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The Celebratory and the Everyday:
Guinea Pigs, Hamburgers and the Performance of Food Heritage in Highland Ecuador

Emma-Jayne Abbots

Abstract

This paper examines the ways in which members of peasant households in the greater Cuenca region, Ecuador, actively seek to maintain the tradition of *cuy* (roast guinea pig) by restricting its consumption to celebratory occasions and upholding strict rules concerning the exchange, preparation and eating of the meat. These practices are notable because global fast-food chains are popular haunts for peasant actors, who associate the restaurants with social prestige and modernity. My objective is to demonstrate that, contrary to McDonaldization theory, this embracing of fast-food does not lead to cultural homogeneity and the rejection of food heritage, but rather facilitates the valorisation and celebration of *cuy* as a 'traditional' dish. This valorisation occurs, I contend, because peasant actors distinguish 'celebratory' from 'everyday' foods, and consciously reaffirm these boundaries through their cooking and eating practices.

Introduction

This paper examines changing food and foodways among the peasant classes in the greater Cuenca region of the Ecuadorian Andes, with a specific focus on the manner in which food expresses and constitutes both modernity and tradition. Initially, I address the celebratory dish of *cuy* (roast guinea pig), examining the ways in which members of peasant households actively seek to maintain *cuy* traditions by restricting its consumption to ritual and festive occasions and upholding strict rules concerning the exchange, slaughter, butchery, cooking and eating of the meat. These practices are

notable because the Cuencano peasantry are generally outward looking, have rejected a number of established food practices and have an inclination towards embracing change and 'modernity'. Moreover, fast-food chains, which are located in the region's capital city, are popular haunts for peasant actors, who continue to live in the rural environs and villages rapidly being incorporated into the city's urban sprawl.

My purpose in this paper is to demonstrate that, contrary to the views posited by advocates of McDonaldization theory (Ritzer 2010) and Cuenca's privileged classes, the peasantry's embracing of modernity, in the form of global fast-food chains, is not tantamount to the wholesale rejection of their food heritage. Rather, I suggest, that while their consumption of prepared foods is, in part, motivated by the peasantry's desire for upward mobility and modernity, this is balanced, and contained, with their continuing need to remain rooted to their rural subjectivities, and contend that celebratory food is one of the key mechanisms through which this rootedness is realised. The tensions, between being outward and inward orientated, modern and traditional, socially mobile and lower class, and urban and rural, are at the heart of what it means to be a member of the peasant class in the Cuenca region today, and I demonstrate that individuals manage these tensions by classifying celebratory food from the everyday. Thus I show that, through their cooking and eating practices, the Cuencano peasantry draw protective boundaries around *cuy*, treating it as a distinct heritage dish, while categorising the hamburgers, french fries, rice, bean stew and pre-prepared chicken procured through global, and national, fast-food outlets and supermarkets as 'everyday'. Moreover, I suggest this is a self-conscious act of heritage protection and, echoing Bourdieu (1977), contend that it is only through the introduction of new possibilities and new foods that existing foodways become realised, categorised and valorised as 'tradition'.

The two categories thereby interplay and mutually reinforce each other, and I explore the processes through which, rather than leading to a loss of food heritage, the presence of the fast-food chains are negotiated in a manner which facilitates the protection and reproduction of heritage dishes. I thus aim to contribute an enhanced understanding of the ways in which specific celebratory foodways are continually performed and categorised as 'tradition' in relation to 'everyday' prepackaged and imported foods. In highlighting this dialectic relation, I question theories of

'McDonaldization' in addition to indicating the import of both categories of food to the constitution of complex, multi-faceted subjectivities.

