International Seminar on Visual Framing of Food Technologies
Wageningen University, 16th-18th of October, 2019.

Milton Fernando Gonzalez-Rodriguez
Participant Researcher,
Peripheries Project
Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis
University of Amsterdam
mfg1@hi.is

Consumable Indigeneity: A Visual Strategy in the Promotion of *Natural* Products

Introduction

In a time where digital spaces become the ultimate platforms to search for information about specific topics, it is not strange that concepts and notions are arbitrarily, or at least, oddly clustered according to algorithms, preestablished criteria or simply synonymity or resemblance. Soon after I started my research about the portrayals of indigeneity in cinema and other media outlets, I couldn't help noticing that the figure of the Indigenous constantly and consistently appeared in many other contexts, being food and natural medicines one of them. I came to realize how common it was to entwine the notion of indigeneity with the promotion of organic, nature-oriented, and above all, healthy consumable goods. Accidentally, I became routinely exposed to the branding strategies deployed to promote *native* berries, grains, seeds, potatoes, plants, extracts, herbs, and even snacks – including chewing gum.

In this paper, the underlying premise is that widespread assumptions about Indigenous epistemologies are manipulated to increase the marketability of items destined for human consumption. By applying and deploying specific visual strategies and by adding strategic visual codes in the creation of advertisement ads, posters, social media videos, and food/medicine packaging designs, certain food products are indigenized. In this sense, this paper is a contribution to discussions about *nutritional primitivism* (Knight, 2008), and critical assessments of the processes by which Indigenous knowledge is contextualized and framed. Attuned with observations about the symbolic connotations of food (Ferguson, 2004), I review the centrality of stereotypes in the visual framing strategies used to promote *Indigenous* consumable goods.

Numerous posts on social media platforms and websites confirm the connection food producing companies make between terms such as 'native', 'Indigenous', 'ancestral', and concepts such as 'superfood', 'properties', 'healthy diet', 'eco-friendly', and most commonly 'natural'. Central to this presentation is to offer an assessment of how the notion of indigeneity in its various forms is consistently, although not coherently, used as a visual reference in the promotion of certain types of food products. Although the main focus lies at exploring this phenomenon as it appears throughout Latin America, I include few examples from other regions. I posit that rendering indigeneity as part of a chain of consumable items is a global phenomenon embedded in cultural, historical and economic processes. Visual promotion material in various forms (i.e., advertisement ads, posts, videos, short films, posters) is the main object of study, along with a 501-entry corpus of comments posted by consumers of Indigenous products on digital platforms (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube).

Theoretical Framework

Food has been approached from a historical and political standpoint (Ferguson, 2004), in connection with gender (Counihan, 2009; Kahn, 1998), as an identity marker linked to social interaction (Gewertz, 2010; Wilk, 2007), and in general, as a part of material culture intrinsically

linked to daily rituals and practices (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002). The routine, mundane and yet indispensable role food plays in daily life explains the emotional, and sensorial relation humans have with edibles, but also the importance of branding in the creation of products that seduce and convince consumers. The aesthetic component of food and its impact, in this case, on shoppers, is as important as the values that it elicits. Ideas about the content of food, the technology used in its production, its origin, and the various meanings attached to the various types of consumable goods explain why framing food products visually requires positioning these items as gastronomical, palatable, but also, ideological and cultural artefacts. Fruits, seeds, grains that are framed and branded as ancestral, native, pre-Columbian and hence natural, powerful, authentic and pure, ultimately make references to notions and ideas commonly held about Indigenous lifestyles now, and especially Indigenous eating practices imagined to have been the norm before colonization took place.

The visibility of indigeneity is linked to cognitive and mnemonic processes intrinsically linked to cultural background (Ouweneel, 2018). Ideas and preconceptions about a specific social group, and ethnicity, or a specific identity, even if it is informed by imagination, rather than facts, materializes in preconceived ideas linked to a set of characteristics that operate at various levels (Leersen, 2007). Ethnotypes (i.e. stereotypes about ethnic groups) are sophisticated, specific sets of idealizations, both negative and positive, about an imagined or perceived Other. Ideas about Indigenous communities, either modern societies, or ancient civilizations, reflect historical processes, established assumptions, distorted discourses and incomplete information that eventually make up the mental schema that the term *Indigenous* elicit in us. This appears to apply also to derivatives of the cultures in question, being food one of them.

Based on 12,000 data points, the figure shows (Figure 1) the mental schema of ideas and markers entwined with the synonymous Indigenous/native/ 'Indian' across Latin America. Soon enough it becomes evident that there is a tendency to believe pre-Columbian identity is related to nature> wilderness> eco-friendliness, but also to purity> free-spirituality> wisdom> special powers (Gonzalez Rodriguez, 2019).

