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Gallo Pinto: Tradition, Memory, and Identity in Costa Rican Foodways

This article traces the social history of gallo pinto (rice and beans) in Costa Rica in order to unpack the meaning of this innocuous marker of southern Costa Rican identity. Southern Costa Ricans describe pinto as a traditional food, yet they reject its possible origin in Afro-Costa Rican culture. While Costa Ricans' use of tradition, as word and concept, marks and thereby validates contemporary praxis, the concept simultaneously erases the African cultural heritage of a country that imagines itself as white. This case study demonstrates how multiple lines of evidence (personal interviews, journalistic and academic articles, literature, and institutionally sanctioned histories) can highlight the cleavage between local memory and history, and illuminate larger cultural issues.

In this article, I examine the concept of tradition as it is used by Costa Ricans to explain the ubiquity of their breakfast cuisine. During my field research in southern Costa Rica, women often spoke with me in interviews about the foods they cooked and the accompanying recipes that they had learned from their mothers.¹ The most common food mentioned was a dish of fried rice and beans, known locally as *gallo pinto*, or simply *pinto*.² Gallo pinto is eaten daily for breakfast, often accompanied by a fried egg and occasionally by fried plantains and fried sausage. Here, I argue that while Costa Ricans' use of tradition, as word and concept, marks and thereby validates their contemporary praxis, the concept simultaneously erases the more uncomfortable aspects of their social history—particularly those aspects of the changing political economies within which foods are embedded. In the case of gallo pinto, what is particularly obscured is the African cultural heritage in a country that imagines itself as white. In what follows, I use personal interviews, journalistic and academic articles, literature, and institutionally sanctioned histories to analyze the meaning of the seemingly innocuous meal of rice and beans. In this way, I unpack a cultural identity marker that, given its familiarity in everyday life and its social history, is at once immediately personal and deeply political.

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Practice into Discourse

DOÑA EMILY: Yes. Well, what we eat the most is rice and beans . . .

THERESA: Do all of the people here know how to make pinto?

DOÑA EMILY: Yes, everyone.

THERESA: And how do you know how?

DOÑA EMILY: Well, pinto is made; one makes the rice at night, in the afternoon, right?

And this at times of the day. . . if you want to put a chili, cilantro, if you want, and then that is fried and it . . . tastes very good.

THERESA: And how do you mix it with the . . .

DOÑA EMILY: With the beans? Oh well, if one makes this, one fries it. Put in the beans and—a secret so that they taste even more delicious—I mash the beans a bit. Then, those that remain whole are with some like this, so that they mix better with the rice, and it is more delicious. Then you mix the rice . . . And there it is!

THERESA: And how did you learn to cook it like this?

DOÑA EMILY: Because one always, yes, always is here. This is the norm. This is what the parents did, and is how the *Ticos* [the local term for Costa Ricans] do it, and all this is tradition.

THERESA: Uh-huh.

DOÑA EMILY: Yes, the Tico has tradition.

—Interview, June 24, 2002³

Traditions and their “invention” are recurring topics in the investigation of everyday life (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Informants who may never have considered why they perform the tasks they do or why they perform them in a particular manner are quick to lean on tradition as an explanation. As Max Weber has noted, practices and types of knowledge that have been so internalized are difficult to articulate; often, the work to objectify them in words and thoughts creates new understandings for both speaker and listener (1904:159). Building on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1979), Mary Weismantel noted, in her study of food in highland Ecuador, that the mere questioning of “previously mute and invisible practices” identifies *doxa* (undiscussed practices) and establishes them as discourses among other competing orthodoxies (Weismantel 1988:159). I had not asked Doña Emily about traditions; it was she who invoked the concept of tradition to authenticate her experiences and to legitimate her cooking acumen. Here, I argue that, for Doña Emily, calling upon tradition created a seamless movement from the present into the past. It suggests that one automatically derives from the other.⁴

During my interviews in the summer of 2006, I asked men and women what they had eaten for breakfast that very day. In past research trips, I had asked the abstract question, “What do Costa Ricans eat for breakfast?” Their responses taught me that general questions yield vague answers. In 2006, I hoped that a specific and personal question would elicit more precise answers and aid me in understanding whether gallo pinto was in fact ubiquitous or if it was just embedded in the national memory as such. Despite my expectation that pinto was only one of many foods eaten for breakfast among southern Costa Ricans, people almost invariably responded to my question, “I

ate pinto and coffee.” Informants frequently continued: “pinto is very typical in Costa Rica,” “it is the primordial food here,” or “one can’t breakfast without pinto.” Such responses indicate a strong connection between the desire (or taste) for pinto, a food, and for Costa Rica, a place. Regarding French culture, Amy B. Trubek discusses the link between taste and place. She writes that certain foods and the practice of eating them evoke a nostalgic image of a certain way of life and corresponding identity (2005:268). This link between taste and place rests, in part, upon a romantic image of the past, both in Trubek’s frame and, I saw, in Costa Rica.

