

Black Cookstove: Meditations on Literature, Culture and Cuisine in Colombia

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Black Cookstove, first published in 2007, and recently translated into English, provides readers a window into the culinary landscape and history of the Cauca River Valley, on the Pacific coast of Colombia. Patiño's main argument is that the Cauca region is heavily influenced by African culture, which is evident in its cooking tradition. He explores cooking practices departing from the novel *María*, written by Jorge Isaacs and published in 1867. Patiño also incorporates references from travelers' chronicles and commentaries written in the colonial period and early nineteenth century. Cooking, according to Patiño, is an essential element of culture, and it is cooking through which he demonstrates the process of transculturation in a Colombian region. Transculturation implies the mixing of different cultures to produce a new one. In this region, as in many other parts of Latin America, Spaniards, Africans, and Native Americans mixed and created a culture that is shared by all according to the author. The process of transculturation was not a peaceful one, as it was the outcome of wars, slavery, and violence. However, each group tried to survive and adapt to the region and in that way contributed to the formation of a unique culture.

Enslaved Africans and Afro-descendants had a major impact in culinary practices since they were in charge of growing crops, fishing, butchering, gathering fruits and wild plants, and provisioning. Among Afro-descendants it was women who played a central role as they were in charge of cooking as well as raising children, both white and black, and preserving their music, dance, and culture. As Patiño notes, Afro-descendants represented the majority of the population by 1789, when a census of the Popayan regions revealed that of the 64,463 inhabitants, 41,484 were black and of those 12,241 were enslaved. Slaves represented the main workforce in *María*, as this institution pervaded in the Cauca Valley until 1852. Patiño highlights that although *María* portrays an idyllic world in which

slaves and masters coexisted in relative harmony, Isaacs was aware of, and denounced the iniquities of slavery. So even if female slaves are portrayed merrily preparing a traditional dessert called *dulce de leche*, which implied constantly stirring the thick mixture, they knew that any mistake could result in physical punishment.

Patiño highlights the abundance and availability of food in the Cauca region. Food was always plentiful so even the poor did not experience hunger. Corn, yucca, and fish were the main ingredients of this cuisine. The Spaniards brought beef, sheep, goats, and swine. Cows were particularly valued. Cows produced milk used to prepare a wide variety of foodstuffs, such as cheese, butter, and dulce de leche. Sugarcane encountered an ideal environment to thrive in this region, and of course slavery resulted in great profits for masters. Spaniards also brought fruits, especially citrus, along with vineyards, olive groves, and other vegetables like onion and garlic. Plantains and coconut, basic foodstuffs in African cuisine, played a central role in the food of the Cauca River Valley too.

Catching fish, as well as hunting wild animals and butchering them, were tasks in which only men participated. Men were in charge of cooking outside after fishing or hunting. If the master was leading the hunt his male slaves butchered and roasted the meat. Slaves also had to hunt bears and jaguars if they were eating the master's cattle. For slaves, hunting was indispensable and dangerous, whereas for masters and landowners it was almost like a sport. Fish was an everyday staple due to the challenges of raising cattle in this climate. Beef was scarce and consumed jerked in most cases. Salted beef was a common ingredient of Chocó, a stew that included plantains and yucca. This stew, also called *sancocho* or *ajiacó* was prepared with other vegetables like winter squash and also with other meats. For instance, bocachico fish or rabbit sancochos were common during fasting as priests did not consider them meat.

A central dish in *María* as one could expect is *ceviche*. Patiño refers to its unclear origins. Some authors claim its Incan origin while others describe it as a Creole hybrid because it includes Hispanic lemon and onions as well as local ingredients. Isaacs also includes dishes with a strong African origin, such as *fufú*, which was a common meal at the time. *Fufú* is a dough made from green cooked plantains that today is called *bala* in Tumaco and green banana *mote* in the Colombian Caribbean. Nowadays it is referred as *jujú* in the Cauca Valley and prepared with ripe plantains. *Fufú* is very similar to a tamal, which Afro-descendants wrapped in banana leaves instead of corn husks. Chefs of *fufú* came to prolong cooking the dish to find a better texture and even replaced corn with green plantains – as is the case of the *piangua* tamal of the Colombian Pacific or rice in the Chocóan –, and also used coconut water as binder of the corn batter as in the Guapi tamal. Plantains were the daily bread in the kitchens of *María*, cooked in multiple forms: green, partially ripe and mature, processed as flour, or eaten raw.

Black Cookstove reveals the culinary world of the Cauca River Valley, and traces back its origin to the culinary traditions of Spain, Africa, and pre-Columbian societies. Using *María* as primary source, Patiño analyzes the provisioning and cooking practices dominant in the region and reveals the contributions of Afro-descendants, both enslaved and free, who represented the majority of the population in the area. Patiño's work contributes to the studies of food and race in Latin America by showing the importance of Afro-descendants in the creation of what we currently identify as local and national cultures. At the same time, his work illustrates how literature can help us understand daily practices in the past, particularly those related to foodstuffs and foodways left out of official records.