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Semiotic food, semiotic cooking: The ritual of preparation and consumption of *hallacas* in Venezuela

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Abstract: The purposes of this paper are, first of all, to present a model of semiotic ritual in food consumption, and, second, to carry out a general analysis of the rites of preparation and consumption of the traditional Venezuelan Christmas dish known as hallaca, a particular kind of tamal well known in most Caribbean and Latin American countries. Our ethnographic research is based on the observation and participation field method, during which we have taken photographs, held interviews, and had discussions with actors involved in this family ritual. We have also taken advantage of our own thirty years of experience as direct participant actors. In its first part, this paper presents some theoretical and conceptual definitions that guide us through the analysis. Hallaca is not only a strong symbol in historical and contemporary Venezuelan culinary culture but it is also a living expression of a particular syncretic mixing of semiotic and culinary elements and cultural traditions. We conclude that, as a whole, semiotics of food will benefit from a ritual and symbolic approach to what is done before, during, and after cooking and consuming food. Our analysis shows as well that hallaca preparation and consumption is not only a matter of gathering and having fun but a strong, deep rooted way of expressing, communicating, and renewing profound values and beliefs among family members.

Keywords: rite, culinary, food, semiotics, identity, syncretism

It is not only the act of eating that is fundamental, it is also the ceremony implied by preparing and sharing food. The ritual ceremony performed around the table is an act of profound and ancient religious signification.

– Laura Esquivel (2007 [1998])

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Hallaca is not only a singular dish of the Venezuelan cuisine but a ritual around which all family members reunite in an exemplary communion that prepares all of them for Christmas celebration.

– Angel Rosenblat (1973)

1 Introduction

Since the beginning of human experience, preparation of food has been one of the most enduring tasks of individuals and groups thriving with a vital necessity of nourishment in order to have enough energy to cope with the hard struggles of everyday life. With social and cultural changes into more organized societies, with more and more knowledge, technological resources, and new ways of obtaining different kind of food, its preparation became more and more sophisticated. In the history of human societies, change from the perception of food just as nourishment to that of nourishment and pleasure is a huge shift in social organization. These changes included not only the development of culinary strategies in order to make the consumption of food not just the answer to a physiological necessity, but the quest for pleasure derived from a refinement of taste. These modifications were possible because people were able to go beyond eating raw food and beyond just basic cooking techniques like boiling, roasting or frying. By going into new steps, people were also able to mix types of food like meat and vegetables, which enhanced different kinds of flavors.

But one of the greatest steps in cultural and social development took place when people transformed nourishment in a social and cultural phenomenon, and not just in a matter of replacing body energy or enjoying tasty food. From the moment in which people began to use the family gathering for eating as a means of communication that supposed not only exchange of information, but also a way of creating and reinforcing beliefs and values, they also simultaneously, systematically, and deliberately created culinary rituals.

2 Culinary rituals

The following analysis is based on the observation and participation in the ritual of preparing the Venezuelan classical Christmas dinner dish known as *hallaca* in the city of San Francisco, state of Zulia, Venezuela. In doing so, we have observed and participated in the preparation and consumption of *hallacas* at the

same family home during December 2011 and December 2013. Selection of these two periods would facilitate the determination of possible changes. The family members are parents, three children and four grandchildren. Usually, at least seven people participate in the whole process of selecting ingredients, cleaning, boiling, and cutting plantain leaves, cooking meat and vegetables, preparing dough, and filling and wrapping *hallacas*, which lasts at least two days. Preparation is usually made two days before Christmas.

As in many other ritual systems, in culinary rituals it is possible to find basic elements that are substantial to this kind of symbolic behavior. First of all, gathering for preparation and consumption of food suppose the co-presence of actors, with clearly defined roles (cook, host, guests); second, time (Christmas) and space (home) are specific to the observed family ritual; third, food (*hallaca*) is the main symbol; teaching, practicing, and reinforcing of family and social values are essential to this culinary practice. Even though there is no strict formality, we see that there are rules and roles clearly established in a way that everyone knows what their duties and responsibilities are.

Preparation and consumption of *hallacas* is an inclusive activity since it implies the participation of all members of the family and, sometimes, even neighbors that will get a number of *hallacas*, according to their participation and efforts. Once the preparation is over, the *hallacas* will be saved for Christmas dinner. Before beginning the analysis of the corpus we have chosen, it is necessary to present some theoretical and conceptual remarks in order to place the two rituals, preparation and consumption, in a broader context.