These images are shaped by Costa Ricans through the telling of stories that link place and practice to identity. In 2003, an article entitled “El gallo pinto: Diversidad de versiones sobre un conocido platillo” (Gallo pinto: Diversity of versions of a well-known dish), appeared in one of Costa Rica’s leading newspapers, *La Nación*. The author, Dennis Meléndez Howell, acknowledges the many nations in which similar foods are prepared. He also lists the Costa Rican names for the dish: “revuelto, arroz sucio (los caribeños tienen otro platillo al que denominan igual) o—como lo llamaban en San Sebastián, al sur de San José—tentempié” (scrambled, dirty rice [the Caribbeans have another plate with the same name] or—as they call it in San Sebastián, in the south of San José—a little snack). Meléndez Howell writes that his mother used to tell him a story about how gallo pinto (the most common label) came to bear such a strange name:

My mother maintained that the name originated in her area, San Sebastián, at the beginning of the twentieth century. . . . [There, it] was hoped, that on San Sebastián’s saint day, friends would arrive from other places in the country, some from not very far. For the twentieth of January, the day of Saint Sebastián, the people know that they should ready sufficient food for the unannounced visits. Of course, the meal is really supposed to be nothing more than a snack, but families tried to show off with special foods, such as a rich mushroom soup, fried pig’s head, pork and corn soup, or entrail soup, as well as the abundant tortillas and different hashes, among them that of root hash with *chicasquil* (it is strange that the new generations do not eat this very tasty and abundant leaf), subtropical squash soup, hemstitch with subtropical squash root, and the potato with sausage. Only the very wealthy families had the luxury of serving hen (which is like chicken but less common and more expensive).

On certain occasions, my mother said, Don Barnabe (whose name I am not sure of and whose last name I don’t know) was one of the few neighbors of this locality near the River Tiribi. Since the start of December, he walked around the area, happily announcing that for the Christmas tamales he was going to kill three hens; however, he was going to reserve the gallo pinto (painted chicken), in order to kill it on the twentieth of January to fulfill a promise that he had made to the saint. He repeated the story with great pride to whichever Christian he encountered, and, of course, I don’t know if in his euphoria he invited them or if his interlocutors merely interpreted it as such.

On the awaited day of the patron festival, probably motivated by the temptation of receiving a little taste of Don Barnabe’s famous gallo pinto, the number of visitors multiplied. The grieving cooks did not know what to do except pass out food, and, like a natural defense, the quantity of rice and beans grew in order to have something

to serve. The most fortunate, probably the first to be served, tasted a miniscule part of the long awaited for fowl. The rest of the parishioners, the large majority, were attended with a snack of fried eggs. (It is worth noting that that was a generous food to serve, because eggs were also very expensive). So that no one remained without anything to eat, the majority had to satisfy their appetites with rice and beans fried in hog fat. As they were waiting, one unleashed various commentaries. As a joke, they asked one another, "Did you go to eat gallo pinto at Don Barnabe's?" And, of course, thereafter the snack continued being called, in a burlesque tone, "gallo pinto." Very soon, the name extended to all of the country. (Mélendez Howell 2003:6)

The legend offered within this newspaper article locates pinto at the heart of Costa Rican culture. Whether or not the dish came to its famous name following the much anticipated and anticlimactic meal at Don Barnabe's is not important. As legend, this etiological narrative provides a crucial cultural explanation for the origin of this ubiquitous food (on the cultural significance of written legends, see Dégh 1997; El-Shamy 1997). In the case of pinto, a culturally adored foodway becomes grounded in time (the start of the twentieth century on the day of Saint Sebastián) and space (the town of San Sebastián by the Tiribi River). It is legitimized through the author's connection to his mother, who is from the named town. Outside of the above narrative, I have not come across any other historical, written documentation of the naming of rice and beans in Costa Rica. Here, I do not intend to dismiss the cultural significance of storytelling or individuals' memories, which can provide insights into the meaning of food. Nonetheless, the interpretations that informants offer can, intentionally or unintentionally, hide other histories—broader histories. Here is where the cleavage between memory and history begins (D. James 2000:228). It is this cleavage that interests me most. With the aid of official and unofficial sources, the next section explores the complicated social history of rice, as well as its gastronomic and cultural foil, maize.

The Ubiquity of Rice and Nostalgia for Maize

My interest in the social history of pinto was first piqued when I noticed incongruities in Costa Rican foodways discourse. Despite its ubiquity, very little culinary writing exists about pinto.⁵ Perhaps it is precisely pinto's everydayness that devalues it in the minds of researchers. In their article on northern Costa Rican foodways, Costa Rican authors Guillermo García Murillo and Luis Efrén García Brinceño omit any discussion of pinto, though, curiously, they write that it is the most preferred meal and perhaps should be dubbed the national food of Costa Rica (1976:10). They differentiate between the "popular" food of festivals and the "typical" food of everyday life. Characterizing pinto as the latter, they imply that typical food is less worthy of documentation than its popular counterpart.

Instead of discussing pinto, García Murillo and García Brinceño stress the historical and symbolic importance of *maize* (corn) in Costa Rican culture. So too do my southern Costa Rican informants in our conversations, despite its absence from daily meals. Occasionally I have encountered *arépes* (sweet corn pancakes), *tortillas* (corn flatbread), and *empanadas* (stuffed corn pastry), most often served at breakfast

with coffee and in place of pinto. Once in a while, maize *tamales* (steam-cooked corn dough) appear in the buckets of peddlers, wrapped in plantain leaves and filled with chicken and vegetables. Years ago, when I first noticed the relative lack of maize-based foods in southern Costa Rican cuisine, as compared to other Central American countries, I asked women if such foods were ever prepared. Informants responded that maize-based foods were routinely prepared. The discrepancy between my observations of few maize-based foods and Costa Ricans' assertions of their abundance points to an imagined collective identity of Costa Ricans as maize consumers. This identity stems from a sense of both a vertical community perpetuated through time and a horizontal community extended across the space of the Costa Rican, and the larger Central American, cultural landscape (Jones 2000).

