

The Birth of a Legend: Mole de Guajolote and Mestizo Identity in the Imaginary of Post-Revolutionary Mexico

Ana Karen Ruiz de la Peña Posada

ABSTRACT: *Mole de guajolote* is one of the most typical dishes of Mexican cuisine. Legends about *mole de guajolote* were written in a context in which the elite of the post-revolutionary era sought to construct an imaginary that defined Mexican cuisine. This imaginary was underpinned by the mestizo discourse that gave the national cuisine its identity with *mole de guajolote* as its crowning jewel.

The origins of Mexican cuisine as it is known today have their roots not just in the history of Mexico, but also in the imaginary, constructed over the course of different stages in the life of the country by men and women eager to meaning and identity from their own context. In order to speak of the identity of Mexican cuisine, the imaginary surrounding it and its typical dishes, it is first necessary to put into context the process by which it came about as well as the factors that contributed to it.

416 The construction of the Mexican national identity and what is Mexican was a process that took several centuries. The connection to the world through the colonial ties to Spain, a war of independence, several foreign interventions and a generally unstable political outlook meant that the official discourse and ordinary Mexicans found it difficult to say what made Mexico a nation. During the nineteenth century, after achieving independence, several attempts were made to define it, however it was not until the Mexican Revolution that did away with the regime of Porfirio Díaz, who had been in power for more than thirty years, provided an opportunity to debate what would thereafter be considered Mexican using nationalist discourses that were prevalent during the first decades of the twentieth century.

The ruling elite began to define the avenues for national discourse to encompass all domains of Mexican life, thus arriving at cuisine. Since cuisine was an excellent representation of a part of what was considered Mexican, despite the fact that, at the time, it was still difficult to conceive a unified idea of national cuisine due to the regional differences in a country as large as Mexico, some authors saw the importance of pointing out that there was a dish that could bring together all of the characteristics of what was beginning to be laid down as Mexican cuisine in the imaginary of the era:¹ *el mole de guajolote*, or turkey mole,² the roots of which can be found in the history of Mexico and a base component of which was a food that distinguished Mexico in the collective imaginary: chile peppers. It should be noted that this history did not at first go back to the Mesoamerican era but

The Birth of a Legend

rather to the colonial era, from which another idea conforming Mexican identity was also taken: *mestizaje*. *Mole de guajolote* was defined as a dish that represented the meeting of two worlds with a series of ingredients brought from different corners of the globe, showing it was not just a mestizo dish, but also its cosmopolitan one.

The transcendence of mole is a result not only of the tangible elements, which in and of themselves make it a wonderful dish: its preparation method and the use of *metate*,³ the enormous variety of ingredients such as dried chiles, spices from all over the world such as cloves, cumin and cinnamon and how they combine with other local products such as tortilla, chocolate and turkey and its presence in daily life and at holidays; but the mythology created around this dish is also relevant. For *mole* to be considered important, it first had to be given a story and history that was worthy of being told⁴. The creation of legends about the origin of *mole de guajolote* and the subsequent transmission of such legends gave *mole* the privileged place it occupies in the pantheon of Mexican cuisine.

Imaginary and Imagination

To be able to study the world of legends about *mole de guajolote*, the concepts of the imaginary on which this work will be based must first be defined. They will mainly be based on the work of Dominique Kalifa, an author who has brought concepts about the imaginary and how it is to be used in by historians in their endeavours back to the table in recent years.

According to Kalifa and for the purposes of this investigation, it is understood that:

The imaginary, such as it is understood by historians, is composed of facts that can be observed, analyzed and measured using real, very material sources. It is a part of the history of *representations*, a term which refers to tangible, material forms of expression that are part of cultural history, shaped by broadcast media and by the media limitations and techniques.⁵

From this perspective, the imaginary corresponds to the myths, stories and even dreams as privileged media in which it is expressed. The world of the imaginary to which myths and legends, as a product of fantasy, belong is also a significant part of how signifieds about reality are constructed,⁶ because it is influenced by the cultural, political and social context of the time at which it is created, in such a way that collective imaginaries expressed through this sort of narrations are a reflection of how different groups of humans that make up societies perceive themselves and the elements thereof.

