TAMALES!

From Festival Foods to Family Fare: Tamales' Role in Fashioning a Nation

Introduction

Tlaltelolco came alive in the morning light. The market was clamorous with the calls of hawkers selling jade, gold, and all manner of jewelry. Rich textiles billowed in the morning breeze; it was cool as it blew in from the sunlit lake. Feathers, cacao, and gaudy mantles were arrayed in another corner of the market, wealthy patrons browsing the wares as they saw fit. Walking further into the center, the smells grew pungent. Vendors sold fowl, deer, jaguar pelts,

and puma teeth. Fruiters had a more colorful set of wares: guava, tomatoes, zapotes, and squash. Deeper still, into the heart of the market, the air was heavy with a profusion of rich scents: roasting meats and baking sweetcorn. A *tamalera* could be found at every corner of the market, hunched over her *comal*, a griddle resting upon three white-hot coals. There, she cooked *masa* (corn-dough), and wrapped each of the dough balls in a fresh corn husk. You could toss a stone in any direction and land on a new Tamale-lady making a different variant of the dish — filled with venison, iguana, chiles, or a host of other vegetables. The market spilled out past the bustling crowds as the sights and smells of the food district gave way to the city proper. It must have been a sight to behold, for the first Spaniards.

Fig 1: La Gran Tenochtitlan Vista Desde el Mercado de Tlatelolco, Diego Rivera 1945

Bernal Diaz del Castillo (1568) writes about their arrival in the city of Tenochtitlan in 1519 with no shortage of awe. He waxes poetic about the market in particular, Tlatelolco. There, he describes the meticulous sort of order to the market. Everything had its place, the *Tamaleras* and their tasty wares included. Tamales were an integral part of this Pre-Columbian marketplace

— a commonplace food, both tasty and filling. Diaz's description grants us a glimpse into a moment right before colonial expansion, into the Pre-Hispanic tamale.

Fig 2 and 3: Artist's Impressions of Tlatelolco by Felipe Dávalos in Mexicolore (2016)

Tamales are a prevalent staple in contemporary Latin American cuisine. They are an old dish, with epigraphic (textual) attestations dating back to Classic Maya inscriptions (Houston et al. 2006, Hull 2010, Taub 1989). Tamales were an essential part of the ancient Maya diet, and often represented an act of ritual consumption — the "people of the maize" consuming maize-cakes — enacting that old saying, "you are what you eat." In many ways, the ancient Maya viewed the tamale as an extension of the body (Christenson 2010, Stross 2010). In this paper, I will use a mix of epigraphic, ethnohistoric, and contemporary blog-style sources in order to construct a diachronistic analysis of the tamale. I will first discuss the origins of the tamale, from the creation of man, to their role in Maya feasts and Aztec festivals. I will then examine how

they changed during the colonial period, representing the body still, but becoming a broader marker of identity. From here, I will consider the tamale in the recent, and not-so-recent past. I argue that for both everyday people and nation building enterprises, tamales are a form of heritage that fulfills the same desire for genealogy and historicity as legitimizing agents. However, tamales take on a vastly different character in these two contexts. To answer this question, I will look at the holiday *Día de la Candelaria* as a case study. For the nation building project, they represent a mytho-historical past that establishes them as successors to an empire. To the everyday person celebrating *Día de la Candelaria*, they represent family, immediate genealogies of only a few generations, and a place in a long continuum of ancestors.

Ancient Origins: People of the Maize

In the beginning, the gods tried three times to create man. Three times, they failed. In the K'iche' Maya epic of creation, *the Popol Vuh*, we are the gods' fourth attempt to create humans. Humans were born from the earth like new maize (Fig 4) — flesh composed of corn (Christenson 2010). Many Mesoamerican cultures share this belief because maize was such an important staple of the diet. Maya cosmology revolved around the Milpa, or the yearly cycle of planting. Indeed, Maya life also revolved around the plant (Staller 2010, Christenson 2010, Stross 2010). Women would wake early each morning, grind nixtamalized (lime-soaked) maize kernels into flour using a *metate*, or grinding stone (Fig 5). They would then make *masa* for their family's daily meal of tamales. Much like in the marketplace of Tlatelolco, they would use a *comal* to bake their dough (Stoss 2010, Taube 1989).

4: Illustration of San Bartolo's north wall Mural by Heather Hurst.