Historically, maize has played a large role in Costa Ricans' culinary practices. Archaeological evidence suggests that maize was cultivated in Costa Rica as early as 130 A.D. (Snarskis 1976:348), and ethnographic work documents contemporary maize-based foodways in northern Costa Rica (Edelman 1999). As it has been for centuries, maize continues to be the staple food and gastronomic marker of identity for many of Costa Rica's northern, Mesoamerican neighbors: Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras (Bauer 2001:20; López Austin and López Luján 2000:49; Pilcher 1998; Taube 1989). Hence, it seems odd that in Costa Rica, rice and beans is heralded as the unofficial national dish. When, why, and how did this change from a maize-based diet to a rice-based diet occur?

The history of rice and beans as a meal in southern Costa Rica is one of global economic, political, and social change. Unlike beans, rice is not a domesticated, native food in the Americas. Its cultivation has been documented in the New World as early as 1535 in Puerto Rico among the Spanish (Cabezas Bolaños and Espinoza Esquivel 2000:10).⁶ By the end of the 1600s, rice had become an important crop in the American Atlantic, a region I am defining as encompassing the coastal southern states of the United States, the countries of the Caribbean, and the Atlantic coastal regions of Central and South America. In this geographic area, rice and beans was and is one of the staple foods. Though it varies in presentation style, the rice-and-beans combination can be found today in the American South as Hoppin' John, on "Spanish-speaking islands as *moros y cristianos* (Moors and Christians), among French dominions as *pois et riz* (beans and rice), and in Jamaica as rice and peas" (Pilcher 2000:1286).⁷ Variations differ in the type of bean used and other added ingredients, such as black mushrooms in Haiti and coconut milk in Belize and Venezuela (Pilcher 2000:1286).⁸

In Costa Rica, the cultivation of rice dates to 1789 among the Spanish (Cabezas, Porras, and Espinoza 1996). Costa Rican researchers who specialize in foodways write that, while the Spanish may have grown the grain, it was cultivated in such small quantities that it would not have been a staple component of consumers' diets. Instead, many postulate that African slavery in the Caribbean was the conduit through which rice and beans as a typical food eventually arrived in Costa Rica in the mid- to late 1800s (Cabezas Bolaños and Espinoza Esquivel 2000:14–7; Ross de Cerdas 2003; Ross González 2001).

When slavery was abolished in the Caribbean over the course of the 1800s, Asian

workers were contracted by capitalists and brought to the Caribbean to flood the labor market and drive down wages. As a result, more than two hundred thousand former British West Indians relocated to Central and South America between 1850 and 1910 to work on railroad construction projects, the Panama Canal, and banana plantations (Putnam 2002:35). In particular, Jamaicans immigrated to the Atlantic coast of Costa Rica following abolition in the 1830s. Under the direction of the Bostonian Minor C. Keith, Jamaicans worked to expand the railroad from the inland capital of San José to the Atlantic coastal city of Limón in the 1870s and harvested bananas for the United Fruit Company in the 1890s (Putnam 2002). Formerly as slaves in the Caribbean, workers frequently cultivated their own small plots of rice for subsistence purposes (Pilcher 2000:1280–1). Now as free laborers living in Costa Rica, former slaves' foodways may be the basis of contemporary Afro-Costa Rican cuisine—and even Costa Rican cuisine in general.⁹

Sources differ as to whether or not banana growers and harvesters grew their own subsistence crops. Aviva Chomsky writes that the production of basic crops for sale was highly discouraged by the United Fruit Company, though workers did maintain their own small subsistence crops (1996:83–6). In contrast, Philippe I. Bourgois writes, “[The] majority of the West Indian banana workers at the turn of the century were obliged at the same time to be part-time peasants in order to survive.” Citing Charles Koch (1975:8), Bourgois notes that during the construction of the cross-country railroads, Keith (who would later become the owner of the United Fruit Company) “kept his labor force from starving or emigrating by arranging for the Costa Rican government to provide his unemployed workers with land upon which to cultivate subsistence crops.” Finally, Bourgois explains that, like the railroad workers, banana workers were encouraged to grow their own food because this enabled the capitalists to suppress wages (1989:68–9; see also Vega Jiménez 2002).

At the turn of the century, maize continued to be a staple in Costa Ricans' diets, despite the fact that rice in Costa Rica grew incredibly well, with little care and no irrigation. However, the primary national rice-growing region in the northwest was isolated from the rest of the country's transportation network, so Costa Rica still imported large quantities of rice from Asia each year (Edelman 1992:305). The situation began to change with the completion of the Pan-American Highway in the 1940s, which facilitated interregional transport. In 1949, the Ministry of Agriculture pushed to develop improved rice seeds, resulting in the modernization and mechanization of rice cultivation. At the time, most maize was grown by small sharecroppers who, Marc Edelman observes, were “largely unable . . . to assume the financial burdens and risks required to shift to mechanized modern farming” (1992:306). A final push to increase the production of rice came in 1965 with the establishment of the Central American Common Market (CACM). CACM was intended to encourage free trade between Central American countries. Because Costa Rica had higher production costs than the other countries, government officials were allowed to protect one basic food out of the four covered by the treaty—rice, maize, sorghum, or beans. Costa Rican officials elected rice because of its “greatest comparative advantage in terms of technological development, productivity, investment capacity of the producers, and geographic location” (Piszk 1982:4; quoted in Edelman 1992:306). The Costa Rican

government created a National Basic Grains Program that concentrated its agricultural efforts on the development of a high-yield variety of rice.