3 Food as a basic component of many rituals

It is well known that food is a basic component of many rituals, not only as part of celebratory ritual, but even as part of funeral ones. In *Wayuu* ritual and cultural tradition, for example, the eating of domestic animals during long days of the dead body wake is extended to the post-wake, since animals are offered to the wake participants for them to take home and have, days later, for a meal in honor of the deceased person (Finol 1999). Food is not only a material thing placed at the level of human necessities, but also a strong, extended and well-expanded symbol, where many of the most relevant values for a particular society are expressed. In that sense, food is a semiotic object that condenses powerful meanings accepted as such by community members. No wonder catholic mass is based in a sacred process named transubstantiation, by which a symbol of food, originated in Jesus' last supper, is transformed, according to believers, into the very real body of Christ himself.

Anthropological definitions of symbols stress various important characters. Turner (1969), for example, points out that symbols have three characteristics: condensation, unification of different referents, and polarization of meanings. Lewis (1988) criticizes Turner's view of symbols as a discrete unit, and seems to agree with Firth: "There are strictly speaking no symbolic objects, only symbolic relationships" (In Lewis 1988: 33).

In semiotics theory, symbols are a particular type of sign whose totality, signifiant + *signifié*, becomes a *significant* for a new, general, *signifié*. If, as Eco (1994 [1973]: 191), says, "signs are a *social force*, and not just instruments that reflect the social forces," then symbols are a special kind of sign, equipped with dense, powerful, and efficient social force; facts that guarantee what Lévi-Strauss (1958) called *symbolic efficacy*. Later, Eco (1986 [1984]: 162) will call the symbol a "*textual modality*, a way of producing and of interpreting the aspects of a text." According to Lotman (1996 [1987]: 145), symbols are memories of culture ("There is always something archaic in symbols"; they "represent one of the most steady elements of the cultural *continuum*"); and they also act mechanisms of unity within cultures.

In any case, food is generally accepted as a powerful symbol in different cultures, always where particularities arise. If, following Lotman's theory, we think of food as text we will be able to see how it embodies *memories* of the community that not only prepares, but in many cases, particularly in small rural villages, also participates in the production of components of daily dishes. These memories are relevant in the constitution and functioning of community culture. Also, food, as dynamic text, is known by the role it plays in given *continuity* and *endurance* to local community culture. That explains why, when processes of cultural contacts, mixings, and aggressions occur, the culinary system is one of the most resistant spheres on the whole semiosphere. Finally, culinary structures act as means of identification and unification. Even tourism advertising has noted how descriptions of foreign territories and cultures runs throughout description of local dishes.

As we shall see, *hallaca* is a potent symbolic instrument of union, identity, family, and social solidarity.

4 Food rituals

It is possible to view semiotics of food from three main perspectives:

1. Nourishment
2. Origin
3. Communication

The first perspective considers food from its natural function, which is nourishment. From this point of view, a semiotic analysis will try to establish the meanings of classification that nutritionists, according to the type of nutrients, have established: carbohydrates, proteins, fats, vitamins, minerals, roughage, and water. In that sense, we know, for instance, that vitamins in today's social imageries are prestigious, esteemed, and desirable; a semiotic conception that is a consequence of our quest for youth, longer lives, and beauty. So, nutrients are not just a fact of biochemical significance but they are, especially in the new mythologies created by social media, a matter of cultural values expressing a new way of life based in new world visions.

As semioticians we are also interested in meanings related to the natural origins of food expressed in five groups: vegetables, fruits, grains, dairy, and protein. In today's social imageries, for the same reasons pointed out before, fruits, for example, are prestigious and semiotically marked as euphoric. But as semioticians we are particularly interested in food systems as means of social and cultural communication. Parodi Gasteñeta (2002) says that "The gastronomic communication process is composed of an emitter or cook who transforms (codification) a recipe in a dish of food (message), mixing some ingredients in a particular formulation, at a special temperature, etc. (codes), which the guest (receiver) eats (decode) with all his senses." Certainly, *gastrosemiotic communication*, as he calls the semiotics of food, is a much more complex process than this scheme may suggest.

A list of communication subjects expressed in rituals related to food preparation and food consumption might be a longer one. Here there are some meanings easy to find:

- Reinforcing family and social ties: "Families who eat together..."
- Showing of cooking abilities
- Showing of social status
- Proof of appreciation
- Teaching the youngest
- Creation of a sense of belonging
- Exchange of information
- Creation of a sense of unity and identity
- Monitoring of family members activities
- Creation of a sense of protection and solidarity

5 Ritual sequences

But the culinary ritual is also a complex semiotic system, since in its performance many other small rites are included, be it before, during or after the main, central act of food preparation and consumption. Here we will focus on

the western family ritual food preparation and consumption, particularly with different kind of guests, and dissimilar from the everyday nourishment actions. In family ritual consumption with guests it is possible to point out at least the following sequence of rites and micro-rites.¹

5.1 Preliminary rites

Invitation → acceptance → welcoming of invited people → offering of presents → introduction of invited people to each other → drinking.

