cooks would prepare indigenous foods, which Spaniards would be forced to consume. For Indigenous people, Spanish cuisine was a principal reason that colonists were intent on acquiring the lands on which they produced their own food. Thus, for Indigenous people, the struggle was in maintaining their own cuisine while understanding that, for pragmatic reasons, they had to adopt new foods.

Lastly, as noted above, the mere availability of food for consumption began to alter eating practices. The land that previously served to nourish indigenous communities was now organized to meet the need for raw materials necessary for export. Yet the Spanish crown was careful to control local Spanish authority so as to not allow any conquistador to acquire a disproportionate amount of power. In order to control this, the crown allowed some land to be preserved for subsistence cultivation of indigenous communities. On this land communities were allowed to collectively grow what they needed for their daily subsistence. However, this was not an altruistic move on behalf of the crown; it was a

calculated attempt to maintain their grasp on local power. As time went on, the crown suffered a series of economic shortages, and when such shortages economically affected the crown, they set their eyes on communal lands, which they then deemed should be used to meet the needs of international trade rather than those of the indigenous community. As European needs expanded, indigenous communal lands turned into large plantations, or haciendas, and their production was now directly tied to the demands of European markets. Slowly but surely these haciendas came under the private control of those profiting off international trade.

Food, the Legacy of Colonization, and Resistance

Although currently we can recognize many Indigenous foods that are staples of Latin American diets, we must also acknowledge the legacy of colonization in this diet. The large-scale consumption of “meat,” which makes up such a significant part of modern Latin American diets, is entirely traceable to the conquest and the process of colonization, as is the cultural, social, and even gendered significance attached to such consumption. The expansion of the commodification of animals as an industry in Latin America is also rooted in the legacy of colonization. Through this commodification, dairy also became a huge industry in colonial Spain. Interestingly, the consumption of milk and other dairy products serve as a unique lens through which to consider the links between food and colonization.

The practice of dairying was a product of the domestication of sheep, goats, cows, and pigs somewhere between 11,000-8,000 BCE. ^[10] People whose society was structured by a pastoral tradition were the first to practice dairying. These people were primarily Indo-European and are said to have pushed out to Northern Europe and as well as Pakistan, Scandinavia, and Spain. The practice of the consumption of milk—and to a large extent cheese, yogurt, and butter—has long been the tradition among these European people. In groups that were traditionally hunters and gatherers, however, there is little evidence for any type of dairying, given that they had no animals suitable for dairying, and that this practice required a more sedentary lifestyle. As Europeans colonized “the Americas,” they also brought with them the practice of dairying, a huge industry to this day. Yet Indigenous societies were based on the hunter-gatherer model. It is here that we see the most interesting piece of biological resistance to the process of food colonization: the bodily rejection of lactose among Indigenous populations. All data indicate high levels of lactose malabsorption^[11] (LM) among groups that were traditionally hunter-gatherers. Populations from traditional zones of non-milking—namely, the Americas, Africa, Southeast and East Asia, and the Pacific—have a very high prevalence of LM. Among these groups, approximately 63-98% of all adults are not able to consume milk or lactose-rich dairy products without experiencing at least some level of physical discomfort. ^[12] Individuals of European descent, however, have a very low prevalence of lactose malabsorption. ^[13] Thus, there is a clear and well-established link between geography and the prevalence of LM. Descendants of zones of non-milking continue to have high prevalence of LM, especially among those who remain relatively unmixed or who have only interbred with other LM populations. Low prevalence of LM remains constant among those of northern European descent. Among individuals who are mixed between these populations, the

level of mixture determines the prevalence of either low or high LM; that is, the more European a person is, the lower the prevalence of LM. Although colonial diets and eating practices were integrated into traditional Indigenous consumption practices, dairy is a product that to this day remains physically intolerable for many.

Food Is Power

Colonization is a violent process that fundamentally alters the ways of life of the colonized. Food has always been a fundamental tool in the process of colonization. Through food, social and cultural norms are conveyed, and also violated. The Indigenous people of the Americas encountered a radically different food system with the arrival of the Spanish. The legacy of this system is very present in the food practices of modern Latin American people. Yet, we must never forget that the practice of colonization has always been a contested matter as groups have negotiated spaces within this process. Indigenous foods remain as present in contemporary Latin American diets as do European foods. Understanding the history of food and eating practices in different contexts can help us understand that the practice of eating is inherently complex. Food choices are influenced and constrained by cultural values and are an important part of the construction and maintenance of social identity. In that sense, food has never merely been about the simple act of pleasurable consumption—food is history, it is culturally transmitted, it is identity. Food is power.

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