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Traditional Andean Food, Tourism and Place: Defining the New Geography of the Quebrada de Humahuaca (Argentina)

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Abstract:

In recent years we have witnessed a growing interest in the consumption of distinctive food products associated to particular geographical and cultural origins. This represents an interesting topic from a geographical perspective since the current process of defining places based on food consumption practices (either by resident or tourists) are associated to the recovery of cultural and "geographical" differences.

This article examines the valorization process of place's specificities involved in the production and consumption of typical Andean products and preparations. The research focuses on a specific place: Quebrada de Humahuaca, Northwestern Argentina, a peasant farming area where pre-Hispanic techniques and products are still present. The analysis performed includes the material and symbolic aspects of this transformation process and the multiple actors involved in them. In order to do this, we analyzed empirical secondary data (statistical information, official tourism brochures, etc.) and we also used primary data from qualitative interviews with producers, technicians, tourism entrepreneurs, tourists, and experts involved in public policy design.

The article shows that the processes under analysis re-signify this place both at a national and global scale. They also make it "competitive" through economic and socio-cultural valorization of some of its attributes. These were the purposes of the public policy designed as an instrument of rural development. Nonetheless, the paper concludes that despite the intention to encourage the production of traditional Andean food as a way of raising incomes, this strategy does not translate into the improvement of local people's living conditions as intended by public policy.

Keywords:

[traditional Andean food](#), [tourism](#), [place](#), [Argentina](#)

Traditional Andean Food, Tourism and Place: Defining the New Geography of the Quebrada de Humahuaca (Argentina)

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Presentation script

Introduction

In recent years we have witnessed a growing interest in the consumption of distinctive food products associated to particular geographical and cultural origins. This represents an interesting topic from a geographical perspective since the current process of defining places based on food consumption (either by residents or tourists) is associated to the recovery of cultural and "geographical" differences.

In this paper we consider the processes through which a place is defined and redefined according to these new trends about producing and consuming culturally specific and "localized" foodstuff.

This topic has been widely discussed among scholars and it encompasses two main issues:

a) The increasing number of local food systems associated to production and distribution of specialty food products. This is related to new "niche products" aimed at satisfying specific market needs that respond to an interest in quality and uniqueness (the so called "quality turn"), associated to:

- i) changes in lifestyles and food preferences (issues related to healthy food, low fat, organic, authentic products and the conditions under which products are obtained) and also associated to
- ii) new preferences in tourism consumption (the valorization of food and typical cuisine considered authentic, traditional, exotic).

In this context the connection among culture, geography and food, (sometimes associated to labels that certify these connections), gives new value to food commodities and help to differentiate them from standardized products (and tastes).

b) At the same time, some governments and organizations intend to transform the production of specialty food products into experiences to promote local development (as an alternative way to generate incomes for small farmers and local population).

There are many previous experiences especially in Europe and North America that have inspired Latin American attempts to achieve development through this strategy. One of them is the current valorization of traditional Andean foodstuff in Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador and Northwestern Argentina. These crops are highly valued because of their nutritive

conditions, the large number of varieties of each species, the ancient techniques and knowledge employed in their production, their historical, ritual and heritage value.

To sum up, we have, on the one hand, an interest in some goods that can be associated to some places and cultures, and, on the other hand, these experiences of small scale production connected to traditional foodstuff. These are two sides of the same process that valorize uniqueness, tradition, geographical and cultural origins.

Purpose

The paper examines the valorization of some qualities of place ("geographical difference") involved in the production and consumption of typical Andean foodstuff and cuisine presented by government and organizations as an alternative strategy for achieving local development. The research focuses on a specific place: Quebrada de Humahuaca, Northwestern Argentina, an indigenous peasant farming area where pre-Hispanic techniques and products are still present.

Methodology

To do that, we have analyzed empirical secondary data (official documents, development programs reports, newspaper's articles, tourism brochures, etc.) and we also used primary data from qualitative interviews with farmers, NGOs practitioners, tourism entrepreneurs, tourists, and public policy agents.

Case study: Quebrada de Humahuaca, brief characterization

Quebrada de Humahuaca comprises many small urban locations and wide rural areas at the Río Grande valley (near the border of Argentina with Bolivia). Over its history, this area was occupied by different pre-Incan societies, briefly by the Incan Empire, by the Spanish Empire, and it has also been the arena of armed conflicts during Argentina's independence fights.

Small -scale agriculture and cattle raising were historically main economic activities in the region, carried out mostly by indigenous peasant population.

During XXth century the area has also become an important national tourist destination.

In the 80's and 90's the region experienced an economic crisis that affected local labor markets. As a consequence job opportunities diminished and local population living conditions began to decline.

In this context, the process we want to analyze here began to develop: the place is under a tourist and agrarian re-valorization. So, what are the main aspects of this process? what are the associations among Andean culture, geography, typical foodstuff and local development in Quebrada?

Traditional Andean food: promotion, tourist consumption and new alternatives for development in Quebrada de Humahuaca

a) Traditional Andean food as tourist attraction

Tourism has recently experienced a remarkable growth at Quebrada evidenced by an increase in the number of tourists and the improvement of tourism industry (mainly business in accommodation and food sectors owned by entrepreneurs that came from other places in Argentina). This growth has been promoted by provincial and national governments since tourism was intended to become an alternative strategy to overcome the economic crisis that had been hitting local population. And as part of this strategy the site was proposed for inscription on the World Heritage List (it was finally inscribed in 2003).

