

Foodscares, foodfields and identities in Yucatán	Titulo
Katz, Esther - Autor/a;	Autor(es)
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criminals' (p. 12); 'of the hundreds of Santa Muertistas whom I've interviewed and chatted...' (p. 142). From the point of view of an anthropologist, the book has the ambition to rely on ethnographic methods, particularly interviews with devotees, paraphernalia shop owners, and altar keepers like Doña Queta in Tepito, Mexico City. Yet, the data is scattered and the reader feels a times lost in the unordered accounts and fragments of interviews, which flattens the material and makes it difficult to assess when the informant or the writer is speaking. In-depth interviews, even a life-story of Doña Queta, who is an eloquent and generous speaker herself, and more detailed material would have been appreciated here. Much has to be explained about the circuits through which the belief spreads, and the way it blends into different geographical and social settings.

The chapters continuously switch among topics and chronological lines; that makes it difficult to find a central argument across the book. Some additional editing should have been used, especially to avoid repetitions. All in all, the book echoes much of the perspective and information already available in newspaper articles, blogs and documentaries circulating in the Internet since the early 2000s, which to a certain extent glamorize the devotion. But the Santa Muerte involves more than a ('powerful') miracle worker. Central questions remain open: to what extent is Santa Muerte an expression of narcocultura? If so, how could the 'criminal' saint come out in the open? And what does this tell about a context of collapsing institutions and expanding violence in present-day Mexico? Further research is necessary to unpack the symbolism of Santa Muerte both as a religious icon and as a cultural phenomenon, and the way devotees switch among systems of belief, combining both dominant and emerging expressions.

José Carlos G. Aguiar, Leiden University

**Note**

1. Lévi-Strauss, Claude (2001 [1978]), *Myth and meaning*, London: Routledge.

– *Foodscapes, Foodfields and Identities in Yucatán*, by Steffan Igor Ayora-Diaz, (CEDLA Latin American Studies 99), Berghahn Books, 2012.

Steffan Igor Ayora-Diaz proposes to look at 'the emergence of regional cuisines as a strategy to defend heterogeneity against the homogenizing power of nationalist ideologies'. Through three-hundred highly documented pages, he illustrates the originality and particularities of Yucatecan cuisine in contrast to Mexican national cuisine. He also analyses its link to identity as well as the transformations it is going through at the crossroads

between the local and the global and the private and public spheres. The political nature of Yucatecan food is the guiding theme.

This substantial book is the result of years of field and bibliographical research. The author certainly knows what he is talking about, as he is dealing with his own culture. He has not only observed Yucatecan food and foodways, he has also savoured it with all his senses, and cooked and shared it with friends. But he has also been able to perceive it from a more distanced point of view, since he spent several years studying and doing fieldwork abroad, and was struck by the changes in the city's 'foodscape' when he returned to Mérida, the capital city of Yucatán. His narration is personal and vivid.

The first chapter, offering a stimulating counter-opinion, is dedicated to the national/regional opposition. Mexican national cuisine is usually considered as representative of the whole country, and regional cuisines a variant of it. I must admit that, doing fieldwork in the State of Oaxaca where the cuisine is fairly close to the national one, I took this assertion for granted. But the case of Yucatán seems to be different. Ayora-Díaz shows us that Yucatán is not just a region of Mexico. The peninsula did not become fully integrated into the nation-state until 1848, and Yucatecan elites were never subordinate to the capital city. They had direct contacts with Europe, the Middle-East and the Caribbean at large, from Louisiana to Venezuela, and especially with Cuba. Yucatán received migrants from all these countries, as well as cultural and culinary influences. Its food is thus quite different from Mexican national food, which is actually representative of Central Mexico. Mérida inhabitants cook, for instance, Lebanese dishes, only consumed in restaurants in Mexico City. Moreover the national ideology enhanced the indigenous heritage from the Aztec empire, so the dishes with indigenous roots are the most emblematic ones of the national cuisine, but this is not, according to the author, the case of the regional Yucatecan cuisine. He describes it as the cuisine of the urban elites, omitting the cuisine of the indigenous, rural and urban lower-class population. National cuisine has of course also received foreign influences, which were taken as exemplary at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a period when indigenous foods were still despised (Bak-Geller, 2009).<sup>1</sup> The Yucatan elites who valued the cosmopolitan influences and minimized the indigenous elements of their cuisine remind us of the ideological position of the Central Mexican elites at that time. This may be why Ayora-Díaz does not track the history of Yucatecan cuisine before the nineteenth century. Yet Yucatecan food has been different from Central Mexican food since prehispanic times, while ingredients introduced at the colonial period are common to Spanish Amer-

ica, such as the citrus and spices cited by the author (not only Asian and Middle-Eastern but also typical of the Arab-Andalusian cuisine). Politics and identities are definitely at the heart of this chapter.

The second chapter is dedicated to the Mérida foodscape, followed by chapters on Yucatecan cookbooks and gastronomy in the process of institutionalization. This city has grown tremendously within the last twenty years, attracting tourists and migrants from other regions and countries. While mainly local food was offered until the 1980s, 'Mexican' and foreign restaurants of all kinds have appeared since then. In restaurants run by Mexicans from other regions, Yucatecan dishes are given a central Mexican touch which is unacceptable by local criteria. The type of food presented in the new-style Yucatecan restaurants has also changed. To appear more typically local towards tourists, some restaurateurs have reduced their menus to a few specific Yucatecan dishes such as papadzules and cochinita pibil, while eliminating others altogether. Recently published cookbooks and regional creations of haute cuisine have done the same, and this has, in turn, influenced local society. Ayora-Diaz elaborates the difference between the 'foodfield' of 'cuisine' and home cooking, and the 'foodfield' of 'gastronomy' cooked in urban restaurants and disseminated in cookbooks. In both fields, the Mérida foodscape is at the stage of innovations, representations and tensions, where power and identities are expressed.

This elaborate and original work brings new elements of reflection not only in the anthropology of food, but in anthropology at large. As a bonus, it is very pleasant to read. I strongly recommend it.

Ester Katz, Institut de recherche pour le développement (IRD)

**Note**

1. Bak-Geller, Sarah, 2009, 'Los recetarios "afrancesados" del siglo XIX en México. La construcción de la nación mexicana y de un modelo culinario nacional', *Anthropology of Food*, S 6, <http://aof.revues.org/6464>.