Performing Tradition and Being Modern: The Relative Merits of *Cuy* and KFC

The consumption of *cuy*, which are native to the Andean region, has a long history, with archaeological records demonstrating that the animals were possibly domesticated as early as 5000 BC (Wing 1986: 260), and widely distributed before the Spanish Conquest (Archetti 1997: 30–1). Unlike alpacas and llamas, guinea pigs were not owned by the Incan state, although records show that *cuy* was never a quotidian dish during this era, but was rather reserved for ritual consumption (Archetti ibid; Cobo 1990; Gade 1967; Poma de Ayala 1978). This indigeneity has led a number of commentators to claim that *cuy* is a lower class 'Indian' food, the most notable of which is Weismantal (1988), who, drawing on Levi-Strauss (1968), structurally opposes the dish to the higher status 'white/*mestizo* (mixed-race)' foods of rice and chicken. More recent accounts have called for a rather more dynamic interpretation, with Bourque (2001) asserting that the status of *cuy* is dependent upon the subject position of the consumer and is therefore rather more ambiguous than structurally determined. Her description of *mestizo* attitudes to *cuy* meat demonstrates that the status of 'Indian and peasant' food is relational to the social status and ethnicity of the individual consumer, and as a result she shows that its classificatory status is not immovable, but rather shifts across contexts and subjectivities. Thus, *mestizos* in the city do not regard the consumption of *cuy* as compromising their *mestizo*-ness, while those in a 'peasant' village takes steps to distance themselves from the meat (Bourque 2001: 95).

The ambiguous status of *cuy* is further heightened by the manner in which its production and consumption has changed considerably in recent years, specifically in terms of its commoditisation. Large-scale *cuyerias* (guinea pig farms) and restaurants that specialise in marketing the delicacy to tourists and the middle-classes have been introduced and, as a consequence, the dish has been refined, elevated and presented as the heritage dish *par excellence.* Yet, despite its increasing availability as an everyday commodity and enhanced status among the upper classes, members of peasant households in the greater Cuencano region continue to treat *cuy* as a 'special' dish and uphold established prohibitions regarding its production and consumption. In this

context, *cuy* is only ever eaten on ritual occasions, including life-cycle events and Catholic fiestas and, in contrast to the production of other Cuencano foods, the home rearing, preparation and cooking of *cuy* is a labour-intensive non-mechanised process in which only kin and intimate friends are involved. Slaughtering, butchering and roasting *cuy* is a skilled and time-consuming practice in which members of the household communally kill, prepare and then spit-roast the meat over a bonfire located in the private spaces to the back of the home. This hidden practice, which contrasts to the manner in which pigs are publically butchered and consumed at the front of the house, indicates that, although celebratory, for the peasantry, *cuy* remains understood as a low-status food that can potentially reinforce their household's low subject position vis-à-vis the professional and privileged classes. Moreover, on the occasions they do not have sufficient *cuy* in their own household, members of the peasantry rely on their personal exchange networks to acquire additional animals for the table rather than purchasing them on the open market; a form of limited distribution which can be understood as representing a distinct sphere of circulation (cf Bohannan 1967). Sharing *cuy* therefore acts to reaffirm and define social relations between households, and individuals within those households, (Bourque 2001: 90), and consequently the dish is understood as inherently social. As Weismental states; "to kill a cuy for someone …is an open declaration that would like to deepen and formalize the relationship between your household and theirs" (1988: 131). Peasant households thus make concerted efforts to continue performing *cuy* foodways in the same manner as their ancestors, and look to render this timeless by valorising these eating and cooking performances as 'tradition'.