Invitation is a micro-rite that might be done verbally, personally or by phone, or by a written message, and belong to what Goffman calls *rites of presentation*: “Comprend tous les actes spécifiques par lesquels l’individu fait savoir au bénéficiaire comment il le considère et comment il le traitera au cours de l’interaction à venir” (1974 [1967]: 63). [‘This includes all specific acts by which the subject lets the beneficiary know how he considers him, and how he will treat him in the interaction to come’]. Acceptance is the corresponding ritual counterpart of invitation and is expressed in a typical courtesy code.

Welcoming people in our own home is an honor that guests should deeply appreciate, a fact that usually should be revealed by expressions of appreciation. Receiving people at home obliges hosts to a set of verbal and gestural expressions of sympathy but also requires even more emotional expression from guests who have been honored with such an invitation.

That is why most guests will offer some kind of presents to the hosts, which is a way of partial reciprocity, one of the rules that support and maintain social equilibrium, avoid conflicts, and foster values of respect and consideration. When some invited people are unknown to others, hosts must realize the ritual introduction in order to make all of them egalitarian members of the group.

Drinking is usually a micro-rite previous to consumption of formal food. This rite takes today a formal behavior, and has been established by a long tradition as composed by small amounts of liquor drinking. It is known in English as *aperitif*, probably taken from French *apéritif*, expressed in Italian as *aperitivo*, which is the same Spanish word.

5.2 Rites of food consumption

Assignment of places → description of dishes → invitation to eat → thanking → serving of dishes → protocols of cutlery use → eating → praise of dishes.

¹ For a more detailed description of food consumption sequences see Millán 1997.

The assignment of places is made by the host following at least three different criteria. On the one hand, there are hierarchical criteria, like the placing of the owner of the house at the front seat of the table. On the other hand, there are age criteria like placing the children far from the front seat or, in some cases, at a different table or at different moments. Some families will even serve food to the children before the adults in order to have them quiet and for the host to concentrate later in serving the adults. Third, there are civil status criteria like placing married or engaged/fiancées couples together.

Descriptions of served dishes, usually made by the host, will emphasize food quality, preparation skills, in some cases exotic or ethnic characteristics, etc. Rituals of food consumption may vary according to criteria of formality or informality, according to the status of the guests, and also according to the fact that the food has been cooked by the host or delivered by a restaurant.

Usually, guests will wait for the host's invitation to start eating, an action generally preceded by praises of the dish's presentation, one of the facts that the *new cuisine*, opposing *haute cuisine* and *classical cuisine*, have emphasized lately. In fact, if flavor was the main semiotic character of traditional food imaginaries, at the beginning of the 1970s² there has been a strong displacement toward food presentation. In that sense, taste as the main semiotic character of food has been undermined by a strong visual character, which, at the same time, is a reflection of the trendy visual dominance in contemporary social media. In this visual presentation, color, disposition, combination of solids and liquids, use of vertical dominance and food simulation of images of the world are part of this complex semiotic code.

Table manners will require from guests renewed thanking for the invitation and for the efforts made by the hosts in order to prepare the dishes, a semiotic redundancy of appreciation already expressed with presents brought to the hosts. Redundancy is one of the known features of rites whose aim is to underline and reinforce important aspects to be communicated by this symbolic action.

The serving of dishes is one of the most ritualized processes and there are two main aspects to take into account. On the one hand, the dish serving will follow a strict order in which hierarchical aspects will be respected: guests will be served before hosts, eldest before younger, and, in some places, men before women. On the other hand, dishes will also follow a strict order: appetizer, also known as *hors d'oeuvre*, in French, *antipasto*, in Italian, or *entrada*, in Spanish; main course; and dessert, to which French cuisine adds cheese and western

2 Nevertheless, the expression *nouvelle cuisine* is very old and, in fact, in 1742 French chef François Menon had published, "*avec approbation et privilege du Roy*," a book with the title *La nouvelle cuisine*.

people add coffee and/or digestive liquors. This classical scheme is always open to modification depending on tradition and creativity of different cultures. Regarding drinks, the classical use has been imposed all over the western world by European cuisine, where wine is almost a must. A practical aspect of ritual serving requires that when big plates are passed from one guest to another in order to have them serve themselves, the big plate should be passed from the left, a rule that takes into account the fact that most people are right handed.

Protocols of cutlery use or, in Lévi-Strauss' famous book (1978 [1968]) title *Manières de table*, are one of the most strictly coded semiotic actions. In fact, rules of table manners are taught to new family members as soon as possible to assure proper handling of food and social acceptance.