To return to Kalifa, the theory of the historical imaginary which includes both the temporal and spatial concepts of the imaginary, two key concepts in the study of history, will be used, as exemplified below.

As regards the temporal imaginary, Kalifa focuses on chrononyms, artificial divisions of time that allow a period with certain characteristics to be defined and that, according to him:

these denominations of time, particularly when they take the form of chrononyms, (the Renaissance, the Middle Ages [...]) bring with them an entire imaginary, a theatricality, even a “sense of drama”. To unravel a temporal imaginary [...] is to understand how societies care for, interpret and occasionally reinvent entire segments of their past.

The post-revolutionary period, beginning with the promulgation of the Constitution of 1917 and culminating in the 1940s with the consolidation of Mexican political institutions is considered to be a chrononym.⁷ The imaginary of the post-revolutionary period fits with this definition because reinventing a chapter of the past is exactly what the creators of the different versions of the *mole de guajolote* origin myths did.

Concerning the spatial imaginary, Kalifa says that ‘[there are] places [that] are vested with social appropriations (in the sense that they produce social interactions), giving them strong historical significance (and are therefore shifting, inscribed in a diachronic movement and can be analyzed historically)’. Such places imply beliefs, representations and practices. In the collective imaginary, convent kitchens are considered a melting pot for dialogue between Spanish and indigenous cuisine that resulted in mestizo cuisine which, in the discourse and imaginary of these post-revolution period authors, was the basis of the national cuisine.

418 The Legends

Legends are powerful tools for transmitting the culture of a country or society. In the case of Mexico, legends associated with cuisine and food left a profound mark on the collective imaginary and paved the way for the idea of what is thought of as Mexican national cuisine to be constructed in the minds of Mexicans. As stated above, one of the first legends that arose with regard to the cuisine of the country was about *mole de guajolote*, which is now a symbol of Mexico.

The invention of the legend of *mole de guajolote* is commonly attributed to chronicler Artemio de Valle-Arizpe, however, the most recent investigations have shown that Poblano chronicler Carlos de Gante published the first legend about this dish in the newspaper *Excelsior*, and that later versions are based on his work.⁸ In a piece titled *Santa Rosa de Lima y el Mole de Guajolote*,⁹ de Gante gave a nun, Sor Andrea de la Asunción, credit for the creation of the renowned dish that was garnering more and more prestige.

According to the legend, Sor Andrea, who was known in the Santa Rosa convent and in Puebla, the second most important city in New Spain for her skill in the culinary arts, was charged with coming up with a dish to honour bishop Manuel Fernandez de Santa Cruz, who was visiting the city and had to be impressed with a unique delicacy that distinguished the cooking of the nuns of the convent from that of the others. We know that, during the colonial period in Puebla, the different convents in the city set up a competition to create

The Birth of a Legend

the best dishes for very important guests, both from the government and the church, who came through the city. The dilemma of what to serve the bishop was therefore given to the nuns at Santa Rosa. After going back and forth in the kitchen and rejecting all of the suggestions from the sisters of the convent, as if by divine inspiration, Sor Andrea gathered a set of ingredients, starting with dried chiles, spices brought from Europe and Asia, turkey which is native to America, pork lard and chocolate, she began to combine them as the other nuns looked on, flabbergasted, as mole was born before their eyes. The mole was then served to the clergyman who was quick to sing its praise. Carlos de Gante's legend shows the intimate relationship between cuisine and religious inspiration, an idea that would go on to be reproduced in other legends about *mole de guajolote*.