The Cuencano peasantry, across all generations, are also enthusiastic consumers of dishes purchased from global and national fast-food chains. During a period of fieldwork in Cuenca's two major malls, which are situated on the city's margins, it became evident that KFC and Burger King are particularly popular concessions, especially on Sundays, when families visit the malls with the specific purpose of eating at one of these restaurants. When not in one of these global chains, members of the peasant class can also be commonly observed in one of the regional chains that specialise in spit-roasted chicken and are located in both the city centre and its outskirts. A comparative observation has been made by Oldakowski & McEwen (2010), whose study of the major fast-food chains in the Ecuadorian coastal city of Guayaquil indicate that KFC is second only to

McDonald's in terms of popularity and frequency of visits[1]. This success and market penetration of the global fast-food chains has been attributed to a number of factors that can be characterised as efficiency, predictability, control and calculability (Ritzer 2010: 16-17). Low prices are factored into the latter, yet, outside of the US and Europe, prices can be higher than in comparative local restaurants (Lozada 2000). This is the case in Cuenca, and my comparison of the global chains' to local restaurants' prices suggests that a meal in the former is significantly, and potentially two to three times, more costly than in the latter. My research participants noted this price differential and not only emphasised the relatively high prices of the global chains, but also indicated that high pricing contributed to their popularity, as they were consequently perceived as more prestigious. This view is illustrated by Elena who, in response to my statement that KFC was generally regarded as lower status in the UK, explained;

> *It is exactly the opposite here, exactly the opposite. It is because they are so expensive, and they come from the US too – they are foreign, not Ecuadorian – so they are prestigious. It is good to be seen there. I can't eat there, it's too expensive, but I can pay for a coffee, just a coffee. And people will see me there and talk –it's all about status here; I only need to go once or twice.*

Other members of the peasantry commonly echoed Elena's perspective on the prestige of KFC and Burger King, while also indicating that they are locally interpreted as symbols of modernity, wealth and urbanisation. As Conchetta explained "*It's here because we want it, and yes it is globalisation and modernisation, but we want it here*". This symbolic capital of global fast food chains has also been noted elsewhere; Oldakowski & McEwen state that they are locally regarded as "upscale restaurants" located in middle-class suburbs (2010: 37), while both Watson (1997, 2000) and Yan (2000) demonstrate that consumers of McDonalds in China are commonly drawn from the middle-classes, who symbolically associate the chain with modernity. Thus it becomes evident that, dependent on the subject position of the consumer, fast-food can be regarded as distinctly more prestigious than indigenous dishes although, as I explain below, in the Cuencano context, there is not a direct correlation between prestige and 'celebratory'.

[1] Cuenca does not currently have a McDonalds branch, although a Facebook page entitled 'I wish there was a McDonald's in Cuenca', with 5,770 'likes', indicates its potential popularity.

"We Don't Eat These Foods Every Day": Classifying the Celebratory and the Everyday

The popularity of global fast food chains among the peasantry is not lost on the professionals, expatriates and political elites who comprise Cuenca's upper and middle classes, all of whom roundly condemn this perceived 'McDonaldization' and regard it as a threat to the cultural food heritage of the region. The presence and the local popularity of the fast-food chains is a source of constant dismay; a perspective exemplified by Andria who told me "*Colonel Saunders is everywhere: all the traditions were dying*" and by Leala who gesticulating to a branch of Burger King stated " *we get the worst of American culture here; it's embarrassing*". Embedded within this discourse is a clear sense of paternalism in which the peasantry's enthusiasm for fast-food is regarded as rather childlike and naïve. This is illustrated by Mariana who exclaimed, "*they just don't know any better*" and Ricardo who explained, "*it's an education thing, these people just don't know how and what to eat*". Furthermore, Leonara stated "*they're just not as far along as we are in realising the dangers of these foods*". A resonant perspective, that rationalisation and globalisation, as epitomised by the proliferation of the global chains, will lead to the loss of indigenous culinary heritage and create a homogenous global culture, is found in the work of scholars whose understanding of fast-food consumption is framed by the McDonaldization thesis (Ritzer 2010). However, the resulting notion that McDonald's is a force for cultural imperialism, is challenged by those who stress localisation and demonstrate that consumers adapt, modify and integrate the global fast-food chains into their own cultural realities (cf Caldwell 2004; Turner 2003; Yan 2000; Watson 1997, 2000). This process of localisation is more akin to the Cuencano context, although rather than being understood as a process of hybridisation, I suggest the Cuencano peasantry manage the presence of the global fast-food chains through differentialism and classification.