Other coded actions in eating events are aptly pointed out by Danesi:

- the order in which dishes are presented
- what combinations can be served in tandem
- how the foods are to be placed on the table
- who has preference in being served
- who must show deference
- who does the speaking and who the listening
- who sits where
- what topics of conversation are appropriate. (Danesi 2004: 200)

5.3 Goodbye

Thanking → offerings

Farewells are also coded actions that should be handled carefully by involved actors. In fact, while hosts must show how much they appreciate the presence, participation, good behavior, and joy of guests, these farewells must show appreciation and gratitude for having been invited. They must also praise, even repeatedly, the taste and quality of the food they have just eaten. Even if farewells might be regarded as a simple rite it implies a great deal of personal and social commitment since it allows finishing up the whole ritual.

At the moment of farewells it is usual that guests, explicitly or implicitly, offer the possibility of an invitation from their part, which opens the way to future reciprocity.

5.4 Reciprocity

Reciprocity is based, according to Goffman, is a set of symmetric rules by which “chaque individu a par rapport aux autres les mêmes obligations et attentes que

ceux-ci ont par rapport à lui” (1974 [1967]: 47) [‘every individual has in relationship to others the same obligations and expectations that they have in relationship to him’]. In that sense, reciprocity is a collection of semiotic actions whose aim is to match the appreciation between equals in a social relationship. In the same way that *Wayuu* Indians that are invited by a friend or neighbor to a wake and funeral of a dead family member acquire the obligation to invite that friend to the wake and funeral when a member of his own family dies (Finol 1999), the guests who have been invited to a dinner acquire an obligation towards those hosts that have invited them.

6 Rite, micro-rites, ritualized behavior, ritualization

One of the main difficulties when working with rite analysis is that this concept has been often used in overly flexible way, which sometimes leads to the wrong idea that almost all human action is ritual. We do not agree with that vision of ritual practices. We think that it is necessary to disaggregate the concept and develop new, more specific approaches to the various ways that ritual symbolic actions occur. For this research we agree with the following vision: “Rites, different from everyday life practices, introduce an interruption/separation in the day to day order; even if it is true that some micro-rites are practiced on a daily basis, in the social and cultural organization of everyday life, they also build up a marked practice that makes them different” (Finol 2009: 60). Nonetheless, it is important to add that the *ritual markedness*, in the traditional linguistic sense, means a symbolic quality, which leads us to the following definition: “A rite is a set of coded symbolic actions, articulated to specific times and space, with a corporal basis, that expresses values and beliefs of a group or community, whose purpose is to create and/or reinforce a sense of identity and belonging, and renew social cohesion and solidarity” (Finol 2009: 55).

We propose, then, to distinguish rite, as it has been already defined, from micro-rites, ritualized behavior, ritual and ritualization. We will call *micro-rites* small, non-complex symbolic actions, with a minimum level of autonomy, that are usually close to the everyday life and whose dimensions of density, symbolic power and transcendence are limited to a person or to a small group of people. Micro-rites find their origin in a) rites that have suffered a diachronical reduction of their components; b) ordinary behavior that has acquired some symbolic dimensions; c) reduced imitation of rites coming from other ritual systems that users do not fully know.

Ritualized behavior has been defined by Liénard and Boyer (2006: 814) as an individual practice, “a specific way of organizing the flow of action, characterized by stereotypy, rigidity in performance, a feeling of compulsion, and specific themes, in particular the potential danger from contamination, predation, and social hazard.” For us, *ritualized behavior* is a small set of pragmatic actions that sometimes, according to some contexts and individual communicative necessities, might acquire a temporal ritual function; it is placed between pragmatic and symbolic; in a sense, is a source of micro-rites since its development might lead to a more organized set of actions and to a denser, semi-structured symbols.

Ritualization is a process that, according to Grimes (1982: 36) happens “when meaning, communication, or performance become more important than function and pragmatic end, ritualization has begun to occur”; eighteen years later he added that ritualization is “a middle, or transition, category, a limbo zone... in which activities are tacitly ritualistic” (2000: 29). Ritualization occurred when men slowly made the progressive transition between pragmatic, physiological-oriented practices of cooking for *nourishment*, to diversifying a set of *types of food*, to developing a set of *taste codes*, and, finally (for now), to *symbolic and ritual* practices of preparation and consumption of food. This progressive transition was possible because men, little by little, were gaining and accumulating abilities to produce and control fire, developing technical skills for building cooking instruments, increasing their population, gaining access to new sources of food, etc.; all of this progress allowed men to have more free time, more leisure opportunities, and, consequently, more possibilities of symbolic enjoyment.

