

Nuns in the Kitchen: Conventual Cuisine in Colonial Latin America

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In examining the cuisine of convents in colonial Latin America, one also investigates the complicated racial hierarchy and rules the colonial authorities imposed, and the ways that lived experience often differed from these guidelines. From the debate over the use of tortillas in the Eucharist to the attempted regulation of chocolate during fast days, the diet of nuns clearly had larger significance than mere sustenance. Examining the conventual kitchen and the women who worked and ate there offers insight into the ways that colonialism and enslavement impacted Latin America during this era, illustrating the way that our basic needs are often charged with much more significance than we realize.

Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has already approved what you do.

-Ecclesiastes 9:7-12
New International Version

For colonial settlers in Latin America, food possessed a meaning beyond sustenance. It could be a memory of the land left behind, or the bounty of the world that was now their home. Food became a racially charged product, one that either showed one's rigid devotion to European customs or demonstrated the human ability to adapt to new surroundings. The Catholic Church, intensely involved in everyday life in colonial Latin America, raged with debate over the classification of chocolate or the use of corn in the Eucharist, arguments that illustrate the greater church dilemma of how much Indigenous tradition could be added to Christianity before it became a new animal all together. While European or church authorities may have attempted to impose rigid ethnic based rules on colonial Latin American society, the reality was more racially fluid and complex. Nowhere was this clearer than in the convent kitchen. The cooks and the food created in these kitchens can be used as a representative for colonial Latin American culture at large, mixing Indigenous, African, and European elements guided by imported Christian traditions. The convent kitchen also replicated the complicated racial hierarchy of colonial society. At first only women of European descent could become nuns, until 1724 when the first convent especially for Indigenous women was created in Mexico. African women could not take full vows at all during the colonial

period. Much of the labour within these convents was provided by slaves or servants of African descent, especially within the kitchen and the garden, meaning that the average convent had women from each of the main ethnic groups of colonial Latin America. The kitchens of Latin American convents during the colonial era can be seen as a microcosm of Latin America society at large during this time, from the ingredients growing in the garden to the women working in the kitchen to the final dishes on the dining table. Through examining the cuisine of convents during this era, it is clear that Latin American cuisine was its own animal, not entirely European nor Indigenous, nor African, but a melting pot of each of these cultures, much like Latin American culture at large.

Although Europeans from the Iberian Peninsula had travelled to the Americas in search of labour, land, and resources to extract, they were not immediately enthusiastic about the food in their new territories. Apart from general apprehension when met with an unfamiliar product, many Europeans also assigned racial significance to certain food, even going so far as to credit food with creating the difference between Europeans and other races. During the 17th century, Spanish writers suggested that it was diet that created the physical differences between Europeans and Indigenous people of Latin America. Some, like Gregorio García, suggested that diet was the main factor in assuring that Spanish settlers did not lose their European characteristics, such as their beards. "The Spaniards were unlikely to lose their beards because the 'temperance and virtues that the Spaniards born in the Indies inherited from their fathers and grandfathers' were continually reinforced through the consumption of Spanish food."¹ However, this suggestion seems unrealistic in daily life. The bulk of the conquistadores diet was maize, whether it be in the form of porridge or tortillas.² For each ethnic group to restrict themselves only to their ethnic menu is not only highly inconvenient, but ignores the fact that the chef and the consumer were not always, and in fact were rarely, of the same ethnic origin. This was certainly the case within the convent kitchen. Although nuns were meant to lead lives of sacrifice and simplicity, many convents had as much help as elite secular households. In order for nuns to focus on their piety and their eternal souls, there had to be people to take care of earthly matters. If, as the Catholic Church suggested, African and Indigenous peoples relied on Europeans for their religious salvation, Europeans relied on these people of colour for their daily bread. The inclusion of Indigenous food in the diets of colonial nuns illustrates the way that Europeans relied on people of colour for their sustenance.

The first convents in Latin America were founded by nuns born in Europe, coming across the ocean to establish convents in the new territories. While they hoped to impose their traditions on this new land and its inhabitants, they soon found that this was not to be the case. It was impossible to not shift habits or shape recipes to adapt to

¹ Rebecca Earle. "If You Eat Their Food...": Diets and Bodies in Early Colonial Spanish America." *The American Historical Review* 115, no. 3 (2010): 693. Accessed April 15, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/23302943.

