

## From *Kongri* to *Diri ak Djondjon*: Slavery, Creolisation and Culinary Genesis in Saint-Domingue and Independent Haiti

Anthony F. Buccini

In a symposium the theme of which is “food and revolution” it seems highly appropriate to discuss the history and specifically the genesis of the cuisine of Haiti. This particular appropriateness stems from the fact that Haitian cookery constitutes one of a relatively limited number of cuisines in the world that is genuinely a ‘creole cuisine’ — i.e., the product of ‘creolisation’ in the strict application of the word ‘creolisation’ which we use in this paper — and further from the crucial rôle played in the developmental trajectory of this cuisine by the Haitian Revolution, which itself stands out as perhaps the most remarkable of the political upheavals that took place in the so-called ‘Age of Revolution’: Haiti’s fight for liberty represents the only mass-slave revolt ever to bring about both the abolition of slavery and the establishment of an independent state, indeed, a specifically Afro-American state. In socio-political terms, the impact of the victory of Haiti’s slave uprising was deep and, at the time, shocking, for it represented not only the defeat of a major European colonial empire but led, moreover, to the virtual complete elimination of Europeans from Haitian society and an end to the (forced) immigration of Africans. In cultural, including culinary, terms, the Haitian Revolution’s abrupt ending of slavery and far-reaching reduction of European influence set the stage for its creolised way of life to develop in a setting to a far greater degree free of external influence than was the case in other Atlantic and Indian Ocean creole societies.

The goals of this paper are the following: first, to examine briefly what the creolisation process entails, tying the term to its original sense as developed in linguistics to describe the emergence of a group of languages of the Atlantic World and the Indian Ocean region, for example, the creole languages of Jamaica, Barbados, Cape Verde, São Tomé, Mauritius, Louisiana, and Haiti, languages which share some general (and in some cases specific) characteristics and were all created for the most part independently but under strongly analogous and specific, highly peculiar socio-historical circumstances during the Early Modern Period. Those specific, peculiar circumstances were, of course, the contact brought about through the expansion of European capitalist production of sugar, coffee and other agricultural products with an enslaved and overwhelmingly African (including the Malagasy-speaking Madagascar in the Indian Ocean colonies) but linguistically heterogeneous work force; the principal setting for the process of creolisation was the plantation. Second, the central point we address here is how this process which led to the creation of the new creole languages manifested itself in the cultural domain of cuisine in Haiti. At issue here is the question of the degree to which

the culinary developments follow the pattern seen in the linguistic developments, including the matter of to what degree and in what form did African culinary traditions survive the crucible of creolisation.

Our findings are partially at odds with much recent work by both popular and scholarly food historians who are inclined to trace many individual elements of Haitian and other creole cuisines directly back to specific dishes or practices currently known in parts of Africa. While there is strong evidence for multiple instances of such direct connections, it is our contention that, as in the case of the linguistic developments, the survival of overt Africanisms is relatively limited and what most characterises Haitian cuisine is its selection and adaptation of a range of foods and preparations largely imposed on the enslaved population by the new environment and the European colonials but to a noteworthy degree done so in accordance with elements of the deep structural culinary grammar that the slaves brought with them from their African homelands. In the end, what is most striking about Haitian cuisine is its emergence out of the prolonged period of enslavement and the subsequent and abiding economic struggles of the nation; in a very real sense it is a new cultural entity, like Haiti’s *Kreyol* language, born of the strangely structured contact between colonials and slaves and subsequently elaborated through the creativity of the new nation’s peasants and townsmen.

### Historical Orientation

The island of Hispaniola, located between Cuba and Jamaica to the west and Puerto Rico to the east, is home to the two modern nations of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, Haiti occupying approximately the western third of the island with the border running in a wavy line from the northern to the southern coast through a mountainous zone. Haiti is shaped somewhat like a horseshoe, with large peninsulas extending out towards Cuba in the north and towards Jamaica in the south; the nation is conventionally divided into three major regions, the north, comprised of the northern peninsula and north coast of the main part of Haiti’s share of the island, the south which is similarly comprised of the other peninsula and southern coast, and between the two, what is traditionally referred to as the “west” — so named in relation to the Spanish part of the island to the east — which includes the centre and eastern central part of the nation.