From 1960 to 1980, Costa Rica's per capita supplies for maize consumption decreased (Pacheco 1983:38). In contrast, rice consumption rose. During this time rice growers were supported by crop-insurance policies issued by Costa Rica's National Insurance Institute, which insured nearly the full operating costs and created a boom atmosphere (Edelman 1992:307). By 1980, annual per capita consumption of rice surpassed fifty-two kilograms (Edelman 1992:420 n. 35). Despite programs of structural adjustment that began in 1984 and lessened support for national rice production, the grain had become a key component of Costa Rican foodways. Currently, Costa Rica is Central America's most important producer of rice and largest consumer of it, accounting for 28 percent of the rice eaten by Central Americans (Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture 1994:12).

At the same time that changes in maize and rice cultivation were occurring, the Costa Rican population was on the move. Though bananas grew exceptionally well in the rainy Atlantic region, disease struck the plants, forcing the plantations to close. Many of the black Costa Ricans, the children of Caribbean immigrants, became full-time cacao farmers after the plantations closed. The population became relatively successful and upwardly mobile. Their children, however, saw better opportunities away from farming, and many migrated to major cities, such as Limón and San José, taking their foodways with them (Bourgeois 1989; Chomsky 1996).

In 1938, the United Fruit Company shifted its location from the Caribbean to the Pacific coast towns of Quepos and, farther south, Golfito (Jones and Morrison 1952). Within a decade, the Pacific lowlands were opened up to the rest of the country. Golfito was a thriving city of seven thousand with a hospital, stores, recreation facilities, a dairy, shops, and means of communication. Two hundred and forty-six lines of railway were constructed in the south as well as modern banana-shipping facilities capable of loading four thousand bunches of bananas an hour (1952:12). A small number of displaced plantation workers from the Atlantic, adventurous and hungry urban dwellers from San José's central highlands, and many more disenfranchised maize sharecroppers and independent farmers from Guanacaste (Costa Rica's northern province) migrated south to work on railroad construction projects, banana plantations, and, later, the Pan-American Highway project. Black Costa Ricans, however, were not among the migrants. In a contract signed in December 1934, owners of the United Fruit Company agreed not to hire black workers on their new southern Pacific plantations (Chomsky 1996:250).

By the second half of the twentieth century, owners of the United Fruit Company realized that the southern Pacific lowlands were not nearly as productive as the Caribbean lands for growing bananas, and so efforts were taken to redevelop old land on the Caribbean side. The United Fruit Company remained in Golfito until 1984, when, triggered by worldwide overproduction, high costs, and a seventy-two-day strike by the trade union, the owners sold the land and infrastructure to the Costa Rican government and decamped (Hall and Pérez Brignoli 2003:207). Without jobs, workers scattered over the southern region, squatting on undeveloped lands, such as the small, rural southern community of Barrio San Cristóbal, where I conduct field research.

In an interview, one of the founding members of Barrio San Cristóbal, a fifty-seven-year-old man named Don Gerardo, described the social geography of the barrios that have developed across southern Costa Rica in response to changing labor situations: “Éste es un pueblo como un gran hotel” (This town is like a big hotel). His comment refers to the residential situation wherein community members leave their homes *en masse* each morning to travel to their jobs and return each night to sleep. Don Gerardo went on to explain that many of the residents of Barrio San Cristóbal are the children and grandchildren of banana workers or were themselves *bananeros*. With the large banana companies gone, former plantation workers and their children now take jobs on smaller, private banana and African palm oil plantations and in factories, though these employ far fewer workers than the United Fruit plantations.

Over the past century, Costa Ricans have migrated across the country many times over—from the Atlantic coast to the urban central highlands and southern Pacific lowlands; from the northwest to the southern Pacific lowlands and back again; from the highlands to the southern Pacific lowlands; and now, increasingly, back to the urban highlands to live and work in San José. These migratory patterns correlate to historical shifts in work opportunities: small-scale maize agriculture jobs were erased, and the banana industry created and later terminated jobs. As people moved across the country’s terrain and built new lives and new communities, they learned and taught subsequent generations of Costa Ricans new foodways using the foods available to them.¹⁰

My primary research site of Barrio San Cristóbal exemplifies a multigenerational community of migrants who practice newer foodways while remembering older ones. Since I began my research in 1998 in Barrio San Cristóbal, I have often talked with people about rice and beans, and about maize. During my research in the summer of 2006, I sought to clarify the claims of past key informants. I interviewed residents from 92 of the 452 households in Barrio San Cristóbal—a 20 percent sample size. I first obtained genealogical data about the year and place of birth of family members and the year and reasons for which they migrated to southern Costa Rica. I also asked what foods the person had eaten for breakfast as a child and, if he or she had lived on a banana plantation, what foods were eaten for breakfast there. Finally, I asked what the person had eaten for breakfast that day, the day of the interview. Together, these questions helped me to document the national switch in foodways from maize to rice.