7 The *hallacas* family ritual

Our ethnographic work was carried out in the city of San Francisco (San Francisco municipality, State of Zulia, Venezuela) during the days of execution of this ritual in December 2011 and December 2013, where we used the method of observation and participation. For gathering information we also took photos, interviewed actors involved, and had discussions with members of the family. At the same time, we use our own experience gained during more than thirty years participating and performing the rites of preparing and consuming *hallacas*. It is important, as we shall see, to point out that this family gathering to prepare and consume *hallacas* is made once a year, at Christmas, a time framework that provides opportunity and pertinence to the rite as a whole, because, as

Lardellier says, “Noël permet durant un intervalle ritualisé de suspendre les logiques contractuelles et l’utilitarisme qui régissent de plus en plus de relations, pour réaffirmer le primat du symbolique, la très précieuse inutilité du ‘temps juste passé ensemble’, dans un monde productiviste” (2005: 53). [‘During a ritualized interval, Christmas allows the suspension of logical contracts and the utilitarianism that increasingly controls relationships, in order to enforce symbolic primacy, the precious inutility of “time just spent together” in a productive world’.]

7.1 Rites of preparation

7.1.1 Pre-rite activities

There is a previous phase to the preparation of *hallacas*. Family members place great importance on these pre-rite activities: selection and buying of ingredients, whose quality and freshness are essential to the preparation of this Christmas dish. According to them, “the secret of a good *hallaca* is the selection of good ingredients.” But we also know that “the semiotic functions of a dish go well beyond its ingredients, just like the meaning of a meal encompasses but transcends the various dishes on the menu” (Parasecoli 2011: 649) (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Pre-rites: Selection of “good, quality ingredients,” made by the pater familia (left: December 2011; right: December 2013). Photos by Beatriz Pérez.

This activity, done by the wife/mother, a daughter, and the husband/father, who leads all the preparation process, might be considered a *ritualized behavior*: it is a set of pragmatic actions (travelling to three different markets, evaluation and

selection of numerous ingredients, etc.), but it is also a behavior full of values and meanings since the father, according to his own words, is acting on behalf of family values, as a sort of *pater familia*, endowed with competence but also with representational, emblematic, capacities. In fact, he is the one in charge of supervising that everything is done “like always.” According to his daughter, “he’ll never allow to have a single *hallaca* without olives and without the proper quantity of meat fillings.”

7.1.2 Actual preparation

The gathering for preparation of *hallacas* is organized through informal invitations and it is carried out at the *pater familia*’s home, usually on the weekend previous to Christmas Eve. The selection of weekends as days of gathering will allow members of the family to be free from work and, consequently, to have more time for their participation in food preparation. Some two hundred *hallacas* are prepared in two days of work.

The preparation of *hallaca* includes seven main steps: cutting and preparation of plantain leaves, cooking of fillings (pork, beef, chicken, raisins, lives, caper, boiled egg, etc.), elaboration of dough, filling of dough, wrapping and tying, boiling. Usually these steps are done simultaneously by different teams of participants.

The cutting and preparation of plantain leaves, known in Spanish as *hojas de bijao* (*Culathealutea*), a plant from the *Marantaceae* family, is usually led by the wife/mother with help from other wives and her children. Leaves are boiled for three hours in order to clean and disinfect them. Then leaves, selected for being resistant and easy to fold, are spread with oil to prevent the dough from sticking to the surface (Figure 2).



Figure 2: A grandmother boiling bijao leaves (December 2013).
Photo by Beatriz Pérez.

Cooking fillings is a main step since their preparation is basic for taste. Our observed family will use meat of hen and chicken, which are previously washed thoroughly, seasoned, cooked and cut in fine pieces. Then it will be cooked together with vegetables and different spices. It is here where members of family will complain about difficulties in finding some of the products they need for preparing fillings of *hallacas*. This is also an opportunity for women to talk, exchange information about their family members but also about neighbors' gossip and, most recently, about government political and economic decisions. Political affairs seem to occupy, more and more, the subjects of family and neighbor's conversations, even at Christmas time (Figure 3).



Figure 3: The pater familia doing the same task and using the same utensils than two years before (December 2013). Photo by Beatriz Pérez.

But the ritualistic gathering helps to cope with general social conflicts as well as family members' differences and controversial political opinions. Time and space are here of great symbolic significance in order to avoid growing verbal and gestural conflicts. First of all, Christmas time, as they say, is a time of peace and love; and, secondly, “le repas de fête doit imposer une temporalité particulière, suspendre le cours ordinaire des choses” (Lardellier 2005: 46) [‘dinner celebration must impose a particular temporality, suspend the ordinary flow of affaires’], or, in Finol’s words (2009: 58), “ritual performance starts with a displacement, a controlled rupture, socially codified, from everyday time.” In the same sense, the household is a semi-sacred place, where polemic relations should be avoided, particularly in front of parents who should be granted consideration and respect.