Hispaniola was one of the places in the New World visited by Columbus on his initial voyage to the Americas in 1492. The very first European settlement in the Americas

---

since the failed Viking settlements in Newfoundland was made in what is now Haiti, the result of the shipwreck on Christmas Day of his ship the *Santa Maria*, located very near where the French later founded the original principal city of their colony; this settlement did not survive much more than a year and was found destroyed with no survivors when Columbus returned on his second voyage.

Claimed for Spain by Columbus, Hispaniola long remained fully under Spanish control but in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, on account of the focus of the Spanish on more profitable ventures in Mexico and South America, their presence on the island remained small, particularly on the western part of the island, giving English, Dutch and French privateers the opportunity to establish a presence on Tortuga, just off the northern coast of Haiti and close to Spanish shipping lanes which they could attack. By stages, it was the French *boucaniers and flibustiers* and ultimately the French government and private investors who gained control of the area, a de facto situation which gained a measure of legal recognition in 1697 when the Spanish effectively ceded Tortuga and western Hispaniola to the French as part of the Treaty of Ryswick. Starting in the 1630s, the French had begun to develop slave-based commercial agriculture in the Lesser Antilles (especially Guadeloupe and Martinique) and already by the 1660s, well before the Ryswick treaty, they had begun to expand these endeavours to western Hispaniola.

The French called their new colony 'Saint-Domingue' and in a matter of several decades transformed it into a major source of revenue for their economy as a whole: at its peak in the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it accounted for a third of France's overseas trade and one of eight Frenchmen lived directly or indirectly from the wealth generated by the colony (de Cauna 2003, p.12). The major sources of profit were three commercial crops: initially indigo was the main one, with sugar cane coming to ever greater prominence in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, and then coffee providing a new major source of income especially from the 1760s. The three crops complemented each other in certain ways. While both indigo and sugar cane plantations were both focussed on the lower-lying, more tropical plains, indigo required less investment and could be profitably produced on both small and large plantations, whereas sugar cane, to be maximally profitable, required more of an investment in processing installations and was far more demanding with regard to the work to be extracted from the enslaved labour source; though sugar cane plantations of various sizes existed, they tended to be larger than the other plantations and all of the largest plantations in Saint-Domingue were devoted to sugar production. Coffee production was with respect to investment requirements and labour demands more like indigo production but unlike indigo and sugar cane, coffee was best grown in the less tropical uplands of Haiti and the expansion of its cultivation allowed for a substantial increase in the overall exploitation and profitability of the colonial territory.

There is a great deal to say about the composition of the population of Saint-Domingue of general relevance to our concerns but space restrictions here force us to limit the discussion to the points most central to the topic at hand. Speaking in generalities, there are some important themes that need be mentioned at the outset: heterogeneity, displacement, and disruption. Each of these terms can be applied to the experiences of all groups of settlers, both willing and unwilling, in Saint-Domingue, but they apply to a greater degree for the enslaved African population of the colony.

Both the European and African populations of Saint-Domingue were heterogeneous, albeit to different degrees. Though the Europeans were primarily French (likely with an admixture of Dutch, English and others up to ca. 20% or more), the Early Modern France whence they came was by no means the linguistically and culturally unified society it is today: the French settlers included members of a range of social levels and among the most highly represented lower levels of society, they came from many different provinces of France, which in the relevant time period means that they brought with them cultural backgrounds, particularly with regard to language and cuisine, which conformed to those of Paris to anything from a high degree to a very low degree; surely most (if not quite not all) spoke an approximative form of French (rather than a dialect) but surely many spoke versions thereof which were to varying degrees coloured by the dialects that they spoke at home, some of which were quite different from the sort of northern and especially Parisian variety that was on the path to becoming the modern standard. From a culinary standpoint, the degree of variation among the lower social classes was surely greater than most food historians, who typically focus on elite cookery and tend to make gross assumptions about non-elite cookery, recognise.