Fig 5: Late Classic sherd portraying a woman grinding over a metate (Taube 1987)

The earliest written attestations to the origins of the Tamale are from the Classic Period (250-900 AD), although it is reasonable to assume they are far older. Perhaps originating from the Olmec of coastal Veracruz or Tabasco. Inscriptions tell us that the Maya daily meals, at least amongst elites, may have consisted of two liquid meals of *atole* (a maize-based drink), and one

large meal of tamales (Houston 2006, Taube 1989). Glyphic depictions of the tamale are common in late classic documents such as the Dresden Codex (Gates 1932). In fact, that glyph that we see for tamale is actually the same logogram for the word heart, *Ohl* (Houston 2006). This visual representation of these two concepts is quite telling, harkening back to that concept of creation — humanity is born from maize, and so to the gods, our flesh is sweet like corn; our hearts are sustenance like the tamale.

Fig 6: *inscriptions from Dresden Codex, WAAJ glyph; Iguana and Venison conflations. Gates 1932, pp 33*

The ancient Maya spoke of tamales with the word **waaj*, which in contemporary Maya languages such as Tzendal (*Vah*) refers to tortillas. Karl Taube (1989) argues that this word "*waaj"* in Common Ch'olan (reconstructed Mayan language of inscriptions) could only refer to tamales, based on accompanying images in various texts. In fact, there is no evidence that tortillas were consumed until much later on, in Aztec texts.

As tortillas became a more common everyday food, tamales were consumed more often as a ritual or feasting food. During feast days such as the feast of *Xipe Totec*, the lord of flayed skin, tamales and tortillas were consumed exclusively as an act of ritual cannibalism (Staller 2010). Tamales were used not only as feasting foods, but as ritual offerings, as well. They are heavily associated with the Aztec festivals of the rain god, *Tlaloc* (Stross 2010). Rain bringing festivals, which are echoed by a similar modern-day Ch'orti' rain-bringing ceremony, seem to

have tamales at the heart of them. In the Maya ceremony, chicken tamales, along with other foodstuffs, are arranged for the *padrino* leader to bury for the earth-god (Stross 2010). For the Aztecs, three festivals constituted the worship of *Tlaloc*: Atlcahualo, Tzoztontli, and Atemotzli. Each involved both infant sacrifice, the flaying of the flesh and extraction of their hearts, and symbolic sacrifice. On Atlcahualo, this was the consumption of tamales (Stross 2010). This harkens back to that concept of the heart, *ohl*, being represented by tamales.

Examining the deep history of the tamale allows us insight into the Maya and Nahua conceptions of the body. Ultimately, humans are born from maize. Our flesh is the feasting food of the gods, and in turn, we too consume maize tamales as sustenance. Nahua and Maya people believe themselves to be the People of the Maize. Corn is considered an extension of the body, and therefore intrinsic to identity. So, when the Aztecs and Maya first encountered the Spaniards, this suddenly became a key marker of their indigeneity.

New Spain: The Tamale of the Colonial Period

I. People of the Wheat vs People of the Maize

When the first rumors of the arrival of Europeans swept through the crowded *mercado* of Tlatelolco, they were described as carrying with them strange “fasting food,” which appeared bland and tasteless to the Aztec observers. This was wheat bread (Pilcher 1996). They viewed Europeans in terms of the food they ate, in keeping with Maya and Nahua conceptions of the body.

Tamales are mentioned 217 times in the Florentine Codex, an early post-contact document from the colonial period. Bernardino de Sahagún (1577) records the making and use of tamales by Nahua and Mexica people. He describes the role they played in festivities — specifically community elders making tamales for various occasions. He also observes the everyday tamale vendors, women who made all manner and flavor of tamale: sometimes filled with chicken, frogs, axolotl, gourds, or chiles.

Fig 7: Tamale-vender selling her wares, Florentine Codex pp. 50 r

When highly complex, maize-based cuisine met equally complex Spanish cuisine, both initially resisted the other's influence. Although there was an exchange of culinary techniques and ingredients during the colonial period, the cuisines developed largely independently of one another (Pilcher 1998). At first the Spanish attempted to root out foods that could give indigenous people autonomy. Spanish efforts to supplant corn, beans, and squash with a triad of wine, olives, and wheat ultimately did not succeed (Pilcher 1996). This may have been because of the climate, but it may have had more to do with how deeply entwined maize was with identity. Despite concerted resistance on the part of both European elites, and indigenous populations, creole dishes began to emerge in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

II. Formation of Creole Identities

With the mixing of cuisine, there was also an inevitable mixing of people. Instead of a social hierarchy enforced based on increasingly minimal blood quantums, culture became a driving factor for social stratification. Specifically, cuisine became an important marker of identity. Elites preferred complex, French haute cuisine, while Pre-Columbian food was considered "street food" and "dirty" (Pilcher 1996). In a twofold sense, the dirtiness was associated with both the sanitary conditions of the market, as well as the "taint" of indigeneity.

