

Activity 4: How Food Was Used to Facilitate Religious Practices and to Coerce Natives Into Following Catholicism

Throughout human history, people have used food as a tool to reinforce their culture and stereotypes onto others. The colonial period was no different. During this time, Spain used food to subjugate the indigenous population by encouraging them to abandon their traditional foods in favor of European foods, giving those who followed higher status and rewards and those who didn't follow lower status and punishment. Even today, people still use food as a tool to reinforce one's ideas and stereotypes onto others.

Read the following quote from the Food Empowerment Project, *Colonization, Food, and the Practice of Eating* (<https://foodispower.org/our-food-choices/colonization-food-and-the-practice-of-eating/>) to learn about how food was used to coerce indigenous peoples into following Catholicism. Then, answer the questions below.

“In addition, at the time of conquest, Spain was facing internal divisions of its own. In an effort to expel Spanish Muslims, as well as Jewish people, from Spain, King Ferdinand V and Queen Isabella I relaunched what was known as the Reconquista, the reconquest of Spain. As a strong Spanish identity formed around the idea of the Reconquista, food became a powerful symbol of Spanish culture. For instance, consider pork: Among Muslim, Jewish, and Catholic people, only Catholics could eat pork, since for Muslim and Jewish people, the consumption of pork was forbidden. During the reconquest, as individuals were being forced to prove that they were pureblooded Spaniards, they would often be offered pork to eat. Any refusal to consume pork would be taken as a sign that such people were not true Catholic Spaniards and would subsequently be expelled from Spain, persecuted, or even killed. As the Spanish arrived in the new world and initiated the European colonization of the Americas, they also brought with them the notion of cultural and class based distinctions that were founded on the types of food people ate. For example, upon their arrival, the Spaniards determined that guinea pig meat was a fundamentally “Indian” food, thus anyone who consumed guinea pig was considered “Indian.” The same was true for other staple Indigenous foods, such as maize and beans. The Spanish considered such Indigenous fare “famine foods,”^[3] fit for consumption only if all other “right foods” had been thoroughly exhausted.

The symbolic nature of food was also seen in the imposition of religion, another destructive aspect of the conquest. The Eucharist, the holiest rite among Catholics, was composed of a wafer made of wheat, which signified the body of Christ, and wine, which signified the blood of Christ. Initially, before wheat was harvested in the Americas, it was difficult to obtain wheat from abroad, since much of it spoiled in transit. The wafers that were necessary for this rite could easily have been made from the native maize, but Spaniards believed that this inferior indigenous plant could not be transformed into the literal body of Christ, as could European wheat. Similarly, only wine made from grapes was acceptable for the sacrament. Any potential substitute was considered blasphemy.”

- 1) How did the European use of pork reinforce the Spaniards’ conceptions of a superiority complex based on race and religion?
- 2) Do you think the Spaniards had the right to use food to try to force Natives to follow Catholicism?
- 3) How do the European stereotypes of individuals based upon what kind of food they ate prove to be an extension of how they formed stereotypes in other ways?
- 4) What can be said about the Europeans that refused to use native maize for wafers to symbolize the body of Christ?
- 5) What does the European perception of their own foods versus Native foods prove about their views of themselves versus others in terms of religion and social status?
- 6) Do you think Spaniards used food in this way in order to simply preserve their culture, or to intentionally discriminate against the Natives in order to put themselves higher on the social/cultural hierarchy?