Of the informants that I interviewed, 60 percent were born in southern Costa Rica. The majority of those people born in the southern region were from families who worked for the United Fruit Company and who had migrated south within the past generation. One such interviewee is Don Mauricio, a sixty-four-year-old man who currently works as a private security guard. Having left his family behind in Guanacaste at the age of twenty, Don Mauricio spent the next twenty-five years working on banana plantations. When the United Fruit Company left the south, he continued working in agriculture for PalmaTica, a company that cultivates African palms. Now, his children are grown and have children of their own. His two sons continue to work in agriculture, and his five daughters are split between professional careers and being homemakers. Three have remained in the south. Ultimately, my field research verified what residents had been telling me for years: the popu-

lation of Barrio San Cristóbal, and that of other southern communities, is comprised of families who relocated to the south in the middle part of the twentieth century to work on banana plantations.

The migratory patterns of these families are linked to individuals' answers about breakfast choices, and analyzing the data, I began to map changes in foodways. Of the ninety-two people that I interviewed, seventy told me that they had eaten pinto that morning, often accompanied by coffee, bread, eggs, or sausage. Only one person had eaten a breakfast involving maize—a type of maize pancake called an *arépe*. This corroborates my experiences; during the extensive time I have spent in southern Costa Rica, I have only been served pinto with a homemade, maize-based food a few times. Instead, flimsy, store-bought maize tortillas that are toasted slightly on a stove's burner regularly accompany a plate of rice and beans. When I asked what people had eaten as children, more than half said they breakfasted on rice and beans. One man said, "It's the custom of the family [to eat pinto]." Yet the vast majority of these respondents were younger, had been born in the south, and had a southern generation that preceded them. As one woman explained, "Es tradición . . . desde que estaba chiquitita" (It's tradition. . . [I've eaten pinto] since I was very little). Nearly everyone who had lived and worked on the banana plantations cited rice and beans as the typical breakfast food. In particular, elderly men recalled that as young bachelors, they ate all of their meals at company-owned kitchens, where the female cook would prepare pinto every day. One seventy-eight-year-old man who migrated from the central highlands when he was twenty-two recalled that he had worked on plantations for forty-two years, and as a *soltero* (single man) he always ate pinto at the local *soda* (tiny restaurant with one or two tables).

In contrast, nearly every person who said that he or she ate a maize-based food for breakfast as a child was born in the north. These individuals spoke of their mothers and grandmothers preparing homemade maize tortillas, not like now when people buy them in plastic packets in the supermarkets. Occasionally, a woman even remembered at what age she had learned to make tortillas. One sixty-four-year-old woman, who had been fired from her plantation job during a strike, explained, "Yo me gusta cocinar igual de allá" (I like to cook the same as there). She began making tortillas with her mother in Guanacaste when she was eleven years old. When I asked informants if they ate pinto as well, all but three individuals responded, "Éso también" (that too) or "A veces" (sometimes). While individuals remembered with detail the maize-based foods of their youth, they only incorporated pinto into their narrative when I asked about its presence. Their responses imply two possible processes. On one hand, informants' readiness to include pinto in their stories of tortilla breakfasts suggests a potential distortion of the recollection of past foodways to include a food that may not have been eaten then. The inclusion of both homemade foods—maize and pinto—in informants' narratives may suggest that contemporary views regarding the current ubiquity of pinto are slipping into and clouding memories of the past, in the same way that nostalgia for maize-based foods obscured informants' assessment of current trends in maize consumption. On the other hand, pinto may actually have accompanied maize-based foods throughout the twentieth century, as informants suggested. On a trip in May 2007 to northern Guanacaste, I discovered that contemporary breakfasts almost always

include a large, thick homemade maize tortilla with pinto. Because informants privilege maize in their childhood memories over pinto, this second possibility points to a process of valuing the one food (maize) over another (pinto). Maize retains the nostalgic sentiment to which Costa Rican authors García Murillo and García Brinceño allude, casting pinto as ubiquitous, yet unextraordinary (1976).

Racialized Foodways

In the field, I queried Costa Rican academics, housewives, and cooks—really anyone who would listen—about their thoughts on the origin of pinto. I outlined my hypothesis that gallo pinto originated among slaves in the American Atlantic and later traveled with emancipated slaves to Costa Rica’s banana plantations on the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. I suggested that from the Atlantic coast it disseminated outward, aided by the transfer of the United Fruit Company’s plantations to the south and the mass migration of northern workers to the south. I explained the correlation among the formation of the Central American Common Market in the 1960s, the fall of maize consumption, and the normalization of a diet dominated by rice-based foods. Yet in conversation after conversation, I was met with the same response: pinto did not come from the Africans. Despite my counter that several Costa Rican food specialists have offered a history for pinto similar to my own, people remained steadfast in their certainty that their national foodway was not of African origin (Ross de Cerdas 2003; Ross González 2001).¹¹

Individuals instead offered the northern region of the country as an origin for pinto. Costa Rica’s northern province of Guanacaste holds great cultural significance for the majority of southern residents, many of whom migrated or are members of families who migrated to the south in search of more secure and higher-paying work opportunities. Most residents still have extended family who live in the north, and they, themselves, journey north annually during the Christmas holiday. Men and women who were raised in the north speak with fondness about childhood meals filled not only with maize but also an abundance of fruits and dairy products. They especially recall growing their own corn to make *tortillas* and raising their own livestock to make cheese and cooking fat. Childhood memories of ample and diverse foods contrast with descriptions of scarcity and a lack of variety among contemporary foods. As Rafael, an eighty-nine-year-old man, explained, “La vida antes era muy pobre, pero uno come bien” (Life before was very poor, but one ate well). In Costa Ricans’ foodways discourse, the northern part of the country is mythologized as a place of plenty, where a food as ubiquitous as pinto must have emerged. One man said that pinto is a “costumbre de campesinos” (a peasant custom). This statement carries particular weight when spoken in Costa Rica, because most southern residents know only wage labor, compared to other regions of the country where subsistence agriculture continues. Linking pinto to peasantry codifies it as a traditional foodway both horizontally over space and vertically through time, because the statement suggests that pinto grows out of informants’ own family histories as peasants in the north.