Literature of the time highlights the way tamales were used to signal indigenous, "lesser" status. A satirist of the time, Mateo de Rosas Oquendo, writes about a character named Juan de Diego (Pilcher 1998). He is a poor, *mestizo* "Coyote." Terms for mixed race individuals grew increasingly ludicrous, with the word *mestizo* gaining popularity as a derogatory term to refer to someone with a creole identity. Juan fancies himself a wealthy *Hidalgo*, or spanish nobleman, but there is no doubt about his identity from his description:

He carries tamales,

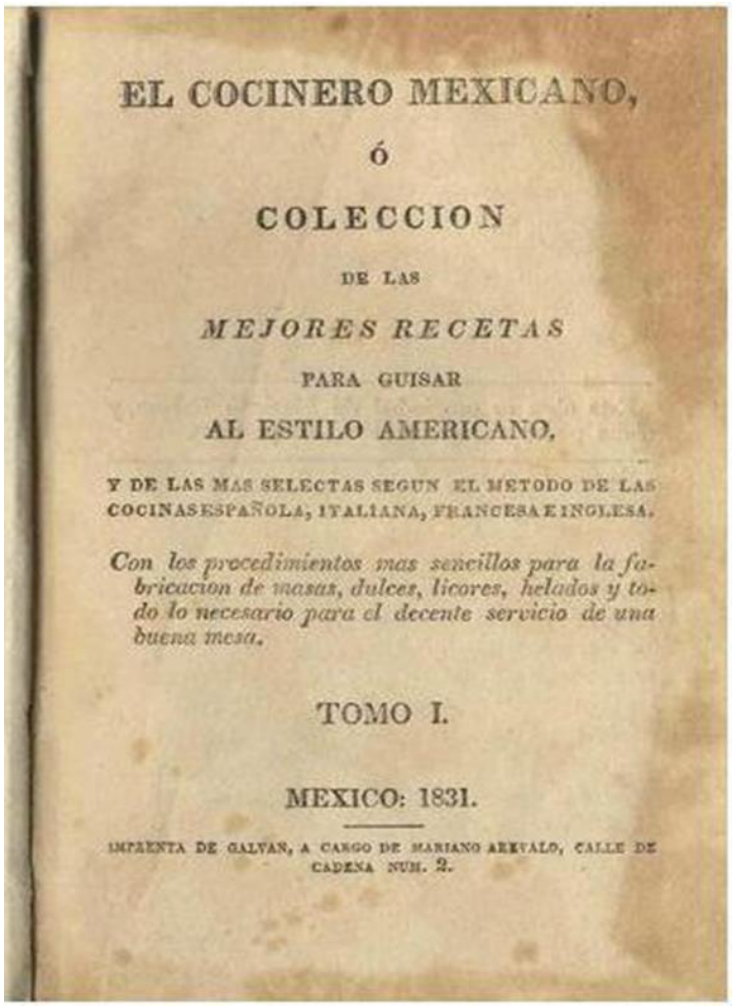
> And a few maize ears,
> Passing like a gigolo
> Through a sea of lovers.
> And out in the pond,
> There is no salamander,
> Nor frog nor fish
> He would not devour…. (Pilcher 1998, 41).

Not only is Juan de Diego being satirized by highlighting his association with "indian" foods such as the tamale, but his insatiable *mestizo* appetite for corn is also associated with sexual promiscuity. This association became so embedded in public consciousness that the same tropes appear nearly five centuries later. In a novel published in 1915, a wealthy woman develops an "unseemly" desire for tamales, which seems to induce her later involvement in an illicit sexual affair (Monrreal 2008). In this way, Oquendo's work reveals common attitudes towards indigeneity in colonial New Spain, that remain prominent even into the twentieth century. Tamales were tied to notions of the body, both from an emic and etic perspective. Food became the identity that people claimed, or it transformed them.

III. Cookbooks

In the colonial period, the majority of recipes codified in cookbooks were from European haute cuisine. Indigenous cuisine was only seen in the marketplaces over a *comal*, or in a *pulqueria*. As more creole recipes emerged, they became an important part of the burgeoning Mexican nation-building project. *El Cocinero Mexicano* was published in 1831. Heralded as an symbol of quintessential Mexican cuisine, it privileged the Spanish elements of this new national cuisine, while renaming or suppressing indigenous dishes. Tamales were buried in a section of the book which contained foods to eat while in the privacy of the home (Pilcher 1998). These

entries were laden with the same “unclean” implications that pervaded the colonial period. It was as if indigenous foods were something to be enjoyed furtively, shamefully.