Figure 1. Mental Schema of the term “Indigenous” (Gonzalez Rodriguez, 2019).

Terms such as rural, farmer, and authenticity are equally applicable to the notion of indigeneity, and in this sense, they align with conclusions drawn by Knight (2018) about the tendency to idealize and contextualize indigeneity in terms of food production and technologies. In many ways, consumable goods that are not considered to be modern or Western are easily linked to claims about health-enhancing properties (Loyer & Knight, 2018). More than ever before, in the last decades, “the marketing of native foods reflects and reinforces the notion that indigeneity is a category that exists outside of the cultural” (Craw, 2008, p. 55). In many ways, it becomes a notion easily applicable, attachable, malleable, and flexible enough to decorate, complement, enhance and legitimize the promotion of food that elicits certain values among its possible consumers. Authenticity, purity, naturalness, greenness, freshness, healthiness are all qualities that become easily aligned with the notion of the indigene.

An imagined origin is linked to assumptions and sensitivities closely related to concerns about its locative dimension and origin. Imaginaries and ideas about food are closely linked to preconceptions, expectations and anxieties about specific geographical places (Anderson, 2010). Ideas about the landscapes where these products grow and are manufactured contribute to their positioning within specific foodscapes (Fraser, 2017). Visually, Indigenous cultures, ornaments, languages, and settings (landscapes) become referents that legitimize and enhance the connection between ancestry, tradition and perceived naturalness/naturalness.

Methodology

In order to approach these images, I have primarily applied a stratified content analysis and an imagology approach. The content analysis was identified as a suitable methodology to critically review advertisement ads, posts, videos, short films, and posters used in the promotion of food branded under the umbrella of the term Indigenous. Concomitantly, an imagology-oriented approach (Leerssen, 2007) was applied to contextualize the creation of images where stereotypes and preconceptions about native societies materialize in visuals carefully tailored to link certain lines of products and the notion of indigeneity.

After reviewing 35 companies dedicated to the production of so-called ancestral, natural consumables and superfoods, the emerging pattern was the connection producers make between origin, type of product and visual codes to promote their brands. The companies were selected based on their digital footprint, active use of social media platforms, number of followers and visibility. Throughout Latin America, it was possible to distinguish 4 strata: Andean Region (Inca Civilization), Mexican Region (Aztec and Maya Civilizations), Amazon Region (Various ‘tribes’) and Unnamed Indigenous Landscapes, a series of locations allegedly, imaginatively and inspirationally related to unnamed extinct Indigenous civilizations. Central to the subsequent discussion is to review how food technologies are promoted using as referent widespread assumptions held about pre-Columbian civilizations, similar to processes observed in Australia (Knight, 2008) and New Zealand (Craw, 2008) regarding imaginaries about pre-colonial food practices. In most cases, the practices are indexically linked to specific geographical places.

In terms of the effect of these health-enhancing products among consumers, this study limits itself to assess how consumers relate with these products, not the accuracy or veracity of these claims. Cyber-ethnography (Madden, 2017) was used to create a 501-entry corpus of comments posted by consumers of Indigenous products on digital platforms (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube). By documenting the reactions of the consumers of the products to the advertisement and promotional material used by the various food companies, it was possible to make inferences about the way in which visual framing actually operates among the aiming audiences. In total, 35 digital promotional episodes were documented, one from each of the companies being analysed. By episode, I refer to the actual posting of an image, the reaction of consumers, the interaction between consumers and producers, and the discussion between consumers.

Results

Without exception, visual framing strategies of natural Indigenous products are linked to specific geographies, and historical references about pre-Columbian practices. Claims about growing and harvesting traditions are added to images of raw materials lying on pieces of soil, often still covered in mud, piled up in a disorganized fashion, exposed to the sun, outside, in the vicinity of green fields where human presence is imperceptible. Inclusion of pictures of the crops where the products allegedly grow, and images of the finalized item ready for consumption is a common strategy. In the case of products destined for local markets, artisanal, poorly elaborated pseudo-infographics are deployed as part of the introductory phase of a new product. Complementary explanations, advice and list of health-enhancing properties in fonts written in earthy colours apparently encourage consumers to consider the innovative aspects of the product. At the same time, the Indigenous origin, sense of ancestry, and homage to tradition induced by visual references such as drawings, use of Indigenous languages, emblems and symbols induce the viewers to consider these products are directly connected with the figure of the Indigenous. Indigenous emblems include drawn faces of natives wearing pre-Columbian attires, animals decorated with items commonly assumed to imply Indigenous legacy, patterns used in traditional clothing still worn by self-identified Indigenous communities, and images of landmarks closely related with pre-colonial times.