The African population brought to Saint-Domingue was even more linguistically and culturally heterogeneous, with the slaves being purchased at a number of trading centres located at intervals from Senegambia in West Africa down to the Congo in Central Africa; there were even some slaves originating in Mozambique on the eastern coast of the continent in the late stages of the colony. Each of these coastal trading centres drew their human resources from more or less broad zones, in some cases extending deep into the interior. Several language families were represented and a great many individual languages; naturally, the cultural diversity of so many peoples drawn from such large parts of the African continent was also great, touching on all aspects of life, from religion on to agricultural practices and, of course, cuisine. That said, aspects of the slave trade, together with preferences of slave owners for certain ethnicities, led to there being some concentrations of people with shared languages and cultures in different places and at different times. In general, proprietors in Saint-Domingue favoured slaves from West Africa and within

---

that vast area particularly the Senegambians, the Bambara, and others, albeit sometimes for specific kinds of work, and those groups were more strongly represented in the early period of the colony. Later, Bantu-language speakers from central West Africa (especially Kikongo) were more available and they arrived in large numbers in the decades just preceding the revolution (for details, see, e.g. Geggus 1993, Debien 1974, p.39ff.).

Two further elements of diversity must be mentioned. In the earlier period of the colony, many in the labour force were French (and other European) indentured-servants who by contract were in essence slaves for periods of three years. When the sugar industry started to expand greatly, these *engagés* became gradually less numerous and the African slave population exploded.

Finally, as in other French colonies, there developed also a class of free *gens de couleurs*, blacks and people of mixed ancestry and their descendants, who were in many cases quite prosperous, well-educated, and even owners of plantations and slaves. The following table shows the relative sizes of the three main social groups over time:

Year	Whites	Freed Slaves & Mulattoes		Slaves
1681	4,336	210		2,101
1687	4,441	224		3,358
1700	5,509	500		9,082
1739	11,699	2,527		109,780
1789	30,826	27,548		465,429

Table 1: Population Evolution in Saint-Domingue (Valdman 2015, p.404)

We should note too that the Native-American population of Hispaniola at the time of contact with Europeans, the Taíno, is believed to have almost completely died off by about 1550, long before the French presence on the island began, and so they played no notable rôle in the social life of Saint-Domingue.

### *La Portion Congrue*

The word ‘congrí’ is best known as the Cuban name for one of the island’s beloved staple dishes of rice and beans: congrí, with red beans, seems at least originally to have been eastern Cuba’s analogue to western Cuba’s *moros y cristianos*, though use of the name ‘congrí’ appears to be less geographically restricted now than it once was. In any event, as etymologically transparent as ‘moros y cristianos’ is — black beans being the Moors and the white rice the Christians — the name ‘congrí’ seems to be to the same degree obscure. Attempts to explain this word’s origins have been few, the only two known to me being both suggested by the Cuban anthropologist, Ortíz. In 1923 (p.

416) he asserted that the word (and possibly the dish) was African in origin, while admitting he could not demonstrate the claim. Later, he argued rather that the name of the dish was not directly African but rather Haitian in origin, a reasonable (and ultimately correct) conclusion given that the Cuban word was originally limited to the east, a part of the country that for a time in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century was home to many Haitian refugees and their slaves during the Haitian Revolution. Ortíz’ etymology is that Cuban ‘congrí’ derives directly from a putative Haitian name for a rice and beans dish; he conjectures that the Haitian word ‘congrí’ was derived from a compound of the French/Haitian words ‘congo’, according to him ‘bean’, and ‘ri(z)’, meaning ‘rice’, with the final vowel of ‘congo’ being elided either before or after the borrowing (Perterra 2012, p.40).

This etymology has come to be widely cited in scholarly works and on the internet and can be viewed as received opinion but is nonetheless clearly wrong. To begin, the word ‘kongo’ in Haitian Creole (HC) has several meanings: 1) a migrant cane cutter or bumpkin; 2) a dance; 3) a particular vodou rite; 4) the African nation, Congo. What Ortíz perhaps had in mind was the HC *pwa kongo*, literally ‘Congo pea’ (cf. Fr. *pois d’Angole*), which is the Haitian name for a kind of field pea or pigeon pea (*cajanus cajan*), but it seems highly unusual to use in a compound only the adjectival qualifier of one of the elements but not the noun itself. A further difficulty with Ortíz’ etymology is that the HC word for rice is *diri* (< Fr. *du riz*) and that was most likely the form already in the period of the Haitian Revolution, when *congrí* was borrowed into Cuban Spanish, (though one could argue that the Haitian word was coined when *ri* still had currency). In addition, the required loss of the final vowel of ‘kongo’ in the alleged compound seems to be at odds with Haitian phonology, where such vowel loss does not seem to appear except with unstressed function words (pronouns, verbal particles). And finally, the order of elements in the compound runs counter to what is normal in Haitian Creole (and Spanish): the head noun regularly comes first and one would expect in this case that ‘rice’ would be the head and ‘kongo’ the modifier yielding an unattested \**diri-kongo* (cf. Hall 1953, pp.46-48), and indeed in the names of the numerous Haitian dishes which combine a basic starch, be it rice or cornmeal, with some legume or other ingredient, the normal order is always head-first, thus, for example, *diri ak pwa frans* ‘rice with French peas’, *diri ak pwa kongo* ‘rice with pigeon peas’, etc.