EL COCINERO MEXICANO,

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COLECCION

DE LAS

MEJORES RECETAS

PARA GUISAR

AL ESTILO AMERICANO,

Y DE LAS MAS SELECTAS SEGUN EL METODO DE LAS COCINASESPAÑOLA, ITALIANA, FRANCESA E INGLESA.

Con los procedimientos mas sencillos para la fabricacion de masas, dulces, licores, helados y todo lo necesario para el decente servicio de una buena mesa.

TOMO I.

MEXICO: 1831.

IMPRENTA DE GALVAN, A CARGO DE MARIANO AREVALO, CALLE DE CADENA NUM. 2.

Fig 8: El Cocinero Mexicano, cookbook volume 1. Published in 1831.

The cookbook was the first attempt to build a cult of domesticity, and to instill middle class values in a growing nation of creole people. Ultimately, the authors and consumers of this new version of national cuisine were members of the intellectual elite, the new middle and upper middle classes. Pilcher (1996) notes that this process allowed them to redefine gastronomic boundaries:

> By defining even chile peppers in Creole terms, the nineteenth-century national cuisine ignored a gastronomic geography dating back to Precolumbian times.

> Native culinary traditions centered around civilizations such as the Nahua, Maya, Zapotecs, Mixtecs, and Totonacs-ethnic groups that rarely corresponded to Mexican political boundaries… (Pilcher 1996, 203-4).

These cookbooks had no room for street food. One, which claimed to represent the "mexican palate" did not contain a single recipe for tamales, enchiladas, or quesadillas. All the way until the late nineteenth century, Elites believed that indigenous people had to assimilate to European sensibilities in order to lay claim to this Mexican identity (Pilcher 1998). It was not until the twentieth century, following the beginning stages of a social revolution when scales of wheat and corn began to shift. Suddenly, the indigenous aspects of cuisine were no longer shameful, or something to be consumed away in the safety of the home, just as the *tamale* had been in *El Cocinero Mexicano*. This change, according to Pilcher (1996) saw Mexico "exalt[ing] *mestizos* as the true representatives of the Mexican nation" (215).

Building a National Identity: the Tamale as a Tool

Initial efforts to define a Mexican national identity in the nineteenth century took place through the creation of a cult of domesticity, and a burgeoning middle class. This meant that attempts to form a national identity were centered around positioning "Mexicans" in opposition to all things "European" (Jácome 2014). These revolutionary narratives characterized pre-independence nationalism. But in 1910, Mexico finally became independent from Spain.

In the sudden absence of a need for revolutionary narratives, and of an oppressor to set themselves apart from, the Mexican nation building project required a different source of national identity (Jácome 2014). They addressed this in two ways: the first was that they began to privilege *mestizo* identities as the true Mexican identity. The second was that they positioned themselves as successors to some imagined Pre-Columbian splendor. They sought to embody both European high culture, and a rich Pre-Hispanic past. In order to observe both of these processes in action, we must turn to the humble tamale. Tamales were used as a symbol of *mestizo* identity in advertisements in order to recast Mexico as a neo-imperial power. As well, their role in holidays like *Dia de la Candelaria* reveals how the state uses this festival food to construct a revisionist genealogy. Indeed, the state uses the tamale as a legitimizing agent for the nation-building project.

I. The Tamale in Advertisements

Chicken tamale advertisements from the 1920s and 30s were a large part of this broader effort to form a cohesive, *mestizo* national identity. These Armour Packing Company advertisements were targeted towards consumers in the United States. Therefore, they present a truly interesting look at how Mexico intended for outsiders to perceive them.

Fig 9: Armour Packing Company's 1920-30 run of chicken tamale advertisements. Monrreal 2008

These ads showed an interest in humanizing Mexicans, depicting them as a "civilized" product of a multicultural blend of peoples. It is an attempt to both recast the tamale as a Mexican food, and to erase modern indigenous people. Monrreal (2008) notes that these seemingly mundane images draw upon imagined geographies which contribute to the construction of imperial power. In so doing, the Mexican nation state fashions itself into a player in the neo-imperial landscape.

The first advertisement depicts a pastoral scene of two Mexican peasants. They embody an idealized rural Mexican life. This image draws on something that Monrreal (2008) refers to as "imperialist nostalgia." These are peasants who have happily accepted their subjugation into national hegemony (Monrreal 2008). Here, the tamale is a unifying force that completes this idealized couple in their Mexican identities.