Across the Andean region, images and references to the mountains, old ruins built by Inca civilization (i.e., Machu Picchu), are comparable to the use of Maya ruins in the promotion of consumables grown in the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico. In both cases, members of modern Indigenous communities wearing traditional clothes are also present(ed) in promotional visuals. Brazilian companies frame their food products mostly by appealing to the cluster of ideas that relate the Amazon Basin with notions such as ‘mystery’, ‘powerful’, ‘Mother Earth’ and ‘wisdom’. Images of tropical landscapes covered by dense vegetation dominated by exotic trees and covered by unruly, massive forests are widely used to promote products fruits, seeds and herbs. Drawings of naked Indigenous peoples wearing feathers, decorative facial and body painting and barefoot represent a state of mind and being that is unrelated to industrialized, civilized, and standardized urban lifestyles. Use of Indigenous languages is widespread among the companies self-promoting themselves as producers of natural food products. With few exceptions, their names are in Amerindian languages, follow the spelling rules of languages such as Quechua, Mayan or Tupi, and are distinguishably transformed into logos that convey the notion of simplicity, rurality, exoticism and primitivism.

The concept of superfood (i.e., Spanish/Portuguese *superalimento*) is directly linked to the peculiar, unrivalled properties of those fruits, seeds, vegetables and grains grown in specific places, and preserved by ancient civilizations that managed to stay healthy for centuries. Visually, the images used to promote superfoods appeal to widespread ideas and myths about ‘lost’ healthy practices and diets embedded in the knowledge of pre-Columbian societies. The captions and texts that accompany the images are often warnings about the importance of turning away from ‘modern’, ineffective eating patterns. Concerns about overweight, health issues, and environmental problems are also used as rationale for the need to include this series of products in modern diets.

With few exceptions (N=4), consumers agree with the claims made by the companies promoting the products. In many cases, digital platforms become spaces to exchange assumptions about these products, and contribute to the information provided by the food producers. Once the advertisement ads are posted, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube comments often surround around elevating the health-enhancing qualities of the product, and its benefits (N=304). They also serve as didactic and disseminating tools to ‘spread’ information about additional properties not mentioned in the ads (N=105). Many consumers thank for the information being provided, and hope there are more similar products in the making (N=88).

Discussion

In many cases, the figure of the Indigenous almost-extinct *Other* and her/his lifestyle are framed in the context of survival, rarity and extraordinariness. The notion of superfood is central in the creation of products that are legitimized by the belief that they are comparatively much healthier, purer, more wholesome and more nutritious than other food products. Indigenous origin or connections to native communities serve mostly an ideological purpose. Visual elements that operate as references to millennial societies imply the products are safe, come directly from nature and are consumed since before ‘modern’ times. As Craw (2008) observes, the need to look for new diet models outside more ‘standard’ food technologies explain, among other reasons, the emergence of nutritional primitivism.

The branding strategies and visual framing tactics deployed in the promotion of Indigenous-inspired food products is based on the assumption that those who are in harmony with Mother Earth and know her best possess knowledge(s) the rest of us don’t. Use of plants, lush landscapes, ruins, flowers, rudimentary alphabets, tribal decorations all contribute to create a sense of earthiness. Indigenous legends provide contextual references that metaphorically contribute to create a sense of historicity while strengthening the notion of ancestry, heritage and tradition. The Argentinean agricultural cooperative Viva el Monte, for instance, uses the image of Zapam Zucum to allude to the Indigenous deity that jealously protects nature, and in specific, the prosopis tree (Spanish: algarrobo) (*prooposis algarrobilla*), often associated with the European/Middle Eastern carob tree (*ceratona siliqua*).

Similarly, languages are used to secure that the visual elements are complemented with a phonetic, sounded equivalent that enhances the difference between these brands and other European-sounded names. This confirms the need to take distance from Western technologies, lifestyles, means and methods of production, and food practices. For instance, Wipala Healthy Snacks from Ecuador explain in their promotional ads that *wipala* means flag in Quechua, and that the seven-coloured flag (i.e., their logo) symbolizes Andean culture, its philosophy and solidarity among people. This practice is also observed in Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

Concerns about poor diets that lead to overweight and health issues increase the popularity of food products that are credited to possess unrivalled health-enhancing properties, are sugar-free, organic, and fit with vegan, vegetarian and gluten-free diets. Although there are not images of exposed torsos or highly sportive models, the image of green landscapes seems to convey the notion that ‘natural’ food products could never be fattening or cause any harm. All along, the notion of simplicity is maintained and iconically supported by images where unruly nature dominates.

Discussion patterns elicited in the recollection of 501 digital entries posted by consumers on social media platforms show they recognize the claims made by the food producers. The fact that they add new properties to those already mentioned in the advertisements indicate they had previous assumptions about the product before they saw the actual image. A close analysis of the comments made by the consumers leads to conclude that the images visually embody preconceived ideas about the power of Mother Nature and the knowledge of Indigenous communities surrounding certain types of fruits, herbs and vegetables.