In two papers I presented in early 2014 (Buccini 2014(a) & (b) I proposed a far more straightforward etymology for the Haitian word whence derives not only the Cuban *congrí* but likely also the Louisiana French *jambalaya au congrí(s)*, the latter being specifically a dish made with field or pigeon peas (Buccini forthcoming(b)). Though apparently moribund, the word *kongri* still lives on in Haiti and while absent from Valdman & Iskrova’s (2007)

extensive dictionary, it is recorded in Freeman & Laguerre (1996, p.289), where it is presented as an adjective meaning ‘cooked with beans (rice, cornmeal or millet)’. Of several native HC-speaking informants I have spoken with, only one said he knew of the word but added that he was not completely sure of its use and I suspect that to whatever degree the word survives, it may be dialectal and probably belongs to northern Haiti. Be that as it may, if we proceed assuming this word, like the overwhelming majority of the HC lexicon, derives from French, the only possible source is Fr. *congru(e)*, a participial adjective meaning ‘congruent, consistent (with)’ but of particular relevance here is its use in the phrase *la portion congrue* ‘the appropriate portion’, an old ecclesiastical expression referring to the amount of money apportioned to parish priests by the Church for their personal upkeep. The tendency clearly was for the Church to be less than generous, so that what was originally supposed to be an amount that would be enough for a priest to live decently came to mean increasingly something along the lines of ‘enough to get by’ and thence to its modern sense of ‘the bare minimum’ and especially ‘an unfairly small share’. Non-ecclesiastical use of the phrase is already attested in the colonial period and appears in at least one French text in specific reference to the food given to slaves (DePauw 1770, p.362): *La portion congrue de chaque esclave au-dessus de dix-sept ans, leur a couté 87 livres tournois* ‘The *portion congrue* of each slave above 17 years cost them 87 Tournais pounds [per year]’.

HC *kongri* matches perfectly with French *congru(e)* from a phonological standpoint, for in Creole, French front-rounded vowels were consistently rendered with the corresponding unrounded vowels (ü > i; ø, œ > e), especially in the basilectal varieties. Both the HC word and its proposed source are, moreover, adjectives. With regard to the semantics, the connexion seems clear enough and it is hard to escape the conclusion that there is something of a sinister joke on the part of the French behind the shift from ‘fitting’ or even ‘meagre’ to ‘with beans’. This shift must have occurred in the context of plantation life and more specifically in the context of slaves being fed by their masters: Under such circumstances, where the profitability of the plantation was the one and only overriding concern for the white master and his subordinates, the slaves were generally fed the bare minimum for their survival and ability to fulfil their work duties. The main foods were forms of starch — corn, millet, cassava, yams, sweet potatoes, and only to a lesser extent rice — all providing basic levels of sustenance but on their own obviously nutritionally deficient. To maintain some semblance of health and functionality in the slaves, a protein source was needed and *salaisons*, salted meats and fish, were regularly used to fill this rôle. But there was no cheaper source of protein than locally grown legumes and under the worst, perhaps most, plantation regimes one can well imagine that the bare minimum given to the slaves, *la portion congrue* in its darkest sense, was a portion of beans, served a couple of times a week, atop a bowl of some bland,

boiled starch or cooked in with the starch. *Kongri* evokes at once the cynicism of the colonial elite, the misery of the enslaved, but also ultimately from the slave’s perspective, once they could prepare their own food to their own tastes, the intense pleasure that comes from eating something that is simple, satisfying, and good.