The second advertisement depicts a Mexican man receiving a tamale from a *tamalera* — one of the market women ubiquitous in New Spain. This advertisement seems to sanitize the image of the *tamalera*, giving her a stall in which to sell her wares instead of bent over the traditional *comal* in the market (Monrreal 2008).

Both ads present a cohesive, idealistic image of a Mexican nation. They project the *mestizo* identity to outsiders, such as American consumers. Even the words on the first advertisement, hailing the chicken tamale as a "novel Mexican delicacy," construct this narrative. Indeed, none of those words are strictly true, considering the tamale is neither novel, nor delicate, and certainly was not considered "Mexican" until the mid twentieth century.

II. *Día de la Candelaria* and the "Candelarita" festival

On February 2nd, families around Mexico attend mass to celebrate the day Mary brought Jesus to the temple. "Candlemas" is an ostensibly Roman Catholic holiday, but in many ways it is an example of a *mestizo* festival. Tamales feature heavily in the festivities. Indeed, whoever was unlucky enough to pick the baby Jesus figure from the cake on Three Kings Day (a month earlier) has to make them for the whole family (Barbezat 2024)! I argue that tamales' role in modern festivals such as this one allows the nation building project to construct a revisionist genealogy, positioning themselves as successors to ancient empires. Indeed, they seek to legitimize the neo-imperialist hegemony which the armour packing advertisements attempt to create.

A mix of online and news articles help to characterize national narratives as they crystalize – even without direct state intervention. Blog posts frequently draw upon this Pre-Hispanic connection, as an attempt to highlight the historicity of the tamale:

> The importance of tamales on Candelaria…comes from the importance of maize to Indigenous Pre-Hispanic populations. In fact, in a surprising coincidence, even the date of Feb. 2 coincided with celebrations in the Aztec calendar to ask the gods for rain and a bountiful harvest (Barzebat 2024).

Sources such as this Trip Savvy article often draw a connection between the prominence of tamales in this festival and its temporal proximity to the Aztec festival, Atlcahualo. This festival was the aforementioned festival of *Tlaloc* in which Aztecs would consume tamales — just as *Tlaloc* would consume the heart of a sacrificial infant. However, this blog post fails to mention the significance of *why* tamales were eaten during Aztec festivals. It mentions that "maize" was important to "Pre-Hispanic" populations, but it omits actual Maya and Nahua conceptions of maize. This is an attempt to establish a direct relationship between the consumption of tamales on *Dia de la Candelaria* and the consumption of tamales in Aztec festivals; it is also a way to claim the historical significance of the tamale without needing to acknowledge the significance of it to indigenous people.

This post is not the first to emphasize the Pre-Hispanic roots of a Catholic holiday like *Dia de la Candelaria*, and certainly not the first to invoke the historicity of the tamale to do so. The nation-building project aims to enforce this connection in a variety of ways. An article from from *CE Noticias Financieras* is even less subtle, as it invokes Atlcahualo directly:

> Candlemas Day has its roots in the presentation of the Child Jesus in the temple and the purification of the Virgin Mary, 40 days after Christmas; from Europe came the custom of lighting candles as a symbol of light and hope…. However, in Mesoamerica, February coincided with the beginning of Atlcahualo, a sacred month dedicated to Tlaloc, god of rain (Día De La Candelaria 2025).

This article discusses the connection between tamales on "Candlemas" and Atlcahualo as a way to once again establish continuity between the Aztecs and modern Mexicans. It asserts that Candlemas, a day that is truly a Catholic festival with some added regional traditions—the making and consumption of tamales—may actually be a recast version of Atlcahualo! In truth, there is no connection between Atlcahualo and Candlemas, bar the consumption of tamales and

the time of year. Here, in these two posts, we first see an attempt to merge the holidays. Indeed, fusing them feeds into the nation-building project's attempts to position the modern state as a successor to the Aztecs, and to build national identity around this mytho-historic past. Second, we see an erasure of modern indigenous conceptions of the body, and the importance of maize.

The *CE Noticias Financieras* article further highlights the perceived *mestizo* character of the festival, saying: "Candlemas Day unites us at the table and in history; it fuses Mexican faith with corn and community in a single celebration full of flavor and abundance" (Día De La Candelaria 2025). The phrase "fus[ing] *Mexican* faith with corn…" is interesting, because the faith that it associates with Mexican-ness is Catholicism. As I have established in the first section, corn *was* intrinsically tied to Pre-Columbian spirituality, and continues to be tied into modern Maya and Nahua conceptions of the body. So the fact that corn is moved into the realm of community rather than ritual is a narrative choice. Actual indigenous ideas of the body and spirituality are relegated to the realm of the past, when indigenous people are still *here*. Indeed, here we see an example of the way that the nation building enterprise seeks to separate the "indigenous" from the "pre-hispanic/Pre-Columbian." The latter takes on a mythic quality, whereas the former is considered "lesser" and "backward," not worthy of being considered "Mexican." Leventhal (2022) describes this experience of social mummification, in which modern Maya and Nahua people are treated like artifacts, frozen in time. This is a product of the older narrative surrounding *mestizo* identities, one that was clear in the early stages of the nation building project—the privileging of European elements of creole identities. Harkening back to cookbooks in the nineteenth century which cast Pre-Columbian foods as shameful, the Spanish catholic aspects of *mestizo* culture are what is considered "Mexican."