Prices are important topics of conversation in the thread of messages that follow a picture used for promotional purposes of popular items (e.g., specific types of quinoa or rare combinations of local and imported goods). For many, it is important to know how much these products cost and to make statements about the benefits of eating ‘local’ and ‘ancestral’, as opposed to ‘modern’, not only from a health perspective, but also from a financial viewpoint.

Ironically though, many of the companies’ primary markets are in the United States, Europe and Asia. Superfoods are visually branded as Indigenous-related consumables, and are widely sold outside Latin America, using as main premise, precisely their exotic origin. Food packaging of those products destined for foreign markets are mostly attuned with notions of cosmopolitanism and

primitivism. Images of exotic settings, references to awe-inspiring rites and alluring decorations are used to fabricate the idea that native communities are somehow connected to the product in question. The main difference between exported goods and those consumed globally is that the former ones are framed around communities living in the geographical space where the product grows, whereas in the latter case, the references allude to extinct civilizations.

Conclusion

Rare plants, herbs, fruits and trees are common references in illustrations, impressions and moving images that serve to promote natural products. Yet, a commonality among this category of goods is the absence of factual information about the food items. Visual cues are strategically deployed to insinuate that Indigenous/ancestral methods of production, preparation and consumption are free from the damaging effects of ‘modern’ industrialized approaches. In many ways, these images encourage viewers to consume what they suggest is their ancestral legacy. The encoding of the messages works as both consumers and producers make connections between contents of the products, Indigenous knowledge and health-promoting properties, specially supported by the notion that these consumables are part of century-old traditions. Some of the food items promoted by companies specialized in organic products offer better prices than comparable consumables believed to have less good impact on human health. According to the reaction of consumers on digital spaces, anxieties and concerns about contemporary food technologies explain the rejection some of them show to notions of massification, overproduction and recentness. A link between the products in question and *unpolluted* native communities allegedly legitimize claims about their purity, freshness, healthiness, effectiveness and wholesomeness. All along, visual and textual references to Indigenous knowledge(s) are used to legitimize the products in question.

References

- Anderson, E. (2010) “Food Cultures: Linking People to Landscapes.” In *Nature and Culture*, Sarah Pilgrim and Jules Pretty, eds. London: Earthscan.
- Counihan, C. (2009) *A Tortilla Is Like Life: Food and Culture in the San Luis Valley of Colorado*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Craw, C. (2008). The flavours of the Indigenous: branding native food products in contemporary Australia. *Sites (Palmerston North, N.Z.)*, 5(1), 41–62.
- Craw, C. (2012). Gustatory Redemption? *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies*, 5(2), 13–24. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcis.v5i2.87>
- Ferguson, P. P. (2004) *Accounting for Taste: The Triumph of French Cuisine*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Fraser, A. (2017) *Global Foodscapes*. New York: Routledge.
- Gewertz, D. and F. Errington (2010) *Cheap Meat: Flap Food Nations in the South Pacific*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gonzalez Rodriguez, M. F. (2019) *Histrionic Indigeneity: Ethnotypes in Latin American Cinema*. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam (Doctoral Thesis).

Kahn, M. (1998) ““Men are taro” (they cannot be rice): Political aspects of food choices in Wamira, Papua New Guinea.” In *Food and Gender: Identity and Power*, Carole M. Counihan and Steven L. Kaplan, eds. Amsteldijk: Harwood.

Knight, C. 2008. “The Food Nature Intended You to Eat’: Nutritional Primitivism in Low-carbohydrate Diet Discourse”. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Adelaide, South Australia.

Leerssen, J. (2007). Imagology: History and method. In M. Beller & J. Leerssen, *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters* (pp. 17-32). Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Loyer, J., & Knight, C. (2018). Selling the “Inca superfood”: nutritional primitivism in superfoods books and maca marketing. *Food, Culture & Society*, 21(4), 449–467.

Madden, R. (2017) *Being Ethnographic*. London: Sage.

Mintz, S. and C. Du Bois (2002) “The anthropology of food and eating.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 3 (1): 99–119.

Ouweneel, A. (2018). *Resilient Memories: Amerindian Cognitive Schemas in Latin American Art*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press.

Wilk, R. (2007) ““Real Belizean Food’: Building Local Identity in the Transnational Caribbean.” In *Food and Culture: A Reader*, 2nd edition, C. Counihan and P. Van Esterik, eds. New York: Routledge.

Wilk, R. (2006) *Home Cooking in the Global Village: Caribbean Food from Buccaneers to Ecotourists*. London: Berg.

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.