Additionally, informants explain that Nicaraguans also eat pinto and cite their consumption of the food as added evidence that the food originated in northern

Costa Rica. I propose, however, that Nicaraguan foodways may have followed a path similar to those of Costa Rica. Like Costa Rica's Caribbean coast, Nicaragua's coast is inhabited primarily by people of African descent (called *garífuna*) whose culture links more closely with the Caribbean than with the dominant national culture.¹² In all of the written collections of northern Costa Rican foodways that I consulted, pinto rarely emerged as a prominent meal, if it was recorded at all (for example, see García Murrillo and García Brinceño 1976). At the same time, in many recipe books of Afro-Costa Rican foodways, pinto, called also by the English name "rice-and-beans," headed every list.

The meal of rice and beans is often included in written historical works in connection with life on Costa Rican banana plantations. In her folk history of Costa Rica's Atlantic coast, Paula Palmer quotes an informant who says that, in the early part of the twentieth century, the white Costa Ricans who lived in the United Fruit Company's camps took on black customs, including cooking preferences (2005:134). Later, she cites another individual who lists the foods that were prepared at large, group holidays and events; rice and beans appeared first on the list (2005:180).

Pinto is also mentioned by author Carlos Luis Fallas in his famous autobiographical novella, *Mamita Yunai* (1957), which chronicles his life working on banana plantations on Costa Rica's Caribbean coast in the 1920s. Much of the book consists of dialogue written in slurred, informal Spanish and occasional Caribbean English: "—En la mañanita le decimos'a la Pastora que nos mande el 'gallo pinto' con el *guacho* de Azuola—le dije, tranquilizándolo" ("In the morning, we said to the Shepherdess that she must send us the gallo pinto with the kitchen helper from Azuola," I said, taking it easy) (138). Like other texts, Fallas's novella does not focus on foodways. Therefore, the author's inclusion of pinto in the cultural landscape of the Caribbean coast demonstrates the meal's ubiquity in daily life as early as the first part of the twentieth century.

When I asked southern Costa Ricans about regional versions of pinto, they strongly differentiated their version from that of Afro-Costa Ricans, describing Afro-Costa Ricans' practice of cooking with coconut milk as strange. Unlike residents of Costa Rica's Caribbean coast, for whom coconut products are important ingredients in nearly every recipe, southern Costa Ricans rarely use them. Such a regionalized practice becomes ordinary in light of a national perspective of varied pinto recipes. In the north, pinto is often toasted to a crisp and called gallo pinto. In the central highlands, where the capital San José is located, locals say only "pinto" and include plenty of oil to make the compote more moist. Some families cook with red beans, while others use black beans.

Many of my southern informants also mentioned that pinto was called *la burra* (a meal carried to work) on the southern banana plantations where they worked. With a smile on her face, one eighty-seven-year-old woman told me that she felt like all she ever said to her husband when they lived on the plantation was, "Voy a hacer la burra ya" (I'm going to make the burra now). In Fallas's novella, which is set in the 1920s, the author uses the same terminology to describe pinto in the Caribbean: "Corría la pobre Pastora repartiendo platos, y en medio de bromas y de risas iba desapareciendo la famosa burra: un plato de avena que era la extra que acostumbraba el cabo, el montón

de arroz y de frijoles revueltos y tostados que llamábamos ‘gallo pinto’ y los bananas sancochados” (The poor Shepherdess ran distributing plates, and in the middle of jokes and laughter the famous burra was disappearing: the extra plate of oats to which the foreman was accustomed, the mountain of scrambled and toasted rice and beans that we call “gallo pinto,” and the bananas parboiled) (1957:111). Fallas names Atlantic pinto as “la burra” in the same way that the workers on southern Costa Rican banana plantations did, which provides a compelling bridge between the Caribbean and the south.

Costa Ricans’ resistance to the connection between pinto, which they called a “natural” and “necessary” food, and the black population speaks to the persistence of racial prejudice. As documented in national censuses and in my own ethnographic fieldwork, most Costa Ricans categorize themselves as *mestizo* (of mixed Spanish and indigenous descent), though they commonly consider themselves to be the whitest of Central Americans. In Costa Rica, as in other Latin American countries, voices from the media and from the political and educational systems downplay race as a social category. Instead, they employ multicultural and neoliberal rhetorics to promote supposedly more neutral ethnic and class categories. I traveled to San José in the last week of August 2006 to speak with faculty at the Universidad de Costa Rica about the possible origins of pinto. Ironically, this was *Semana Cultural Afrocostarricense* (Afro-Costa Rican Cultural Week). At the same time that I encountered disbelief at the potential connection between pinto and the black population, I was surrounded by state-sponsored events promoting the important cultural role of Costa Rica’s black residents. Despite race’s departure from socially acceptable discourse, it appears at times in the most seemingly unmarked spaces—such as the breakfast table—to remind us that its power as an agent of discrimination exists despite recent attempts to render it invisible (Weismantel 2001).