Spatial and temporal imaginaries play an important role here. Firstly, the spatial imaginary is represented by two types of spaces: convent cuisine as a space for culinary experimentation and Puebla, considered one of the most important cities in the colonial era, it was a settlement that was already illustrious for its cuisine and because it was a well-travelled meeting point between various cultures, as not only did indigenous and Spanish cultures live there, but it was also a stopover for those traveling east to west. It is well-known fact that during the colonial era, the kitchens of convents, both of monks and of nuns, became a sort of laboratory where they conducted experiments with the full range of native and foreign ingredients that were available to their pantries, and creating the most extraordinary recipes to impress locals and foreigners alike. One of the main duties of these kitchens was to put on a celebratory spread for important guests to the city such as viceroys and bishops, who held the highest positions in the social hierarchy of New Spain. It is also thanks to convent cuisine that the first written recipe books of New Spain were preserved. The recipes in these books have transcended generations, seeping through the brick-built convent walls, first to be enjoyed in the houses of high-class New Spain houses and eventually being cooked and reinterpreted in every home of what is now Mexico. This narrative of convent kitchens was useful to post-revolutionary Mexico as it lent credence to the idea that the identity of Mexican cuisine and Mexicans themselves was mestizo.

419

In the version of the legend by Melitón Salazar Monroy in his work *La típica cocina poblana y los guisos de sus religiosas*,¹⁰ he tells the tale of how the convent recipes came to be appropriated by the Mexican pueblo. 'Sor Andrea de la Asunción had triumphed mightily with her invention of *mole*. Other convents asked for the recipe for such exquisite a dish, which quickly became vogue in the houses of the rich, and then reached the masses who made it a mainstay at celebrations.' Here Salazar Monroy is expressing another idea about *mole de guajolote* that would remain engraved in the collective imaginary: that it is a holiday dish. Today, *mole* is considered part of the Mexican diet, it can be found in supermarkets where industrially produced versions are sold, in markets and cornershops, but *mole de guajolote*, still prepared using traditional methods, continues to be associated with big family celebrations, weddings, quinceañera parties and baptisms; it is eaten at

The Birth of a Legend

patronal festivals and celebrations such as Día de los Muertos, where *ofrendas* dedicated to the departed often also bear *mole*, and at Poblano tables at Christmastime.

Legends about *mole* express stereotypes about Mexico that began to dominate the thinking of many figures in post-revolutionary Mexico. In the version by José Miguel E. Sarmiento, *mole de guajolote* is accompanied by other foods that are typically Mexican, such as *tamales* and beans. It is also significant that it is served on a Talavera plate. Talavera is a pottery technique that was brought to Puebla by Spanish settlers of Muslim heritage that has since been made an honorary Poblano handicraft. Again, cuisine appears in a role charged with significance in the imaginary of the origin of *mole*. The cuisine of the Santa Rosa convent represents, in the imaginary of Mexicans, principally Puebla natives, the place where a nun was inspired in an act of God to create the national dish. It is noteworthy that it was not just any kitchen, but a kitchen lined with Talavera tiles; the same material as the plate on which the *mole de guajolote* was served to the world (Figure 1).



420

FIGURE 1. The Santa Rosa convent kitchen was all decorated with Talavera Tiles.

Picture taken by the author, 01 June 2021.

The collective imaginary has given credit for the *mole de guajolote* origin myth to Artemio de Valle-Arizpe but, as stated previously, Carlos de Gante was in fact his precursor. Valle-Arizpe changed the version created by de Gante to make the guest honoured by the



FIGURE 2. Some of the *antojitos* that are part of Mexican cuisine. (Illustration by Pictoline.com)

mole de guajolote Viceroy Tomás Antonio de la Cerda y Aragón, giving the first man to taste the national dish a higher political status and thereby according the dish itself a greater role in the nascent pantheon of Mexican cuisine. In his tale, the chronicler lists the dishes that other convents in Puebla sent to dignify the Viceroy. His description of the dishes sent out by a convent whose name he does not mention is striking: ‘from another, platters of *molotes* with enchiladas, with *chalupas*, with quesadillas, with *tostadas* of various compositions, and with flawless *pambazos* made with unambiguous flair.’¹¹ All the dishes mentioned here are considered authentically Mexican cuisine. The majority of

them are made of maize and considered part of what are commonly known as *antojitos* (Figure 2).¹² We can therefore say that these dishes were already part of the national culinary universe in the imaginary of Artemio de Valle-Arizpe.

