



Anthropology Book Forum

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JOHANNES, VENETIA, 2020, *Nourishing the Nation - Food as National Identity in Catalonia*, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 278 pp., ISBN 978-1-78920-438-4

Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork and a deep reservoir of various works on Catalonia, Venetia Johannes' *Nourishing the Nation* provides a succinct yet informative discussion on the pivotal role that food plays in the formation of Catalan identity, and how these quotidian objects serve as an impetus for pro-independence (and anti-independence) movements. In its ordinariness, Johannes treats food carefully in the important contexts within which it finds itself: history, politics, gastronomy, and most importantly, culture. The author structured the book in a manner so strategic that it facilitates a smooth contextualization of the subject, tracing its history through secondary research and examining its relevance in contemporary Catalan society through ethnography; the latter substantiated by the length of time the author spent in fieldwork. Equally tactical is the anthropologist's choice of field site — the town of Vic — in that the practices surrounding Catalan food are at their most authentic form, with no external pressure from international tourism that now pervades the entire region. Heeding Llobera's (2004) call for "in-depth studies" of nationalist movements, *Nourishing the Nation: Food as National Identity in Catalonia* surely renders service to the task that its author daringly accepted.

In Chapter 1, Johannes examines, in a quite extensive manner, Catalan culinary cookbooks from the medieval up to the contemporary period. It is in this part where the author historicizes Catalan food and its place in the lives of the people. It is also here that the prominent names in Catalan food history are introduced, both from Catalonia's "golden era" during the Middle Ages, and the those who to this day bring it to the local and international stage. Through these cookbooks, communal practices were preserved and are handed down. It is also interesting to note that the remaking of these centuries-old recipes concretely mirrors the continuity in Catalan kitchens, where the 'old' never dies and is consistently introduced to the 'new.' In maintaining such

continuity, what made it possible are the culinary calendars that drove the Catalans to partake of the same cuisines during important holidays of the year.

In the second chapter, the author turns the attention to the culinary aspects that give Catalan food its peculiarity. It primarily focuses on the *sofregit*, *picada* and *allioli*. These sauces are no basic concoctions: they do not just form the very base of what Catalans consume, but also mirror Catalonia's character as '*terra de pas*,' land of migration, as these are not Catalan in the strictest sense of the word. These sauces reflect Catalonia's openness to peoples of diverse cultural backgrounds who brought with them their cultures, and left their marks in the place they once (and still) inhabit. Catalonia's identity as '*terra de pas*' simply proves that nationalism does not have to take a "purist" definition; it can be an acknowledgement of how the movements of people shape places and practices. The very same practices are what bind the Catalans together.

In the third chapter, Johannes situates food in the historical and political context of Catalonia. The author brilliantly provides an account of how a corpus of agencies contribute to making Catalan food an intangible cultural heritage. These actors span from local up to international bodies. The author also showed how Catalan cuisine, staying true to Catalonia's inherent openness towards others, assumes and maintains connections with other regions, such as the Mediterranean and the *Països Catalans*. While Mary Douglas' concept of 'commensality' (2002) was already subtly referred to in the preceding discussions, this concept is all the more stressed here; the recognition of similarities of cuisines in Catalonia, the Mediterranean and the *Països Catalans* maintain these regions' social bonds. It also emphasizes Catalonia's assertion of unity with the *Països Catalans* and its ongoing effort to grapple with its (non)identification with the larger Spain.

The fourth chapter delves deeper into the authors' exploration, focusing considerably on the Catalan gastronomic calendar's function in shaping "seasonality in national identity." Both religious and gastronomic calendars guide people toward shared commensality, resulting in uniform consumption of specific foods during celebrations, ultimately creating a collective gastronomic experience. The author's insightful observations highlight the significance of material objects during these events, exemplified by the extended tables facilitating interactions among individuals. Given the material nature of cooking and food being a cultural artifact (Crowther, 2013), this chapter contributes to discussions on material culture and the anthropology of daily life. It can therefore be argued that the imagined Catalan community brought forth seasonally by

religious and gastronomic calendars is also palpably shaped by tangible objects, integral to the rituals of these festivities. The last chapter centers on the emergence of "new Catalan food" and how the Catalans perceive them. This is where readers are confronted with the discourse distinguishing between what is deemed 'historically Catalan' versus 'commercially Catalan.' While this discussion may be intricate, its very existence underscores the notion that national identity is constructed on daily basis; it is contested and performed.

At the end of the book's densely ethnographic core, the reader will arrive at the conclusion that national identity in Catalonia is continuously formed through — as Bruno Latour calls it — a network (Latour, 1993; 2005). While people and institutions are what can be referred to as the main actors in this process, food itself contributes in it as seen in how it creates imagined communities, stirs nationalist movements, and drives the re-making and re-living of Catalonia's past. The question as to whether or not food possesses agency was not thoroughly discussed by the author, notwithstanding a brief mention that it does not have (p.84). Nevertheless, the very thesis of this work is grounded in the fact that quotidian objects, such as food, also have 'the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act' (Ahern, 2001: 110). All that this book brilliantly discusses, and food's central place in it, acquires greater sense if food is seen as an object not just passively 'worked upon,' but in being 'worked upon,' influences the socio-cultural fabric in which it is carefully knitted.

Nourishing the Nation: Food as National Identity in Catalonia presents a captivating and compelling ethnographic study centered on Catalonia, exploring nationalist movements and tangible cultural aspects. This book holds immense appeal for students across diverse fields within the social sciences, effectively connecting history, anthropology, and even political science. Furthermore, the book showcases innovation and creativity by employing photo-elicitation as a method in ethnographic research. Despite its theoretical sophistication, the book maintains an approachable and engaging style, making it accessible even to the general public with an interest in understanding Catalonia's rich history, and how the Catalans' take pride with their gastronomic tradition.

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Venes Carmelo Tiñana Banquiles is a cultural anthropologist trained in Hungary. His research interests include material culture, consumption, migration, the Filipino diaspora and radical politics in the Philippines. Now based in Colombia, he is to commence his training in political studies.



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