Besides its pre-Hispanic and colonial past as well as some ancestral practices still performed by local population, one of the main tourist attractions is traditional foodstuff: maize, potatoes, oca, yacon, quinoa, kiwicha, llama meat, etc, and the way they are prepared in different dishes (locro, humita, tamal, empanada, etc).

The consumption of Andean food is part of the tourist experience in Quebrada. Traditional agricultural products have been progressively incorporated into the menus in local restaurants in the last decade. But the traditional versions of Andean dishes were reinvented to create a new "gourmet" cuisine (that includes refined and more sophisticated and exclusive dishes). This strategy looks for satisfying an exigent tourist demand interested in local flavor combined with an avant-garde touch. This new Andean cuisine was invented by chefs that refer to themselves as the rescuers or saviors of these products and preparations considered at risk of disappearance. So, for tourist entrepreneurs the use of these ancient, typical, native crops and dishes was an opportunity to create exclusive, more targeted and sophisticate products.

So these crops are highly valued from a tourist point of view and they are increasingly consumed, but, most of the products employed in local restaurants at Quebrada come from other places. Andean potato and quinoa come from Bolivia, llama meat come from Puna. They come from outside the place where they are consumed as "local", traditional products.

So let's take a look to the agricultural production at Quebrada.

b) Recent changes in agricultural production at Quebrada de Humahuaca

During XXth century Andean crop production had considerably diminished as a result of some processes, namely massive emigration of peasant population, and expansion of vegetable production oriented to regional market. Due to this situation and the condition of Quebrada as a Word Heritage Site, rural development programs launched by national government (in association with NGOs) and some international organizations started encourage local farmers to recover traditional Andean crops to generate both the insertion of small farmers into niche markets (in hopes of higher profits), and its tourist commercialization (through local cuisine offered in restaurants at tourist destinations). What is assumed here is that the promotion of local agriculture would be related to income increase and the improvement of living conditions for small farmers.

Induced by NGOs and government intervention some farmers' organizations were formed. These organizations have been working on the improvement of some varieties of Andean potato crops and on llama meat production.

They try to differentiate their products promoting them as healthy, natural (ecological) food, strongly associated to their own culture, their heritage in an effort to reinforce their identity. We can see the way they present these dried mashed potatoes that one of the organizations sells. But, this foodstuff is not only a mean to obtain incomes; they use it for

political purposes: it is a tool to affirm an indigenous identity and to claim their rights (especially land rights). The symbolic significance of food is associated to these claims.

There are also some initiatives to generate its tourist commercialization. For example, one of the most important local cooperative (Cauqueva) has created the "Peasant Life Museum" and a restaurant where products and traditional dishes are offered. Some cooperatives have also promoted their products in local and international fairs and events.

However, farmers and organizations still have some problems to exploit niche markets. It is difficult for them:

- (i) To create enduring alternative food supply chains;
- (ii) To increase production (they have problems to replace vegetable production by traditional crops, to improve the irrigation infrastructure needed to grow these crops, and to overcome sanitary problems associated with these crops)
- (iii) To compete with cheaper production that comes from Bolivia where some of these crops are produced at large scale (that is why local restaurants buy Bolivian products).

As we have said, this place transformation was intended to bring development. Both tourism and agrarian transformation were conceived by public policy as strategies to improve local living conditions. So far, it is not possible to say that the benefits of these transformations in Quebrada are addressed to local population. If we consider agrarian production: local population provides knowledge about crops and techniques, they risk their production to try new crops, they provide the "cultural content" of food products and the "local colour" to complete the tourist portrait of Quebrada as an indigenous traditional destination, but they are not the ones receiving the benefits of this transformation. Tourism is not a solution either: tourism business was developed mainly by people from outside Quebrada. Employment opportunities have increased but labor seasonality, low wages and undeclared work are very common in tourism labor market.

Conclusion

Our final comments concern some ideas about place transformation through the valorization of traditional food at Quebrada de Humahuaca and the relevance of geographical differentiation in this process

a) This process of tourist and agrarian re-valorization of Quebrada cannot be understood without taking into account some global processes. Indeed, Quebrada is transformed in relation to some processes occurring at global scale. The increasing refusal to the mass productions systems in agro-food industry, the interest in consuming not standardized, traditional, vernacular food (sometimes as part of a tourist experience) and the emergence of local food systems are key elements to understand the relevance acquired by local crops that had been abandoned during the XXth century.

So, how these ideas about geographical differentiation as part of a strategy to create more targeted products and tourist attractions were put into practice at Quebrada? What were the results? What happens at local scale?

b) Following previous experiences in other places or countries, differentiated and localized products and forms of organization were promoted at Quebrada as a way to obtain alternative incomes for peasant farmers. NGOs professionals and public agencies staff,

chefs, tourism entrepreneurs, tourists and experts from international organizations (most of them from outside Quebrada) encouraged and led this transformation process.

Although this process was promoted from "outside", indigenous peasants' organizations have also actively participated in it. In some cases they have created cooperatives and farmers associations and started growing these crops to obtain a new source of incomes. However, the structural problems concerning production and commercialization of these crops became serious obstacles to develop this strategy.

So, Quebrada is being redefined as an agrarian and tourist place; it is a place where traditional food started to be produced and consumed. But this appeal to geographical differentiation is still not a solution to the problems faced by local population.

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