The family founders of the household where we carried out our research are born in the small city of La Cañada, some fifty kilometers from San Francisco city, in the same state of Zulia. That is why they are known as *cañaderos* (gentilic for natives

of La Cañada), and, consequently, for their *hallacas* they have a particular kind of dough: instead of using corn they use *plátanos* or plantains (*Musaceae* family, *Musa* genre), which is a sort of big banana that traditionally might be consumed fried, boiled or oven cooked, and it is company to meats (pork, beef, chicken, etc.), where it takes the places that bread occupies in European cuisine. Dough for *hallacas cañaderas* is prepared with green plantains, which, according to family members, grant a much better taste and softness. But also, the use of plantains instead of corn is a strong symbolic link with the parent's origin, it is a way of building and keeping semiotic bridges between their old town of La Cañada and the new residence in San Francisco city, where they moved in twelve years ago.

Before filling the plantain dough, a small portion of such dough must be spread over the pieces of leaves of *bijao*. This step requires abilities to measure filling quantities for dough portion capacity, and to smoothly close the dough leaving no holes in it, otherwise it might break during boiling. It is also an opportunity to identify and please individuals' tastes and requirements, and, in doing so, an opportunity to make them embrace this culinary practice. In fact, parents, for example, will fill some of the *hallacas* with a bigger quantity of some ingredient because that is the way his or her son loves it, or, also, will eliminate one of the ingredients (usually onions) because grandchildren do not like it. As we see, this collective ritual will take into account individual requirements, which is a good strategy of making everyone happy about it. These small variations will have no disturbing effects on the effectiveness of ritual performance or in its values and purposes.

Wrapping and tying is a task that usually goes to male family members. Active participation of male members expresses the capacity of rites to break gender roles. In fact, in Venezuelan gendered culture, cooking is a role traditionally and actively attributed to women, and even though this kind of stereotype has been slowly changing, is still very strong in small towns and villages. Ritual contexts like carnivals allow men to disguise as women and vice versa, a well-known inversion of roles pointed out by Bakhtin (1993 [1941]). Here men, young and adults, participate willingly because they know that in this gathering they will not be mocked by other fellow men.

Once finally wrapped and tied, *hallacas* will be boiled for about one and a half hours. After that they will be hanged in order to let them drip and dry before going to the refrigerator, ready for consumption at Christmas Eve family dinner. A final step implies a testing of the first *hallacas*, an action that takes place at around 7 pm, and is a sort of reward for such long hard work that started at 7 am. According to one of the daughters, "My mother opens the first green plantain *hallacas* and she serves it to my daddy, then to us and to the grandchildren. They were just exquisite!"

All of these steps imply time-consuming, hard work, careful attention to detail, but they especially imply group participation under the direction of the *pater familia*: wife, sons and their wives, daughters and their husbands, grandchildren, neighbors, etc. Usually the chores of *hallaca* preparation are aroused with alcohol for adults and soft drinks for children. This preparation is full of micro-rites that are oriented towards make food a semiotic space of collective participation, in a sort of gradient ritualization towards the celebration of Christmas dinner.

7.2 Rites of consumption

Sequence of consumption follows like this: reheating of *hallacas* → serving in everyone's plate → consumption → drinking

As Parasecoli says (2011: 651) “the food signs that are included in the culinary semiosphere are always interacting with their context through signs and signals.” It is, thus, important to point out that *hallacas* are placed in a traditional food context. In fact, they are served with a specific traditional set of side dishes, which includes: hen salad, ham bread, and portions of cooked pork leg. From this traditional serving we have witnessed some variations, for example, instead of hen salad one frequently finds chicken salad, or cooked ham or turkey instead of cooked pork leg. These variations are usually related to family economic capacities but they keep a similar semiotic value: changes keep the basic elements of animal protein from poultry and pork.

Traditional dessert is *dulce de lechoza*, very tasty strips of papaya fruit, boiled, sweetened and seasoned with sugar, cinnamon, and clove. In the state of Zulia and other Venezuelan states it is customary that *dulce de lechoza* is accompanied with a similar dessert made of pineapple, *dulce de piña*, and both go with what is known in Venezuela as *manjar blanco*, a somehow tasteless dish made with corn starch, milk, and sugar. This triple combination results in a mixing of sweet and unsweet, in a delicious equilibrium of flavors. But also other traditional desserts are in use.

Different from a more formal dinner, consumption of *hallacas* follows, nonetheless, unwritten traditional rules where hierarchy is a dominant issue. According to this precedence code, first to be served should be the *pater familia*, and, generally, it is for females to serve males. Also, interviewed family members point out that at Christmas dinner they will use new attire, but it seems to us that this is a tradition more related to the Christmas time than to the proper dinner itself. For children, this tradition, together with receiving presents from *El Niño Jesús* (Baby Jesus) or from Santa, is one of the great attractions of the holydays.