Prejudice toward Afro-Costa Ricans intensified in the nineteenth century when ex-slaves prospered on banana plantations and began to move farther inland. These immigrants were pitted against lighter-skinned nationals in the press and were accused of taking money away from the national economy and shipping it back to the Caribbean (Chomsky 1996). The government even supported discriminatory policies when, in 1934, the United Fruit Company moved from the Caribbean to the south and refused to hire any black workers (1996:251–2). Now, nearly a century later, race is viewed by the latest generation of Costa Ricans as a nonissue, an erasure that itself is problematic, especially considering informants’ outraged reactions to my hypothesis.

Like all doxa, whiteness gains its power from its unquestioned, hegemonic presence. In his book, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, George Lipsitz writes, “As the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations” (1998:1).¹³ Nonetheless, as I have tried to demonstrate, doxa very quickly transforms into orthodoxy when individuals work to articulate the meaning of everyday practices. Since at least the nineteenth century, Costa Ricans have created an imagined community that marries nationalism and whiteness (Anderson 1983; Appadurai 1993; Molina Jiménez 2005). This vision excludes Afro-Costa Ricans from what Benedict Anderson would call “deep, horizontal comradeship” (1983:7)

and obscures them from public view and cultural memory. In his recent article, “Re/Making La Negrita: Culture as an Aesthetic System in Costa Rica” (2006), Russell Leigh Sharman documents this historical praxis through the example of La Negrita, the black Madonna and patroness of Costa Rica. While the icon was once a symbol of Afro-Costa Rican identity, beginning in the late eighteenth century, the dominant white segment of society appropriated the symbol to stand for nationalism and class concerns. The story of pinto may not be dissimilar to that of La Negrita. According to the legend that I cited earlier, pinto supposedly originated in San Sebastián, one of the southern neighborhoods of San José in the early 1900s. At this time, few Afro-Costa Ricans lived in the central highlands, and chances of the villagers or Don Barnabe being of African ancestry are slim. Instead, the readers of the article, and perhaps the writer himself, assume a white cast of characters who become affiliated with the famous dish. The plot’s focus revolves around a benevolent member of the elite who bestows gifts upon those below him. Little emphasis is placed, however, on the actual architects of the meal—the female cooks—who may have been black, as single Afro-Costa Rican women occasionally migrated inland and found employment as cooks in white homes. Like the statue and image of La Negrita, pinto may have been whitewashed to proffer Costa Rican nationalism and class matters. Issues of class mask those of race in Costa Rica, and national discourse has historically promoted social democracy and equitable relations between capitalists and workers (Paige 1997).

I cannot at this point in my research definitively name the Afro-Costa Ricans as the originators of pinto; however, I found *no* evidence that it began as a northern foodway, as many people claimed. Instead, the transfer of the United Fruit Company from the Caribbean to the south provides a likely conduit for the dissemination of pinto. This project is only in its initial stages. Future ethnographic fieldwork will focus on the Caribbean coast to learn the perspective of Afro-Costa Ricans regarding the social history of this dish. More investigation about life on banana plantations in the southern part of Costa Rica will yield information about the role of the United Fruit Company in promoting rice and beans instead of maize as the principal food.

At the outset of this research, I did not intend to write an article that focused on race; however, informants’ reactions to my foodways questions demonstrated the continued salience of race in the Costa Rican production of identity. While the historical particulars of a certain tradition are necessary for understanding the larger picture of a practice and how it relates to identity formation, perhaps more important is the discrepancy between informants’ statements about pinto’s origin and the secondary source material I collected. This case study demonstrates the benefit of gathering multiple lines of evidence in order to illuminate larger cultural issues that lie just beneath the surface.

Informants’ responses also allowed me to begin to understand the difficulty we all have in translating practice into discourse and how quickly we rely on preexisting discourses, such as tradition. Our trust in tradition is not always wrong, and it is often very comfortable. Unless someone forces us to delve further into our memories, we rarely place mundane practices within their historical, political, and economic contexts. That has been my goal in this investigation of the social history of rice and beans in Costa Rica. As new foods and ways of preparing them enter the culinary imaginations

of consumers, people invent new traditions of eating (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Aging Costa Rican parents and old grandparents ate maize daily as children, but they raised their own children on rice and beans. Foods and their concordant practices are inherently flexible (A. James 2005). As one generation gives way to the next, old foodways sink into the folds of memory and are replaced by new traditions and invented familiarities. In southern Costa Rica, I suggest, gallo pinto first became common, then it became familiar, and finally, it became a traditional food.

Notes

This article developed from a paper that was given in October 2006 at the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society. Since then, other articles that investigate the topic have appeared: Varela Q. (2007) and Vega Jiménez (2007).

1. I began fieldwork in southern Costa Rica in the summer of 1998. Subsequent field trips took place in the summer months of 2001, 2002, 2004, 2005, and 2006, and eighteen months from March 2007 to August 2008. Though I did not narrowly study foodways during all of these trips, my culinary interest motivated numerous conversations and the continued collecting of food-related material.