This same article then goes on to cite an academic, Roberto Álvarez Manzo from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM); He “explained that this festivity is a cultural reference that deserves to be understood and preserved. He added that it is currently in danger of losing its original meaning, being reduced to a simple gastronomic gathering….” (Día De La Candelaria 2025). This is perhaps the most interesting quote to draw from the article. Not only is there an attempt to 1) merge Altcahualo and Candlemas 2) establish catholicism as intrinsic to mexican identity (therefore suppressing Maya or Nahua ideas of spirituality) and 3) differentiate the “indigenous” from the “pre-hispanic,” but here there is an intellectualization of the tamale. The nation building project does not want the festival to lose “original meaning” or become “a simple gastronomic gathering” because for them, the importance of the tamale is that its “origin” validates their imperial power. If it becomes simply another tradition associated with family and immediate genealogies, the state loses the ability to position themselves as the successors to this mytho-historic past. Therefore, they invoke intellectuals and academics to assist with the process of legitimization.

A more concrete example of the state’s attempts to enforce the “original meaning” of Candlemas can be found in actual government projects. In another recent article, as of February 2025, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism announced a new initiative: "Candelarita." Pitched as “an effort to preserve the gastronomic richness of the State of Mexico” the state seeks to promote “ancestral culinary traditions of the state, with special emphasis on the preparation of tamales” (The "Candelarita" Festival 2025). As a part of this initiative, they sponsored cooks of “traditional” cuisine, and brought together producers of tamales from a variety of different regions (The "Candelarita" Festival 2025). Here we see overt state involvement in the celebration of *Dia de la Candelaria*, with the creation of an entirely new festival day in order to emphasize

the role of tamales in the festivities. These efforts serve as the state's attempt to form a revisionist genealogy — one that appeals to the deep history of the tamale as a legitimizing agent for the nation-building project.

We can see the way that this narrative emerges even without direct state involvement, such as in "Candelarita." In fact, this excerpt from Munchery, a food blog, gets to the heart of *why* the nation-building project forms this revisionist genealogy:

> With roots entrenched deep within the heart of Mesoamerica, the humble tamale has traversed the culinary landscape for thousands of years. The Aztec, Maya, and Inca civilizations—each an embodiment of ancient innovation and culture—were the first to craft this simple yet significant food.… food, able to maintain its taste and freshness despite long journeys, even fueled armies on their expeditions (Munchery 2023).

There is a lot to draw out of this excerpt. To begin with, they invoke "[t]he Aztec, Maya, and Inca civilizations," appealing to the deep past. In fact, underlying messaging becomes transparent as soon as the article references the Inca. Not only did the Inca live thousands of miles away in Peru, but they did not even have tamales! The Peruvian tamale was a later invention, influenced by the Mesoamerican tamale. So, why include them? The goal of this then becomes transparent — this is a narrative of empire. It presents Mexico and the beneficiaries of the tamale as the successors to empire. Mexico spent a great deal of the nineteenth century positioning themselves as a neo-imperial power, through the use of advertising and the creation of that aforementioned *mestizo* identity. The excerpt ends with a reinforcement of this idea — stating that tamales "fueled armies." This militarizes the tamale. It establishes a direct connection between tamales and empire.

To the nation state, tamales are a tool to establish a lineage to ancient empires. They have attempted to recast themselves as an imperial power, and seek legitimacy through the deep past. This revisionist genealogy reifies their claims to a neo-imperial hegemony and defines their identity as a nation.

Constructing the Family's Tamale

Dia de la Candelaria is not simply an instrument of the state. This holiday is an important time for families to come together, and celebrate with food and faith. I argue that the tamale serves a similar role for the everyday person as it does for the nation-state: using the deep past to construct a lineage where they can position themselves as successors. However, this takes on a distinct character in that they are not appealing to ancient empires, instead they are appealing to family. Both within immediate genealogies of a few generations, but also in claiming ancient ancestors as a part of a more expansive familial tradition.