The tale goes on to describe the nuns’ dilemma and their concerns about which dish was worthy to be served to the Viceroy. The author writes, ‘Sor Andrea wanted to send His Excellency a delicious, exquisite dish, with the spirit of Mexico beating in all its alluring fineness within it.’¹³ This version of the legend is adorned with literary language that beautifies the story and gives it a halo of mysticism, elevating the serendipitous creation of *mole de guajolote* to the Mexican imaginary.

Carlos de Gante, Artemio de Valle-Arizpe, and all the authors who retold this fantastic story, not Sor Andrea de la Asunción, were the ones who left their mark on the postrevolutionary imaginary and gave the history of Mexican cuisine one of its greatest origin myths. *Mole* was, and still is, one of the most refined and elaborate dishes in the oeuvre of Mexican national cuisine, but its most significant impact has been to give visibility to the immense value of made-in-Mexico cuisine.

The Birth of a Legend

Notes

1. It seems pertinent to note here that the prevailing imaginary of the time was not wholly formed in all of society, in light of which we turn to the ruling elite because the power they possess influences and determines the imaginary of an epoch. This idea is supported by the work of Juan Camilo Escobar who, in his work *The Imaginary Between Social Sciences and History* which establishes that the domination of a social class fundamentally depends on imaginaries.
2. *Mole de guajolote* is just one of many varieties of this dish that exist in Mexico. Almost every state has one typical *mole*. Varieties of *mole* include *mole negro*, *mole verde*, *mole amarillito* and *mole de caderas*. The mole about which the legends were written is known today as *mole Poblano*, and was originally an accompaniment to the Mexico's native poultry, the turkey. The mix of sweet and spicy flavours in *mole Poblano* make it stand out from other *moles*.
3. The metate is a cooking utensil similar to a pestle and mortar used by Mesoamerican cultures to grind grain, seeds and some other ingredients and is currently still an essential party of traditional Mexican cuisine.
4. María Elsa Guadalupe Hernández y Martínez, *El mole poblano, platillo prehispánico logra su inmortalidad en el siglo XVII*, (Puebla: Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla-Dirección de Fomento Editorial, 2017) p. 83.
5. Dominique Kalifa, 'Escribir una historia del imaginario (Siglos XIX-XX)', *Secuencia*, 105, (2019) http://secuencia.mora.edu.mx/index.php/Secuencia/articulo/view/1757/1905?fbclid=IwARoUA2yFt_6XHmnffLYAOWWysHW3dLUv2AiYrmGT6GFsgbf_hOTcxRNJLY [Accessed 20 may 2021]
6. Ángel Enrique Carretero Pasín, 'La relevancia sociológica de lo imaginario en la cultura actual', *Nómadas*, 9 (2004) <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=18100906> [Accessed 20 may 2021].
7. Luz María Uhthoff López, 'La construcción del Estado Posrevolucionario en México. Una aproximación desde la administración pública', *Diálogos Revista Electrónica de Historia*, Vol. 20, 2, (2019) <<https://www.redalyc.org/jatsRepo/439/43959529005/html/index.html>> [Accessed 20 May 2021]
8. Few texts concerning legends about *mole de guajolote* acknowledge the contribution of Carlos de Gante. One of the most recent works that unearths this legend is the article by the researcher José Luis Juárez López entitled 'La leyenda de la creación del mole de guajolote de Carlos de Gante'. El gran mito de la cocina mexicana published June 2018 in *Academia, Ciencia y Cultura* of the AAPAUNAM.
9. Carlos de Gante, 'Santa Rosa de Lima y el mole de guajolote', *Excelsior*, México D.F., 12 de diciembre de 1926, pp. 4-5
10. Melitón Salazar Monroy, *La típica cocina poblana y los guisos de sus religiosas*, (México: Impresos López, 1945) 145 p.
11. Artemio de Valle Arizpe, 'El mole' en Hernández y Martínez, , *El mole poblano, platillo prehispánico logra su inmortalidad en el siglo XVII*, pp. 91-97.
12. *Antojitos* are a type of Mexican street food, generally eaten as an appetizer and made of maize. They range from high-fat fast food to a more nutritious meal.
13. Hernández y Martínez, p. 93.