² Ibid.

the ingredients available in their new home. “After making their own perilous ship voyage, they soon found themselves trading their homey stews for spicy dishes flavored with unfamiliar tomatoes and chili peppers.”³ Many of their fasting practices were simply not possible, especially during the difficult journey when any food was a blessing. Capuchin nuns, for example, did not eat meat according to their vows. However, during their first voyage to New Spain the alternative was starvation, especially since they had no Indigenous servants to cook native plants for them. The pious nature of their mission gave them dispensation to bend their vows. “Their main goal was to make it to the new convent in Peru, and if the nuns had to eat meat to survive the final months of the pilgrimage, then so be it.”⁴ Soon, it seems, the nuns integrated native foods into their diet, despite early complaints about the impact on their bodies.⁵ While in Spain, they may have eaten garlic, bread, and cheese for their meal, now they ate “*nopales* (prickly pear cactus) or squash and a piece of fish.”⁶ Once settled in their new convents, the nuns did not return to fully European diets. It was simply not sustainable. Instead, their diets, like their lives, would now contain a mixture of Europe and Indigenous elements.

The cultural diversity of Latin America was amply evident in the convent cuisine, both in the cooks and in the ingredients. In order to reduce contact with the outside world, convents attempted to provide as many ingredients as they could within their walls. “The almost complete self-sufficiency of the lifestyle of convents in New Spain also required that there be plenty of outbuildings, gardens and orchards.”⁷ The convent garden strove to grow all the ingredients the nuns might need, which included native plants as well as European imports. After arriving in Latin America, Spanish conquistadores and settlers found a multitude of new ingredients from future staples like potatoes and corn to more decadent fruits like chirimoya and plantains. The Europeans also brought their own ingredients, including sugar, cheese, and meats like beef and chicken. The convent garden might contain all of these, growing them in the fertile soil that led some to compare the New World to the Garden of Eden. The culture left out of the flora of the convent garden was Latin America’s significant African community, both enslaved and free. Despite their lack of inclusion in the garden, there was no shortage of African influence in the convent kitchen.

It is impossible to discuss the cuisine of the Latin American convent in the colonial era without examining who stood at the stove. The Latin American colonial convent, like European convents, ran with a strict hierarchy. The abbess or prioress was at the top of the ladder, followed by nuns of various titles and precedence, and the lay serving women at the bottom. While there were orders that operated with

3 Sarah E. Owens “Food, Fasting, and Itinerant Nuns”. *Food and Foodways* 19:4, 275, (2011) Accessed April 12 2020. DOI: 10.1080/07409710.2011.630619.

4 Ibid., 285.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 287.

7 Josefina Muriel. “The Role of Convents in Colonial Society.” *Artes De México* (1979), no. 198, 95–99. www.jstor.org/stable/24324471.

less hierarchy, these were the exception. “It was only in the most austere orders like the Carmelitas, Agustinas, and Capuchinas that the inmates ate in a refectory from a communal kitchen and were unattended by servants.”⁸ A large percentage of this labour was provided by servants, or *donadas*, enslaved women who had been donated to the convent by their master or who had been able to donate themselves. Some of these women accompanied their master’s daughter into the convent, while others chose the life for themselves and petitioned their masters to donate them. Others entered the convent as free women, pledging their lives and labour to the convent in exchange for a home, food, and religious education. Unlike in Spain, in Latin America a racial aspect was added to this hierarchy. A large portion of *donadas* were African, and therefore unable to take full vows to become nuns. For African women, becoming a *donada* was the closest thing to becoming a nun available to them. “By the seventeenth century, monasteries and convents throughout Latin America were home to thousands of free and enslaved men and women of African descent.”⁹ Although *donadas* held a social position over their counterparts in secular homes, their position still represented the racial subjugation of African peoples within colonial Latin America. “There is no question that the title ‘*donada*’ symbolized the hierarchical, unequal nature of social relations based on the extraction of their labour for the benefit of others, but it also represented the opportunity to serve God and Christ honorably.”¹⁰ *Donadas* served God through their service of the nuns, and partook in fast days and prayers. They occupied a place below the nuns in the conventual hierarchy, filling their vows to God in front of the stove rather than in front of the altar.