7.3 A gift giving tradition

As Lehrer aptly says (1991: 392), “gift-giving appears to be a universal practice, with a semiotic of its own. In contemporary America, food and drink gifts are common, and there is an interaction of the two semiotic systems.”

If in Venezuelan and Latin American traditions the exchange of food is customary, in our case this tradition becomes a must. *Hallaca* needs to be exchanged; it is a particular Christmas present that it is offered to family members, neighbors, and to very special friends. Here *hallaca* becomes a potent symbol of reciprocity, a mechanism that will warrant strong family bonds, fluent neighbor relationships, and enduring friendships. We asked family members to whom *hallaca* should be offered as a present and they signaled “some neighbors and other family members.” After Christmas dinner the remaining *hallacas* will be consumed by family members daily until they are run out, a fact that usually occurs at the first week of January.

8 Food, identity, and syncretism

According to the great Mexican writer Laura Esquivel, food is one of the basic elements in shaping cultural and social identity: “You are what you eat, with whom you eat, how you eat, and the meaning which is given to what you eat” (2007 [1998]: 92). In her vision, food is a powerful structuring system not only in individuals and their families but also in national identity, an identity that relies more in what we eat than in national geo-political, arbitrary borders. In an accurate semiotic vision Esquivel points out that what it is important in culinary systems is the *sense* that actors, in specific contexts, give to the food they eat and to the way, place, and time of eating. Moreover, Esquivel is conscious of the extraordinary power of rites in the preparing and consuming of food as well as in social life: “Many people, like me, discovered that the new revolution will generate in the intimate world of rites and ceremonies” (2007 [1998]: 44); and then she adds “We shall promote and rescue rites. By means of rites we will recover the spirit” (2007 [1998]: 63). In the end, “the pleasure of the palate was secondary to that of coming together at the table” (Saint-Paul, 2010: 121).

Construction of identities is always made from pre-existent elements in a cultural process that has been defined as syncretism. In that sense, what characterizes a particular identity, always dynamic and bound to changes and adjustment, it is not the syncretic mixing itself but the articulation of particular elements and the specific way in which those elements are combined.

In today's industrial and commercial consumerism the *hallaca* might also be considered a commodity since there are small businesses that prepare this dish to be sold, and certainly there are families that do not prepare the *hallacas* that they will eat at Christmas dinner. And even if "all commodities can be used by the consumer to construct meanings of self, of social identity and social relations" (Fiske 1996 [1989]: 11), in the case of the San Francisco family Christmas dinner we are facing a different phenomenon since *hallacas* are not a real commodity because, strictly speaking, they do not have an economic value but a culinary and symbolic one. The subjects involved in the preparation and consumption of this culinary object will seek no pragmatic ends but symbolic ones; they will eat and enjoy the *hallacas* and will give it as a presents to loved ones.

In the case under analysis, preparing and consuming *hallacas* is a syncretic process in many ways. First of all, *hallacas* themselves are a mixing of European, American, and African elements (Cartay 2005), a fact that it is possible to notice, in the same order, in the filling ingredients, in the corn, plantains and leaves of *bijao*, and, finally, in the particular combination of what usually were leftovers of the slave's owners given as food to the African slaves. This syncretic quality is also expressed in the combination of three types of food: vegetables, meats, and minerals (salt). In some recipes various types of meats are mixed (poultry, pork, and beef), and various types of vegetables are also mixed. This syncretic culinary product is for the parents of the family we are analyzing, a powerful symbol that ties them to their native village, La Cañada, to their own parents and family members, but also to a time embodied in traditional practices that includes not only food but also music, celebrations, stories, and events.

Syncretic identity process occurs in two main contexts. Both rites of preparation and consumption of *hallacas* are surrounded, in a sort of macro-context, by a choreography of Christmas ornaments that occupies most of the common family homes spaces. Christmas tree, nativity representation, and different kinds of Santa representations are spread all over the living room, porch, and kitchen. Also, during preparation and consumption two particular kinds of music are played. First of all there are Christmas carols known in Venezuelan Spanish as *villancicos*, and secondly and more important there are *gaitas*, which is a folkloric expression, emblematic of the state of Zulia, and played only at Christmas time. *Gaitas* are performed by an ensemble of singers and musicians who play instruments like *cuatro* (chordophone, small guitar with four strings), *maracas* (idiophone, made of two hollowed pieces of a sort of small gourd with seeds inside), *furro* (membranophone, a sort of drum with a stick attached to it and rubbed to produce bass sounds), *charrasca* (scrapped idiophone, a copper tube with grooves cut around its circumference and played

with a big nail), *tambor* (membranophone composed of a hollowed cylinder and an animal membrane placed over it, and played with two sticks).

But also *hallacas* themselves are placed, as we said before, together with salad, ham, bread, cooked pork leg, etc. In this micro-context *hallaca* is the main dish while the other elements are just company to it. Outside this composed plate the traditional dessert, *dulce de lechoza*, will be served in another, small plate.