When I asked my research participants if they felt that fast-food chains were eroding their food traditions, the answer was a clear and resounding "*no*", with many offering the additional explanation that they believed the two aspects of their culinary lives could live alongside each other. "*We don't eat these things everyday, so we still eat our traditional food, especially during fiestas*", was a common response, and it became evident through our discussions that my participants clearly define and classify foods into different categories; two of which are 'the everyday' and 'the celebratory'. Falling into the category

of ‘everyday’ are those foods purchased for general consumption, such as rice, beans, vegetables and some meats. Pre-prepared foods, such as the hamburgers, fries and chicken purchased from the fast-food chains also fall within this category. These foods are often, although not always, associated with modernity and globalisation, and subsequently they can be understood as prestigious and/or low status, dependent on the subjectivity and class position of the consumer. These foods may also, in some contexts, be social, as the central role that KFC plays in Sunday’s family meals exemplifies, but they are not classified as such by members of the peasantry; a categorisation which seems to founded on the way these foods are always commoditised, and are either pre-prepared in restaurants, or prepared at home by a single cook, often a domestic servant.

As my participants’ comment in the paragraph above shows, everyday foods are clearly not consumed every day, and the peasantry’s acceptance of fast-foods is premised on the notion that they are balanced with other categories of food, included the ‘celebratory’. *Cuy*, which is not only inherently social, but is also regarded as such by the peasantry, epitomises this category, and hence its commoditisation is resisted and the meat can only be acquired through personal exchange networks. Furthermore, in contrast to everyday foods, when the use of technology in their preparation is sanctioned, *cuy* must be prepared communally and by hand following a prescribed method in which the use of technology and exogenous – particularly waged – assistance is prohibited. Thus, peasant households make a clear distinction between everyday and celebratory foods, and this division is maintained, not because of the material qualities of the dish, but through the discourse and practices of peasant actors. By treating *cuy* as a unique food, and following specifically culturally prescribed cooking and eating customs, *cuy* becomes segregated from everyday foods and valorised as traditional and celebratory. Peasant actors thereby draw protective boundaries around the dish, which they continually renew and affirm through their own practices. Moreover, these eating, cooking and exchanging performances are not enacted every day, but only on the sole occasions which are demarcated as ritual and/or festive on the household’s social calendar. Therefore specific time, designated as celebratory, is set aside for the preparation and consumption of *cuy*. Food and event can consequently be seen to mutually reinforce each other’s unique classificatory status; *cuy* becomes celebratory because it is consumed on festive occasions, and the occasion is marked as celebratory because *cuy* is consumed. Thus, temporalities serve to further reiterate the boundary between the everyday and the celebratory.

"Fast Food Protects Our Traditions": The Interplay between the Celebratory and the Everyday

Notions of time further inform the classificatory process of foods, with the relation between past and present, and tradition and modernity, playing a central role. As theorists of modernity have highlighted, the modern condition brings an inherent contradiction in which social actors become increasingly aware of a rupture with the past, while also seeking to (re)create continuities (Bauman 2000, Habermas 1987). This temporal consciousness and the emergence of a new presentness, which derives from an opposition between past and future, can create uncertainty and anxiety as actors are faced with the "agonies of choice" (Bauman 1998: 74) and become aware that tradition is invented. The tension between stability and choice is, as Simmel (1978) argued, one of the intrinsic characteristics of modernity. However, the appearance of new possibilities – and potential threats – throws the existing order of things and taken-for-granted practices into sharp relief, which in turn can initiate and facilitate the valorisation of these practices as 'tradition' (Bourdieu 1977). Applying this theoretical framework to foodways in Cuenca it can be argued that traditional, celebratory *cuy* becomes valorised as such *because* of the presence of the global fast food chains, rather than despite of them; a theoretical assertion borne out by the perspectives of members of the Cuencano peasantry.