While *donadas* or other servants likely did the bulk of the cooking within the convent, this does not mean that more elite nuns never entered the kitchen. Sor Juana, for instance, a prestigious nun and former lady-in-waiting, wrote about cooking several times. In her “Response to Sor Filotea” she mentions her observations on cooking eggs and observes, “If Aristotle had cooked, he would have written much more.”¹¹ Nuns seem to have been especially involved in making the sweet treats associated with religious holidays, and seem to have participated more in this type of cooking than in making the daily fare of the convent. This division of food preparation was mirrored in secular households of the time as well. “The colonial ladies of the house, the *senoras*, left the basic cooking of soups, stews and vegetables to their cooks while they concentrated on the sweet things: puddings, jellies, cakes and biscuits.”¹² As these foods were tied to religious holidays, they were of no small sig-

8 Muriel. “The Role of Convents in Colonial Society.” 95-99.

9 Nancy E. Van Deusen. “‘The Lord Walks among the Pots and Pans’: Religious Servants of Colonial Lima.” *Africans to Spanish America: Expanding the Diaspora*, ed. Sherwin K. Bryant et al., University of Illinois Press, (2012), pp. 139. www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt2ttc0k.9.

10 Ibid., 140.

11 Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, “Response to Sor Filotea” 1691.

12 Elisabeth Lambert Ortiz and Nick Caistor. “‘Desserts.’ The Flavour of Latin America:

nificance to nuns. “Food, one of the few sensual pleasures permitted in some small degree to the nuns (for instance, particular sweets were associated with specific holidays), relieved the tedium and monotony of convent life.”¹³ The amount of sugar in these treats was also an example of the way that religious holidays morphed to adapt to the territory in which they were celebrated. While refined sugar was scarce and expensive in most convents in Europe, sugar cane was bountiful in parts of Latin America, especially Mexico. Early Spanish settlers had attempted to establish huge sugar plantations in the area. However, these plantations had been unable to compete with Brazil in terms of European export of sugar, therefore leaving a large surplus of the product for Mexican use. This influenced the creation of now iconic Mexican desserts, like the sugar skulls of *Días de Los Muertos*.¹⁴ These foods often display great cultural blending in their appearance as well. *Pan de Muertos*, the bread eaten on *Días de los Muertos*, is a sweet bread often decorated with crosses or bones, symbols associated with Aztec ideas concerning death and regeneration, displaying the way that the holiday infuses a Christian holiday with pre-contact Indigenous symbols.

Cuisine is not simply a matter of putting calories into one’s body. For inhabitants of colonial Latin America, it was intertwined with race and religion. Food was one way in which colonial authorities and the Roman Catholic Church attempted to impose their will and maintain racial divide, to limited success. While some members of the Catholic Church attempted to enforce European diets on Indigenous peoples, it is clear that these movements did not succeed. Although, they do speak to the condescension some church members showed to the very people they attempted to convert. Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún admonished Indigenous people for eating foods native to their area, “You will not eat what the Castilian people do not eat, for they know well what is edible.”¹⁵ However, this does not seem to have had much effect. The lack of impact this censure had on both Indigenous and Spanish is illustrated by the popularity of chocolate. The Catholic Church seems to have held a special grudge towards the drink, even going so far as to ban Catholics from drinking it during Mass (although this was not reflected in a papal bull, meaning that each church could decide for themselves whether they allowed parishioners to drink it). In 1651, one Friar Francisco Ortiz was sent before the Inquisition for drinking it before Mass. “He might have escaped detection except on one occasion, when he deserted the altar to drink with women for half an hour before returning to complete the mass.”¹⁶ Women seem to have especially drawn ire for drinking chocolate. An

Recipes and Stories” *Latin American Bureau*, London, 1998, 91–104. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1hj56t4.9.

13 Electra Arenal and Stacey Schlau, as quoted by Owens, “Food, Fasting, and Itinerant Nuns”.

14 Stanley Brandes. “Sugar, Colonialism, and Death: On the Origins of Mexico’s Day of the Dead.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 39, no. 2. 1997: 270-299. www.jstor.org/stable/179316.

15 Bernardino de Sahagún, as quoted by Earle, “If You Eat Their Food”, 708.

16 Jeffrey M. Pilcher, *Que Vivan Los Tamales!: Food and the Making of Mexican Identity*.

English priest Thomas Gage refers to “the chocolate-confectioning donnas” of Chiapas who drew the critical eye of the local bishop for drinking chocolate in church.¹⁷

He continued by recording that the women, rather than putting their immortal souls in danger or giving up ‘taking chocolate’ in church, instead chose to attend their neighbourhood chapels where the local nuns and friars appeared to be less troubled by refreshments being served during mass times.¹⁸

