



Craft-Artisanal Agri-Food, Identity and Culture in Salvatierra, Guanajuato, Mexico

KEYWORDS

Craft-artisanal agri-food, identity, culture

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ABSTRACT

The focus of the paper is craft-artisanal agri-food production in Urireo, Salvatierra, Guanajuato, Mexico. Food production is analyzed as a space for the construction of personal and community identities. It is emphasized that food is a space for the analysis of different aspects such as techniques, production, distribution, consumption and transportation. Moreover, it is a space of the preparation and development of social, cultural, culinary and worldview elements of those who participate in the cooking, consumption and sharing of food.

Re-thinking handicrafts

The Dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy (2014) defines the term handicraft as a social class consisting of artisans or as the art or work of artisans. The etymology of the word-craft, derived from the Latin words "artis-manus", which means *art with the hands*. Handicrafts comprises, in this sense, works or pieces manually made with little or no intervention of machines. Most of the time handicrafts are decorative or commonly used objects.

In reviewing the literature on the conceptualization of handicrafts, it was found that different authors consider handicraft works as functional and manual and linked to the culture of the community that creates them. According to UNESCO (2007, para. 1), artisanal products are:

Those produced by artisans, either completely by hand or with the help of hand tools or even mechanical means, as long as the direct manual contribution of the artisan remains the most important component of the finished product. Handicrafts are produced without restriction in terms of quantity and using raw materials from sustainable resources. The special nature of artisanal products derives from their distinctive features, which can be utilitarian, aesthetic, artistic, creative, culturally attached, decorative, functional, traditional, symbolic and religiously and socially significant (para. 1).

Handicrafts are recognized as one of the forms assumed by folklore to represent the set of creations of a community. Furthermore, this definition says that handicrafts are based on tradition and are an expression of cultural and social identity of those who make them. These works are not only part of a tangible heritage (as a product), but also of an intangible heritage (in terms of traditional artisanal techniques, transmission of knowledge and artisans' skills, etc.).

When the inhabitants of Urireo in Salvatierra, Guanajuato, Mexico, which is where data was collected during January and June 2014, were asked about local handicrafts they emphasized the transformation of raw materials, for instance, for the making of foods and traditional sweets or desserts such as *ate de guayaba* (guava jelly/jam), sweet potatoes, preserved fruits, jams and peanut and milk candies among other products. Participants also underlined the importance of handmade tortillas as their town, Urireo, Salvatierra, is well-known for it. Food production is a craft-artisanal agri-food activity. This was the participants' shared

and consistent social representation of crafts. This reminded us the text Mexican Cuisine Praise (De Orellana et al., 2012), which describes the process of how Mexican food became part of the list of the World Cultural Heritage. This title was provided by UNESCO on November 16th in 2010. This declaration describes Mexican cuisine as an essential part of the cultural identity of the country.

Edgar Morin (2012) states that the heart of every culture is its cuisine. López (2012) agrees with Morin and argues that it would be difficult to disagree with such a brilliant knower of Western thought whose concerns have aimed to unravel and understand the physical and metaphysical scope of the act of preparing and tasting food. This topic has been a constant concern because of its multidimensional scope related to human creativity as a deep root of art. It is a fact that the preparation and enjoyment of food have been fundamental in each civilizing process (López, 2012). Food making has multiple psychosocial functions in Mexico. Therefore, in this paper, we have decided to give this process a name and a last name. *Artesanías* (craft-artisanal) is its name and *agroalimentarias* (agri-food) its last name.

Herrera and Ruiz (2012) warn us that linguistic sources and Institutions responsible for the registration of information do not have the term "agri-food" registered. The closest idea, perhaps, could be to describe the artisanal way to create as a productive practice by specific social sectors in territories that persist in the outer margin of progress. Since handicrafts are usually made in the countryside or in rural areas through manual techniques and with little industrial technology, this activity is perceived as obsolete and old-fashioned. Also, it is usually associated with backwardness. Warman (1982) says that our roots in the past, which sometimes are considered outdated and obsolete are identified with what is rural, provincial, rustic and with "the non-modern." In its radical versions, modernization can become a racist argument when "symptoms of backwardness" are described as inherited characteristics and especially as people's inherited characteristics.

Social and productive practices represent the starting point to describe the evolution of the most basic manufactures of mass production processes. Primary producers and processors experience technological and commercial situations that make it difficult to find partners within the business chain. Agri-food producers face multiple difficulties just as those

artisans that work on other handicrafts areas such as in the basketry and textiles sectors. Artisans deal with different problems such as lack of training and informative programs, discrimination against and exclusion, lack of recognition and social prestige, intensive long hours of work that affect their health and very low incomes.

With regards to agri-food production, for example, traditional cuisine in Mexico is described as a comprehensive cultural model comprising farming, ritual practices, old skills, culinary techniques and ancestral customs and ways of community behavior. The State of Guanajuato as well as in the rest of Mexico different groups of cooks and other practitioners of the culinary tradition can be found; they are responsible for crops and traditional cuisine. Their knowledge, techniques and skills are an expression of community identity. Their work has strengthened social ties and the sense of identity at the local, regional and national levels.



Picture 1: Tortillas made in Urireo.

Source: The photographic archive of the research group.

The Urireo town, which is where this research took place, is located in the southern part of the State of Guanajuato and it is in the Municipality of Salvatierra. The production of tortillas in Urireo started long before the Spanish conquest. Significant knowledge and material and cultural values have been constructed and transmitted by families with indigenous ancestry. Currently, the production of handmade tortillas in the community is threatened by factors such as the socio-economic and cultural influence from other places; male migration to the United States; disinterest of young people to continue with this activity; high costs and lack of institutional support. This implies not only the loss of knowledge about the handmade tortillas making process, but also the loss of socio-cultural values related to corn and tortilla itself. There is no school that can replace the skills learned by those women who know how to make tortillas. It is in the process of doing or making that these skills are acquired and developed.

Methodology

This research followed a qualitative ethnographic methodology, where participant observations, field journal, audiovisual material, document analysis and unstructured and semi structured interviews were used. The latter followed a thematic guide based on the aims of this research. Food sellers and makers were interviewed.

Results and Reflections

The findings of this study in Urireo, Salvatierra invite us to think about the concept of handicrafts as a broad, diverse and plural concept without ignoring the etymological and conceptual meaning of "artisan."

Summary of some of the findings:

- 1) In Urireo, Salvatierra there is an outstanding agri-food production, which we have referred to as craft-artisanal agri-food.
- 2) The shared social representation of handicrafts is associated with food production which raw material is processed. In most cases, this process is done with traditional techniques and traditional instruments.
- 3) Most food makers are not recognized and named *artisans*. Instead, they are given the name of their occupation: bakers, merchants, sweet makers, and others.
- 4) There are exhibitions and sales of the craft-artisanal agri-foods made in the town.
- 5) Craft-artisanal agri-foods are a broad space of meanings that help analyze cultural diversity and contemporaneity. Also, they are a symbolic world that feeds the stomach and people's culture.

Conclusions

Studying emblematic and distinctive elements in Salvatierra has allowed us to approach people who build their everyday life on their occupation(s), for instance, on the craft-artisanal agri-foods production. These products are spaces for the construction of personal, social and community identities. In addition, craft-artisanal agri-foods are a space for the preservation of culture, history and present; present that has its roots in a rural past and food agri-culture. This is a space of analysis related to techniques, production, distribution, consumption, transportation and the preparation of cultural, social and culinary elements. Moreover, it is a space for the preparation of the cosmopolitanism of those who make, consume and share agri-food.

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