2. The Spanish phrase “gallo pinto” does not literally translate as “fried rice and beans.” Informants have offered two explanations of the dish’s name. First, it is said that the colorful mixture of rice and beans looks like the speckled (painted) feathers of a rooster or chicken (*gallo*). Second, the phrase “¿Quiere un gallito?” (Do you want a bite of food?) is common among Costa Ricans, and it is suggested that the name gallo pinto may derive from, “Do you want a little bit of mixed food?”

3. Translations from Spanish to English in this article are my own, unless otherwise noted. All informants’ names have been changed to pseudonyms to protect their identities.

4. Doña Emily’s words impacted me greatly as a listener and an ethnographer, prompting me to write this article on the use of tradition. Of equal importance, however, is whether she creates new meanings for herself as she speaks, as Elaine Lawless would suggest (1993). Unable either to recreate the interview moment or to query her now, I instead examined the remainder of Doña Emily’s interview. During interviews, “food talk” has for me often served as a gateway to more intimate topics. Following her talk of pinto, Doña Emily spoke about teaching her daughter how to cook; however, she quickly transitioned to a narrative in which she described her hopes that her daughter would get an education and a job, without becoming pregnant and taking on the additional work of being a mother and/or a wife. It may be, perhaps, that this talk of everyday practice and tradition spurred Doña Emily to tell of her plans to disrupt this cycle by encouraging her daughter not to become like herself, someone who cooks pinto for breakfast each morning.

5. Pinto, however, is often mentioned in texts that do not focus on foodways. In an article entitled “Being-in-the-Market versus Being-in-the-Plaza,” Miles Richardson writes, “At noontime, at one of the market’s small restaurants—which is only a counter, five stools, and a name, ‘The Gardenia’—a comfortable-looking man is eating a dish of rice and beans topped with a fried egg” (1982:427). In another article, this time on anti-Americanism, Lester Langley includes foodways as a component of “experiencing” a culture. He writes, “It is not enough to speak the language, go out into the boondocks and teach people how to read and write, or live on rice and beans just to show that one is willing to eat what they eat” (1988:86). Finally, Marc Edelman records that in 1988, during a rural strike by maize growers in the northwestern town of Santa Cruz, supporters of the strike brought gallo pinto to the strikers for nourishment. He writes that it “had been prepared that morning and that by then tasted ‘bitter and horrible’” (1990:748). The inclusion of rice and beans in these texts suggests that the meal has achieved ubiquity among observers, who see it as an ordinary component of Costa Rica’s cultural landscape.

6. Historian Judith Carney has written an excellent history of rice that traces the grain and its subsequent foodways from West Africa to the Caribbean and the American South (2001; see also Carney 1996). In particular, she notes that Western historians have portrayed Africans as incapable of the sophisticated

process of domestication and diversification needed to adapt rice to West Africa's varied environments (2001:36). Instead, they assumed that rice had traveled across Arabia or had arrived with the Portuguese explorers, and they doubted the dynamic role African slaves played in the transmission of foodways to the Americas. Carney presents material data that show parallels in the cultivation, processing, and cooking of rice between West Africa and the Caribbean. Based on such evidence, she calls for a conceptual change, a shift from viewing "rice as an export crop" to seeing a "rice culture" (2001:81). Viewing the cultivation and milling of rice as a specific knowledge system will lead to a better understanding of the movement of people, materials, and ideas over the course of the Atlantic slave trade and thereafter (2001:81). See also Coclanis (1993).

7. At the 2006 meeting of the American Folklore Society, a colleague brought to my attention that rice and beans is not called "moros y cristianos" among Puerto Ricans, who serve the two side-by-side, not mixed. Variations in rice-and-bean mixtures can be found among countries and within national borders, as occurs in Costa Rica.

8. Far from Costa Ricans' views of rice and beans as an everyday, local dish, Richard Wilk argues that, in Belize, rice and beans began as foreign, luxury, or holiday fare when it entered the historical record in 1895. Its ingredients—red kidney beans, rice, salted pigtail, and coconut milk—were imported, despite a local abundance of black turtle beans, and they represented a cosmopolitan identity, Wilk shows (2006:101, 121, 141).

9. Throughout this article, I use the term "Costa Ricans" to refer to people of mixed European and indigenous American descent, while I employ "Afro-Costa Ricans" to indicate people of African or mixed African and Costa Rican descent. These usages follow local practices. I have avoided prefacing "Costa Ricans" with such modifiers as "white," "Hispanic," or "national" because they are not frequently used there.

10. Wilk found similar results in Belize, where female domestic workers moved from rural to urban locations, male and female cooks sought employment at plantations, and workers learned new foods that they brought home with them when the work ended (2006:111).

11. Interestingly, Brazilians proudly attribute to slave culture their national dish, *feijoada*, which consists of black beans, rice, and various animal parts (Pilcher 1998:154; Fry 1977). As Lindsay Hale explains, Roberto DaMatta describes the food as "gustatory miscegenation" (Hale 1997:411 n. 9).

12. Future research on my part will incorporate a social history of Nicaraguan pinto. In his ethnography of Atlantic banana plantations in Costa Rica and Panama, Bourgois (1989) notes the migration of many Nicaraguans to Costa Rica plantations on both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. The genesis of the Nicaraguan consumption of pinto may be in their encounter with it on the plantations.

13. In Costa Rica, the common use of the unmarked term "Costa Rican" (to refer to those of European or mixed European and native descent) and the marked term "Afro-Costa Ricans" (to refer to those of African or mixed African and European/native descent) reflects this privilege. As I explained above, I have used the local style of racial and ethnic terminology in this article.

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