We do know that some nuns ingested chocolate, especially in the form of mole poblano. There does not seem to be consensus concerning chocolate in convents. Some convents ate it prodigiously and sent boxes of chocolates back to their confessors in Spain. One convent in Mexico City spent “2,916 pesos on chocolate for themselves, the sacristans, and the priests, while only spending 390 pesos on poultry, eggs, and wine.”¹⁹ Other convents banned it entirely. “When they [a group of nuns of nuns travelling from Madrid] stopped for a few days in the Toledo convent..., they had to receive special permission to partake in this frothy beverage; a treat normally prohibited in that community.”²⁰ There were multiple aspects of chocolate that were challenging to religious authorities, from its association with Indigenous nobility to its ability to be consumed as a solid or a liquid. Debates raged over whether chocolate was considered a liquid product, and therefore appropriate to consume while fasting, or whether it was a melted solid. “For the Catholic Church, classification proved to be especially vexing, as the growing popularity of chocolate in either form potentially threatened the moral standing of its parishioners.”²¹ Chocolate as a foodstuff illustrates the way religious life changed in the Americas, forcing nuns to adapt to their new world, one that refused to be confined to European ideas.

In addition to debating what foods should be allowed for those of religious orders in the New World, there were also arguments over which European food practices must absolutely be observed. One place where there was no space for non-European ingredients was the Eucharist. As the Catholic church considers the bread used for communion to be the literal body of Christ transformed through transubstantiation, the question of bread was also the question of the sanctity of communion. Thomas Aquinas, a 13th century Dominican friar, had clearly outlined in his *Summa Theologica* that “wheat bread is the proper matter for this sacrament,” that is to say: no

(UNM Press, 1998), 31.

17 Thomas Gage, as quoted by Beth Marie Forrest & April L. Najjaj “Is Sipping Sin Breaking Fast? The Catholic Chocolate Controversy and the Changing World of Early Modern Spain”, *Food and Foodways*, (2007), 15:1-2, 31-52. Accessed through Taylor and Francis.

18 Forrest & Najjaj, “Is Sipping Sin Breaking Fast?”, 32.

19 *Ibid.*, 42.

20 Owens, “Food, Fasting, and Itinerant Nuns,” 706.

21 *Ibid.*

maize tortilla.²² This was stressed in conversion practices throughout Latin America. “Thus a 1687 Venezuelan catechism offered a clear answer to the question ‘Of what material is the Eucharist consecrated?’ The response was ‘of *true* bread, made with wheat flour and water, and of *true* wine from grapes.’”²³ This campaign was, for the most part, successful. Most convents, even in rural areas, held wheat bread for communion. Convents were more orthodox than independent churches, which at times attempted to preserve both Christian and traditional Indigenous religious practices. “But these loaves often sat beside tamales, indicating the continued veneration of Young Lord Maize Cob.”²⁴ Foods associated with Indigenous religious practice drew specific censure from colonial authorities. Amaranth, which was made into a dough and shaped into models of gods during the Aztec festival Panquetzaliztli, is just one example of the foods that held special religious significance for the Indigenous peoples. “To facilitate the extirpation of idolatry, Diego Durán compiled a lengthy list of suspect pre-Columbian feasts and their associated dishes. Amaranth stood out as anathema because the Indians shaped it into idols and ate it for communion.”²⁵ However, not every aspect of the Catholic ceremony resisted its new converts and their foodstuffs. The Nahuatl translation of the Lord’s Prayer line “Give us this day our daily bread” literally translates to “May ye give us now our daily tortillas.”²⁶ This change illustrates the complex difficulties of religious life in colonial Latin America, as Catholic clergy attempted to convert as many as possible without risking blasphemy.

Although the typical diet of the nuns was meant to be spartan, the multitude of religious holidays on the Roman Catholic calendar created the opportunity for feasts of delicious foods, some of which were invented in the convent kitchen. Perhaps the food that best illustrates the cultural melting pot that was the colonial convent kitchen is mole *poblano*. This spicy, chocolatey sauce is not a traditional Indigenous food, nor is it based on the mother sauces of European cuisine. Instead it is a creation on its own, the combination of ingredients from two cultures to create something entirely new. The name itself derives from the Nahuatl word for sauce: *moli*.²⁷ The origin of *Mole Poblano*, often touted as the culinary emblem of Mexican Mestiza culture, is shrouded in mystery. The majority of origin stories attribute it to a nun of the Dominican order who, in attempting to create a dish for a visit from Viceroy Tomás Antonio de la Cerda y Aragón, combined chiles, fragrant spices, tomatoes, and chocolate to create the sauce. “From the Native American grinding stone she turned to the Old World spice rack, selecting cloves, cinnamon, peppercorns, and coriander and sesame seeds...Andrea cast about the ceramic-tiled kitchen for inspi-