---

### Slavery, Colonial Demographics and Linguistic Creolisation

Given space restrictions this section must be limited to a few basic points. To begin, we note that the terms ‘creole’ and ‘creolisation’ have in recent years entered the general discourse on culture but have been increasingly detached from their historical and technical origins; in effect, they are used as little more than synonyms for ‘mixed’ and ‘mixing’, albeit with an air of postmodernist exoticism. This development is unfortunate because with it we lose the more useful senses of these words.

Though the word has ultimately taken on more specific senses in some places (referring only to whites or blacks or people of mixed heritage), the original meaning of ‘creole’ was ‘someone of non-native lineage born in a colony’ and was applied to such persons without reference to race (Chaudenson 2001, p.3ff.); there seems to have been a sense that the environment moulded the individual in such a way that creoles were constitutionally different from those born in the Old World. From this it follows naturally that the term would come to be applied to distinctive colonial cultural developments, including new language varieties.

‘Creolisation’ is in origin a technical linguistic term referring to the process(es) by which those languages which were commonly referred to as creoles and other languages which resemble them in important ways had come into being; here we focus only on the ‘classic’ creoles, developed in the Atlantic World and Indian Ocean region in the context of European colonisation during the Early Modern period. From a purely linguistic standpoint, what we call creole languages are, in fact, simply languages: there is nothing strange or exceptional about how they function as linguistic systems. And with regard to their structures, they do not form a distinct typological class, in that they possess neither any unique and characteristic structure(s) nor do they share a unique bundle of structural features by which they can be set apart from other languages around the world. That is, however, not to say that they do not generally tend to exhibit some basic characteristics and structural tendencies but these are linked to how they arose and it is ultimately the very particular and uncommon social circumstances under which they developed which justifies treating them as a kind of language.

The ‘classic’ set of creole languages developed in the context of plantations run by Europeans and powered by enslaved African labourers, where colonial varieties of European languages (Portuguese, Dutch, English, French) were acquired and restructured by slaves who themselves

---

were speakers of very heterogeneous mixes of African languages. Significant are the facts that a) the European colonial language varieties initially involved were themselves in a process of development out of mixes of metropolitan regional dialects and social varieties and therefore showed high levels of variation and b) the African language-learners spoke an array of (lexically and structurally) distinct languages. Under these circumstances, the European colonial variety necessarily served as the one unifying medium of speech and was acquired by the slaves but in the plantation context, where slaves greatly outnumbered European and African speakers of the colonial variety, access of the newly-arriving slaves to the target language was increasingly limited, with the slaves approximating the target (e.g., simplification in unmonitored second language acquisition, selection of more salient variants) and (re)shaping it according to their own linguistic knowledge (e.g., selection of elements allied with their native languages, imposition of some, especially phonological elements from their native languages) as they went. In the end, what they produced collectively as a speech community were ‘creolised’ varieties of the colonial dialect, lexically very close to that target but structurally deviant from it at the grammatical level.

Linguists have distinguished two stages in the process: an initial ‘homestead phase’, a period when the colonial variety of the European language is developing. During this phase, the demographic and sociolinguistic dynamics of the colony allow for the linguistic absorption of foreign language speakers: alloglot Europeans and African slaves are in close contact with the main linguistic group (here, French-speakers) in small settlements and are thus able to acquire the developing colonial variety to a high degree, participating in its evolution. This founding population, though small, had a disproportionate and abiding effect on the cultural trajectory of the colony, setting norms to which newcomers would be assimilated (the ‘founder principle’; see Mufwene 1996).

The second or ‘plantation phase’ is marked by the rapid expansion of commercial agriculture and the concomitant increase in the use of slave labour leading to a) a demographic/sociolinguistic imbalance in favour of the slaves and b) a situation on the plantations in which newly arrived slaves have increasingly less contact with speakers of the colonial variety though still being compelled by circumstance to acquire it and use it as their vernacular language. In figure 1 above we can see that this stage was reached in Saint-Domingue after 1687 and likely near 1700, when the slave population not only surpassed but then soon greatly exceeded the population of whites and the *gens de couleur* combined, a trend that only hastened as time went by. Further factors in this process were the low birth rates of slaves and the extremely high mortality rates of creole slaves and especially ‘bossales’ (African-born slaves), so that the expanding populations on plantations were constantly absorbing new groups of language learners with only a

gradual expansion of the creole population (Geggus 1993). Under such circumstances, it becomes clear why it is said that the genesis of creole languages proceeded by ‘approximations of approximations of approximations’.