Internet opinion posts show this perspective quite clearly. Gomez, a food blogger, seems to be drawn to the *mestizo* elements of the festival, once again attempting to connect the celebration of the milpa with catholic practices through the tamale:

> The Mexicas, Mayas, Olmecs, and other pre-Hispanic cultures prepared them as sacred offerings to the gods, especially to Tláloc, the rain god, in hopes of securing fertile harvests. Maize, after all, was more than just food—it was divine. The Popol Vuh, the sacred book of the K'iche' Maya, tells us that humanity itself was created from maize, making every tamal a bite of mythological continuity…. The fusion of Catholicism with native practices found its way to Día de la Candelaria, aligning the presentation of Jesus at the temple with Pre-Columbian rituals that celebrated the start of the agricultural cycle (Gomez 2025).

In her discussion of tamales, Gomez first mentions *Tlaloc* and "pre-Hispanic" cultures. This seems to mirror the structure of the previous blog posts, ones that seemed more concerned with perpetuating the narratives of empire. It emphasizes the connection between *Tlaloc* and the *mestizo* festival of *Dia de la Candelaria*. However, she goes one step further and invokes the Maya conception of the body, that same concept of being born from maize. She is leaning on

deep history to build the importance of the tamale. Here there is an important difference from those previous posts' invocation of historicity. In her acknowledgement of indigenous conceptions of the body, she decenters European primacy. Maya and Nahua spirituality are placed upon an equal playing field as catholic sensibilities. This runs counter to national narratives seen in the nineteenth century cookbooks, and the initial construction of the *mestizo* identity in those twentieth century advertisements. Gomez goes on to make a final point which reveals her perspective: "What once were tamales placed on altars for the gods became tamales prepared in kitchens for family and friends, a culinary relic of an ancient past that persists to this day" (Gomez 2025). Here, she uses similar language to the *CE Noticias Financieras* article in the previous section, however there is a subtle difference. She once again does not afford primacy to European spirituality. Although Gomez invokes these same narratives of historicity as the nation building project, her reason for doing so is very different. She seeks to use deep history as a legitimizing agent for family lineages. By bringing tamales back into the home, and into the realm of family, she seeks to legitimize a *familial* tradition. In so doing, she creates a revisionist genealogy that situates the ancient past in terms of ancestry rather than empire.

Again and again, this narrative amongst the everyday person persists: tamales represent family, but more importantly, ancestry. Infinity Auto Insurance published a guide to the holiday in an attempt to promote tourism, describing tamales in these terms:

> Tamales are a typical Mesoamerican dish made from corn dough filled with … ingredients, wrapped in corn husks, and steamed. Along with atole, these dishes represent a link to Mexico's past, as they have been prepared by indigenous cultures for thousands of years. Preparing tamales is a communal and laborious activity that brings together friends and families" (Inicio 2024).

Again, we see the deep past of the tamale being invoked, they "represent a link to Mexico's past." Their historicity is being used to construct a continuous lineage. Continuity is the key here, as the article goes on to say that they have been prepared for thousands of years by Maya or Nahua people, *continuously*. Even though Maya and Nahua people are still around in the present, they are only relevant to the everyday Mexican if they are their ancestors, the ones who existed in that mytho-historic past. Therefore, tamales become couched in family lineage—something that "brings together friends and families."

Another article which is called "The History and Tradition of Mexican Tamales" first details the Pre-Columbian past of tamales, "Mexican tamales [have] … roots tracing back to ancient Mesoamerican civilizations, … a staple in Mexican cuisine for centuries" (MexicoHistorico 2023). As in previous examples, the past is emphasized in order to legitimize this lineage, and sense of continuity. The article then goes on to describe the role of tamales in *Dia de la Candelaria*:

> "[making tamales] fosters community spirit as families and friends come together to share food, laughter, and stories, reinforcing social bonds. The preparation of tamales for the Day of the Candelaria can involve entire families, with each member contributing in some way, whether through cooking, wrapping, or simply enjoying the meal together" (MexicoHistorico 2023)

Here, family becomes the centerpiece. The association with family subsumes grander sweeping narratives of empire, and fostering a community of care becomes the primary purpose of the food. In this particular quote, there is a narrative of community and of "reinforcing social bonds" through the shared making and eating of tamales. This is the primary purpose of the tamale, in an everyday person's perspective.

In fact, family becomes so important to how the everyday person conceives of the tamale that some articles fail to mention a Pre-Columbian past at all. Montes describes their role in Candlemas thus:

> Tamales are delicious and a big part of celebrating Candlemas.… Lots of families and friends get together to make tamales. It's fun because everyone helps out and tells stories while they work. Eating tamales on Candlemas Day means good luck and many good things coming your way in the new year (Montes 2024).