22 Owens, “Food, Fasting, and Itinerant Nuns,” 706.

23 Ibid.

24 Pilcher, *Que Vivan Los Tamales*, 35.

25 Ibid.

26 Owens, “Food, Fasting, and Itinerant Nuns,” 706.

27 Pilcher, *Que Vivan Los Tamales*, 35.

ration, then alighted upon chocolate, the ancient drink of Aztec lords.”²⁸ Although the story of the Dominican nun is possibly apocryphal, the fact that the dish most associated with the mixture of Indigenous and European culture is attributed to a nun illustrates the way that convent cuisine evaded traditional cultural boundaries and was in itself an example of the cultural diverse environment in which it was created.

By creating convents in colonial Latin America, the Roman Catholic Church attempted to impose European religious ideas on the Indigenous population, and later on the African population, of the area. In fact, the result was a new type of Christianity, one that adapted to better fit the lives of the new converts. Although the most obvious example may be the transformation of holidays like All Souls’ Day into *Dias de Los Muertos*, the cuisine of colonial Latin American convents is an oft-forgotten source of information on cultural and religious adaptation. As the first order of Capuchin nuns left their confessor behind in Spain, they likely could hardly have imagined the world waiting for them on the other side of the Atlantic, a world of maize, cocoa, and avocados. Just as Latin America was not culturally homogenous, neither was their cuisine. Food is the very base of human experience, and the study of food can illustrate a great deal about the culture in which it was created and enjoyed. Cuisine within the Latin American convent can demonstrate the tragedies of colonial life, such as the disenfranchisement and exploitation of those of African heritage. It can also illustrate the beauty of a new culture being created, one that borrows from its cultural predecessors but becomes something incredible of its own.

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28 Ibid., 45.

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Gender Troubled: European Masculinity and Kaúxuma núpika on the Columbia Plateau

Mira Harvey

Kaúxuma núpika was a Ktunaxa guide, prophet and mediator from the Columbia Plateau in the early 19th century that appears in multiple Euro-American fur trader journals and narratives. He left his community as a young woman, and returned a year later as a man, who gained significant political and spiritual influence across the Plateau. Fur traders that hired Kaúxuma núpika as a translator, mediator and guide interpreted him as a man, and often only discovered that he was born a woman long after they had parted ways. Kaúxuma núpika, knowingly or not, was performing a masculinity entirely legible to these traders—and within their narratives they are constantly trying to remind both themselves, and the reader, that this man is not actually a man.

Kaúxuma núpika was a Ktunaxa guide, prophet, mediator, hunter, and warrior on the Columbia Plateau, whose life was partially recorded by European fur traders during the early 19th century. As a young woman, Kaúxuma núpika left her community to marry a white fur trader. A year later, he returned as a man. Kaúxuma núpika took on masculine roles in his Ktunaxa community, and went on further to guide white fur traders, mediate disputes between warring Indigenous peoples, and prophesy across the Plateau. He was multilingual, a skilled mediator and warrior, and by the time of his death and after greatly respected by many Indigenous peoples.¹ The specifics of Kaúxuma núpika's life are difficult to know - what written records do exist are traders' journals and subsequent narratives, which are far from reliable sources, as Elizabeth Vibert has proven.²

But through both trader's accounts and ethnographic data, a fuller picture of Kaúxuma núpika's life may be elaborated on.³ In this picture, an interesting phenomenon starts to take shape. While traders spend much of their narratives adopting dismissive attitudes towards Kaúxuma núpika's masculinity, Kaúxuma núpika is actually performing a kind of masculinity that is familiar to traders: a masculinity marked by attributes like spiritual power, independence, and involvement in warfare.

1 Claude Schaeffer, "The Kutenai Female Berdache: Courier, Guide, Prophetess, and Warrior," *Ethnohistory* 12, no.3 (Summer 1965): 193-236.

2 Elizabeth Vibert, *Traders' Tales: Narratives of Cultural Encounters in the Columbia Plateau, 1807-1846* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997).

3 Suzanne Crawford O'Brien, "Gone to the Spirits: A Transgender Prophet on the Columbia Plateau." *Theology & Sexuality* 12, no.2, 125-143 is, in my opinion, the best overview of Kaúxuma núpika's life and career.