Slavery does not necessarily bring about the development of a creole language but the particular demographic conditions associated with certain European plantation societies the Atlantic World and Indian Ocean did (cf. Mufwene 2005, p.54ff.): creole languages developed where the slaves were not only from disparate backgrounds and in relatively brief periods of time came to vastly outnumber the colonial population, but due to low birth-rates and high mortality, their communities remained for an extended period of time in a state of flux, constantly absorbing large numbers of new arrivals.

---

### Culinary Creolisation

Language is a cultural domain, which is to say that it is a body of learned ideas expressed as behaviour, open to individual innovation but strongly filtered by communal norms. It is a system, with an observable surface level, an underlying (i.e. existing in the minds of individual members of a community) structure, and rules for mapping between surface phenomena and underlying structure; language exists, moreover, alongside and in intimate connection with other cultural domains, such as religion, music, gender rôles, and cuisine, and these other cultural domains show their own systematicity and structure (Buccini In press, forthcoming(a)). Cultural continuity in all domains depends upon generational transfer through relevant discourse and sensual experience, as well as explicit instruction, and in traditional societies the typical focal point for generational transfer is the family, extended family, and thence other local circles of social discourse (e.g., the village, urban neighbourhood, etc.). Openings in each system — in the process of learning (total replication is never possible), through interrelations with other cultural domains that are subject to change, through external influences (e.g. environmental) — make change always possible and inevitable, but the stronger the local focus is, the more inclined each system is to continuity. Conversely, the weaker the local (community internal) the focus is, the greater the degree to which change will occur.

With regard to language, we have seen that for the slaves linguistic change — shift to the colonial language — was forced by circumstances, but also from the standpoint of European colonists, the diversity and instability of their sociolinguistic environment also ensured change within the colonial dialect itself but in addition with most having also to acquire the emerging creole and many ultimately making a version thereof their own vernacular.

The question is, in the same environment in which linguistic creolisation took place, what were the effects of the particular social circumstances which led to the genesis of creole languages on other cultural domains? Specifically in

---

the present context, what does culinary creolisation entail? In his own consideration of the term, Eriksen (2007) contrasts 'creolisation' with other forms of cultural 'mixing' and defines it as "cultural phenomena that result from displacement and the ensuing social encounter and mutual influence between/among two or several groups, creating an ongoing dynamic interchange of symbols and practices, eventually leading to new forms with varying degrees of stability" (pp.172-173). In the cases of plantation societies such as those of Haiti, Jamaica, etc., I feel it crucial to amplify the notion of 'displacement' and add *disruption* in the sense that while both European colonists and African slaves in such societies were displaced from their native cultural settings, Africans especially were also subjected to conditions that to a significant degree worked to disrupt the normal mechanisms by which traditional cultural (including culinary) knowledge is transmitted (cf. Mintz & Price 1976, p.24), namely:

- the linguistic/cultural heterogeneity of plantation populations.
- the favouring for purchase of younger slaves over older slaves (Debien 1974, p.82).
- the favouring for purchase of male over female slaves, reducing the relative presence of those with certain specialised knowledge, e.g. with regard to agriculture and cookery.
- the favouring of creole males for all higher positions in the slave hierarchy; slaves engaged as cooks were male, the vast majority creoles (Geggus 1993, p.87); the large majority of females remained field hands with limited opportunities to control their own diet.
- on many plantations, newly arrived slaves were fed all meals from the central kitchen for as long as one or even two years and received extensive instruction on the cultivation of personal garden plots (Debien 1974, pp.75ff.).
- on some (many?) plantations, slave children were fed meals from the central kitchen (de Cauna 2003, p.100).
- field workers were normally supplied midday meals from the central kitchen.