This echoes the previous post, in its invocation of family. It attributes the importance of tamales to their work as a community-building force. Interestingly this quote also represents the fear expressed by Roberto Álvarez Manzo. In some ways, Montes' tamale has taken on an importance divorced from sweeping narratives of the deep past. In his words, it is "reduced to a simple gastronomic gathering." This is the core difference between the nation-building project and the everyday person: the deep past is important for both, but for the everyday person, it's not essential. For the everyday person such as Montes, tamales have become entwined with immediate genealogies of only a few generations: perhaps her grandmother's recipe is what has been passed down. That is how her tamale gives her ancestry legitimacy. The nation building project, however, *needs* the deep past to establish its genealogy.

Even still, it is important to return to the ways that the historicity of the tamale is important for everyday people. In establishing this lineage, they are concerned with continuity; this we have seen in the Infinity Auto Insurance article. But Gomez truly drives the point home:

> In a way, every tamal we eat today is an artifact of survival—both culinary and historical. They were here before the Spanish arrived, before the printing press could have immortalized them, before the idea of "Mexican food" was anything other than the daily sustenance of a people who saw maize as sacred. And despite

> wars, colonization, globalization, and the occasional dietary fad that dares to label them “unhealthy,” tamales persist” (Gomez 2025).

This is a powerful statement. It is filled with appeals to the distant, and more recent past. Gomez is drawing upon a narrative of survival. This illustrates an underlying theme throughout the tamale of the everyday person—yes, it is connected to family, to ancestry, and to social bonds, but it is also a representation of survival and continuity. It *is* the legitimizing force for all of these things because it “proves” a continuous relationship between people who make tamales *now* and people who made tamales in the deep past. Here, she has made clear the importance of the tamale, and how even people like Montes rely on this element of continuity, even when they don’t acknowledge the ancient past.

Throughout all of these appeals to family, to the past, to the ancient Olmec, Maya, Nahua, Mexica, Zapotec, Toltec, and (according to Munchery), even the Inca, where does that leave indigenous people who are alive *now*? They seem to be a lot more important to people when they are confined to the realm of the past.

Conclusion: Where Does this Leave Maya and Nahua People?

Tamales have been used as a legitimizing agent by both the nation building project of Mexico, and the everyday person. For both, they are key to creating a genealogy that establishes them as successors to the ancient past. However, for the nation state, this has more to do with legitimizing their neo-imperial aims, by appealing to ancient empires. For the average person, this is about establishing a continuity with their ancestors, in which family subsumes grander narratives of mytho-historical greatness. In all of their appeals to the historicity of the tamale, they are right about one thing: tamales are ancient.

This paper has explored the origins of the food, from an everyday staple of the Maya diet, to a feasting food for the Aztecs. It has discussed the evolution of the tamale throughout the colonial period, as a "shameful" food, a representation of indigeneity, and a marker of identity. It has discussed the creation of a national cuisine, in which tamales were sidelined along with other non-European foods, because they did not fit into the new *mestizo* identity, or culture. Then, into the twentieth century it examined the imperial project's attempt to integrate Pre-Columbian elements into this new Mexican identity through advertisements. Finally, looking towards the festival of *Dia de la Candelaria*, it has compared the ways in which the state has used the tamale, as compared to the way the everyday person imagines the food.

In both of these narratives, the past is important. The Pre-Columbian people of Mexico and more broadly, the Yucatan are referenced either as empires or as ancestors. Throughout all of this, however, the modern indigenous people *who still exist* are hardly spared more than a footnote in the conversation. This is because to both the state, and the everyday Mexican, they are not relevant to their narratives. They are neither family, to the average Mexican, nor are they

a representation of any imperial splendor. The modern Maya or Nahua person is considered "backward" or "frozen in time" according to those very same narratives from the *colonial period* (Leventhal 2022)! Indigeneity is considered shameful, while at the same time, the ancient Aztecs or Maya are important parts of "Mexico's cultural tapestry" (MexicoHistorico 2023). Maya bodies and identities are essentially mummified, and put on display as a tourist attraction. They are overwritten in the construction of Mexican national identity, serving only as predecessors to the new *mestizo* identity.

Tamales *can* be an important part of national identity, or how family relates to one another. But there is such an acute concern with their historicity, that it seems irresponsible to eschew mention of the living people who also have a claim to this lineage. Tamales can be part of a narrative of survival and continuity, but indigenous people must be not only included in these narratives, but afforded some level of primacy in them.

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