9 Family, rites, and belonging

Initial definitions of family are usually grounded in biological reproduction factors, first, and creation of consanguineous and affinity bonds, later. Also, sociologists have pointed out that family, as a social reality, goes beyond individual members, granted a life of its own, a sort of micro-universe with official acknowledgement by the state and religious sanctity attributed by most churches. In that context, “family” has become almost a sacred word, and words, according to Bourdieu (1998 [1994]: 129) when concerning social world, “creates things because they establish consensus about existence and sense of things, the common sense, the accepted *doxa* accepted by all as something self-evident.”

But in the particular case we have been analyzing, family becomes much more than a word, much more than an official or religious concept. At Christmas time, during preparation and consumption of Christmas dinner, the sense of family incarnates as a strategic way of living, not just predicating values of identity and belonging; it is a time when emotional expressions of love and affection are deeply felt and communicated. In this process, rites and ritualization play a crucial role since they embody feelings, expectations of new, renovated relationships, where offenses and conflicts are forgiven and forgotten. Here the *hallaca* rituals of preparation and consumption play the role that Bourdieu (1998 [1994]: 131) attributes to rites of institution: “Rites of institution are aimed to constitute family as a united entity, integrated, united, therefore stable, constant, regardless of individual feelings fluctuations.”

For some of the interviewed family members, there is a great similitude between family and *hallaca*: “Family keeps together its members; it is like *hallacas* that also reunite different ingredients.”

In our comparison of ethnographic observations made in December 2011 and December 2013 preparation and consumption of *hallacas* within the observed family, we have noticed almost no important change at all. The only exception that we have found is that in 2013 during the actual dinner, some relaxation of

hierarchical rules have begun to appear; in a way, informality has begun to take its toll: at the 2013 Christmas dinner, children managed to get served before their grandfather, and even children and the wife were served before him. These changes might be interpreted as an expression of a *crescendo* tendency according to which egalitarianism instead of hierarchy is the dominant force in family and social relationships, a fact that has been observed in other sacred or secular ritual processes.

10 Discussion

As we have seen, *hallaca* is not only a strong symbol in historical and contemporary culinary Venezuelan culture; it is also a living expression, a text, of a particular syncretic mixing of semiotic and culinary elements and cultural traditions. Preparation and consumption of food is a complex ritual system that includes several semiotic codes oriented towards two different sets of objectives: family identity and renewal of social cohesion and solidarity.

But what makes true rites of this preparation and consumption is that everyone is conscious that they are not just preparing and having a good meal; they are also participating in a process of renewing bonds of solidarity and rebuilding their own identity through self-placement in a particular group that has enormous deep ties with everyone. The ritual food preparation and consumption are what make that self-identification possible. Placed between modern fast food and recent slow food propositions, traditional food keeps and renews its capacity to hold together dynamic identities that help groups and families to cope with the powerful changes of globalized consumerism.

Of course, there are other rites that contribute to constructing and keeping the otherwise weak identity relations (celebration of birthdays and college graduations, for instance), but preparation and consumption of Christmas dinner have a strong, unequalled semiotic sense that derives from two main sources. First of all the rite is surrounded by a special time, Christmas and New Year, a fact that makes more powerful and gives more efficacy to the symbols and symbolic actions that actors assume and play. Secondly, preparation of food is something made by actors themselves and carried out collectively, a fact that increases embodiment of emotional ties to the family and to the rite itself. It is just these particular characteristics of *hallaca* Christmas dinner that make it different from official banquet rituals or in-company celebrations (retirement of employees, rewarding to best employees, etc.), processes that vary a lot from family food consumption.

If it is true that “one can also define a culture by looking at its *food ways*” (Saint-Paul 2010: 122), we can conclude that in the particular case under analysis there is a strong, deep-rooted, culinary micro-culture that evolves around *halla-ca*'s preparation and consumption: not only including specific rites and micro-rites but also well established, common symbols of sharing, belonging, and identity. Deep down, this micro-culture is defined by the sense and values that actors invest in what they do at this particular time of the year and in this particular household. As Saint-Paul argues (2010: 126), “what matters is less *what* we eat or even *where* we eat, than the human values invested in the activity.” For some culinary theorists, culinary structures are a well-established language, able to articulate dense, efficacious discourses; moreover, for Gaínza (2003) the culinary language, because of its atavistic intensity, is the maternal language *par excellence*.

Finally, we shall point out that in spite of the fact that consumerism, through industrialized preparation of food, has considerably reduced the domestic rites of preparation and consumption, *hallaca* Christmas dinner continue to be widely practiced by families where a strong sense of identity and powerful bonds among their members still exist.

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