As I indicated above, the Cuencano peasantry are rather more relaxed about the presence of global fast-food chains and their potential impact on the region's culinary traditions than members of the middle and upper classes. It quickly emerged in our group discussions that the reason behind this is not only peasant actors' ability to compartmentalise and classify the foods as everyday and celebratory, but also because they regard these two distinct categories as mutually reinforcing. The general consensus among the groups with whom I worked was, that in the last two to three years, there had been a greater level of promotion and recognition of local gastronomy and the region's food heritage, and they noted this had developed alongside an increasing number of fast-food outlets and greater availability of imported and processed foods. As Sara told me, "*fast food helps us protect our traditions, because it makes us more aware of them, it highlights them*", and Jose explained;

> *in Cuenca, we are very conservative, the most conservative in all of Ecuador, so we protect our traditions; we like fast-food, you know, I love KFC, but our traditions are important too; so we need to look after them.*

Thus, echoing modernity theorists, members of the peasantry understood that the presence of global fast food chains and 'exogenous' dishes were helping preserve their culinary heritage. We thereby see the interplay between the everyday and the celebratory: one category, it appears, cannot exist without the other. Moreover, this theme was particularly pronounced among teenagers, suggesting that while young people may drive demand for the products of the global fast-food chains (Bugge 2011, Lozada 2000, Yan 2000), they are also developing nuanced and sophisticated understandings of the relation between new and established eating practices. However, it also becomes evident, through my participants' discourse and their self-conscious performances of cooking and eating *cuy* as 'tradition', that fast-food does constitute a threat and the boundaries between the everyday and celebratory are perceived as potentially permeable. Yet, it also appears that my participants are highly aware of this potential threat and recognise that boundaries have to be remade and reaffirmed through their own actions. Consequently they look to valorise *cuy* as 'traditional' and 'celebratory', and look to reinforce the distinction in order to minimise potential loss and cross-contamination (cf Douglas 2002).

This became particularly clear when I asked my participants whether they thought that hamburgers could become 'celebratory' food in the future; a question which created the greatest level of disagreement and discussion, with a number stating that this clearly could not happen as "*our food traditions are protected*", while others argued that, as celebratory food is the "*food of the ancestors*", in "*four to five generations time*" the ancestors will be today's consumers and "*we are eating hamburgers*". Individuals in this latter group drew on the history of the region to support their cause, explaining that, as some foods introduced during Spanish colonisation are now regarded as typical of the region, foods from the USA could be interpreted in the same way in the not-so-distant future. Yet this process was not understood as a uni-directional globalising force originating in the North and homogenising the South, but was rather constructed as a dialogue between the different forms of cuisine. This perspective is further evidenced by Oldakowski and McKewen (2010), who note that KFC's success outside of the USA has been built on a strategy based on adaptation to local cuisine and tastes, and demonstrate that their research

respondents understand that, out of all of the chains, KFC offers a menu closest to Ecuadorian cuisine.

My research participants made a similar observation, but stressed that the presence of rice, shrimp and *menestra* on the KFC menu should not be regarded as a cynical ploy to exploit local tastes for commercial gain. Rather it is seen as evidence of the strength of their own food traditions. As Rafe forcibly stated, "*our traditions, our food is very strong – they [KFC] are having to adapt to us*". This adaptation is, however, limited, and my participants expressed horror at the thought of *cuy* being on the menu at the global fast-food chains. I suggest that this is because of its classification as a 'celebratory' dish, and the consequent associations of sociality and gift giving, as opposed to commoditisation, that this classificatory status brings. The foods which can acceptably form part of the KFC menu, and which Rafe takes pride in, may be classified as 'local', and in some contexts be defined as 'traditional', but they are also classified as 'everyday' foods and are therefore able to shift across different dining settings and temporal contexts. In contrast, I contend, *cuy* has to remain rooted to a specific context – that of a celebratory event – and the prospect of this rootedness being undermined and challenged, by situating the dish in an everyday commoditised context, can not, and will not, be considered.

The strength of this reaction stems, at least in part, from the role that *cuy*, and celebratory food in general, plays in shaping the identities of the Cuencano peasantry. When Cristián informed me "cuy is part of my culture; it is who I am", and Maria took immense pride in the way that her son "*loved his cuy*" and explained that this was because "*he is a son of Jima*"[2], they echoed the voices of many of my participants, young and old, who use the dish to define their rural personhood. At a time of immense social change and new possibilities of being and eating, *cuy*, and the celebratory events in which the dish plays a pivotal role, offers a groundedness to members of the peasantry who are faced with the 'agonies of choice' that modernity presents. Yet, being 'traditional' and 'rural' is just one aspect of being a member of the Cuencano peasantry, and individuals within this social group have multiple relative subjectivities. Aspirations of social mobility, founded on global rather than local symbols, outward orientation and conceptions of modernity, are dominant characteristics of social life for this group, and play a significant role in informing shifting eating and consumption practices. I have demonstrated that these tensions between rural and urban, outward and inward orientation, and tradition and

[2] Jima is a small 'peasant' village located in the centre of the greater Cuenca region.

modernity are managed through a process of classification, but further suggest that the presence of the global fast-food chains, among other 'modern' symbols, enables this process to occur not only by throwing the traditional into sharp relief, but by also creating a new subject position from which the protective boundaries around *cuy* can be drawn. By acknowledging that fast-food outlets are high in social capital, I argue that they help facilitate the class mobility of the peasantry and thus, building on Bourque's (2001) assertion that the relative status of *cuy* is shaped by the relative status of the consumer, contend that *cuy*, in turn, can also become elevated from its 'Indian/peasant' connotations in this social context. The dish consequently becomes less potentially damaging to the upwardly mobile aspirations of the peasantry. Thus, by providing a site through which they can enhance their social status, the global fast-food chains provide the foundations through which members of the Cuencano peasantry can, celebrate and value, rather than diminish, their food heritage. As Julia surmised; "*I may be here with my laptop and modern clothes, and go to Burger King but I will still teach my children our traditions – my daughters will still know how to cook and eat cuy*".

Conclusion

The Cuencano peasantry's classification of foods into the everyday and the celebratory can be seen to be their method of negotiating and managing the tension between stability and choice that is characteristic of the modern condition (Simmel 1978). Consequently, celebratory dishes, for example, *cuy*, have to be distinctly bounded and segregated from everyday foods. Yet, this boundary is understood to be constantly under threat and therefore has to reaffirmed and maintained through specific, culturally prescribed, exchange, cooking and eating practices. These practices not only provide a sense of stability at a time of dramatic social change, but are also consistently valorised as performances of 'tradition'; a valorisation that can, paradoxically, only occur, following Bourdieu (1977) and Habermas (2000), when new possibilities appear. Thus, far from resulting in an eradication of culinary heritage, the presence of global and regional fast-food chains can be seen to facilitate the self-conscious protection of particular food 'traditions'.

An analysis of the relation between celebratory and everyday foods shows us how the Cuencano peasantry are negotiating and constituting new subjectivities that are simultaneously traditional and modern, lower and higher status, and rural and urban, and

elucidates the process through which they keep both grounded and explore new culinary opportunities. Thus, contrary to the views of some scholars and the Cuencano privileged classes, the peasantry have a nuanced understanding of relations between global and local and are not adopting fast-food with a childlike naivety, but are rather negotiating their increased presence through a classificatory process. I suggest much can be learnt from the Cuencano peasantry's approach to both the global fast-food chains and their culinary heritage, for they remind us not to view these topics through the lens of our own culinary values and biases.

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