More generally, the conditions of slavery inflicted on its victims pervasive restrictions on their organisation of time and their freedom of association and often destabilised newly developed familial and amical circles. In specific reference to cuisine, it must be noted that choices regarding the availability of basic staples (grains and other starchy foods, salted fish and meats) were made by plantation owners and managers, who also played a key rôle in the development of the slaves' personal garden plots. Considering such conditions, under which many of the basic decisions regarding alimentation were made by others, one can reasonably ask whether the enslaved population of a place like Saint-Domingue had a 'cuisine'.

Countering these arguments are the following points. First, plantation management chose staples and garden crops at least partially in consideration of the food preferences of their slaves. In addition, provisions grown in garden plots were an important part of the slaves' diet and a means by

which they could recreate familiar or develop new prepared foods that conformed to the culinary aesthetics which they had acquired in Africa. It is, moreover, well documented that slaves routinely foraged whenever possible for wild foods of all sorts —sources of protein (small game, crabs, oysters, and insects), fruits, leafy vegetables, medicinal herbs — to supplement the very meagre resources available on the plantations. In this regard, it must be noted that though Saint-Domingue presented the new slaves with an unfamiliar environment, it resembled in ways the tropical environments from which many had come in Africa. One can well imagine a constant exchange of information between creoles, those most familiar with the colonial situation, and bossales renewing communal knowledge of African ways and counterbalancing the explicit training in colonial/creole ways that plantation management gave newcomers.

Despite the oppressive restrictions on food choices, leisure time, and freedom to associate with others, many of Saint-Domingue's slaves had the opportunity on Sundays and a few holidays per year to gather in nearby markets towns or elsewhere to exchange or sell goods (including produce from garden plots) and to engage in cultural, community-building activities, most particularly religious rituals to which were linked music and dance. In these gatherings, largely away from the immediate control of plantation management and colonial authorities, African cultural elements came naturally to expression and it is therefore not surprising that in Haitian Creole, with its overwhelmingly French-based lexicon, relatively large numbers of words from various African languages appear in the semantic fields related to religion, music and dance. It seems certain that in the context of such celebratory gatherings, coinciding with market exchanges of comestibles, foods of various kinds must have been discussed and shared; prepared foods were surely also consumed. It is therefore with these events in mind that we should consider the overt culinary Africanisms that occur in Haitian Creole, the number of which is yet to be fully ascertained but is in this writer's estimation greater than generally indicated in the literature.

---

### The Genesis of Haitian Cuisine

In the title of this paper I refer to 'kongri', apparently no longer the name of a dish in Haiti but, given that the word was borrowed into Cuban Spanish and appears as the name of a rice and beans dish, it likely once was, a dish that clearly grew out of the meagre portion of beans with a starch served to the slaves under the worst of circumstances. I also refer to an especially beloved and, in my opinion, particularly elegant Haitian dish, *diri ak djondjon*, literally 'rice with mushrooms', a preparation associated with the north of the country but now regarded as belonging to the national cuisine. There exist many variations but in essence it is rice seasoned with garlic, onion/shallot, cloves, habanero chilli, thyme, with the rice taking on a characteristic blackish colour and flavour

---

from being cooked in the soaking liquid from a type of wild mushroom native to Haiti (Nieves-Rivera 2001); the mushrooms (*Psathyrella copriniceps*) are in limited supply and expensive. Common additions to the dish are lima beans or peas — rendering this dish in a sense a kind of *diri kongri* — and a further seasoning often used is *tritri*, small dried shrimp or fish. While it is likely impossible to trace the history of this dish, I see no reason to believe that it is anything other than a creation of the collective efforts of northern Haitians; vaguely similar dishes certainly exist elsewhere in the world but *diri ak djondjon* is firmly tied to the Haitian environment through the central ingredient of the wild mushrooms, as it also is through the use of *tritri*, foods that were surely foraged by slaves and which both have direct analogues in parts of West Africa and elsewhere in West Indies, where enslaved West Africans lived: in other words, *diri ak djondjon* cannot be traced back to an African dish — it is a Haitian creation but one that clearly has indirect connexions to African traditions, to deep elements of particular African cuisines that took root in the newly emerging cuisine of Saint-Domingue and independent Haiti.

One of the most interesting aspects of Haitian cuisine is its regional diversity. Having emerged from colonialism and slavery, Haiti's population was mostly rural and the majority of Haitians were peasants. Under such circumstances, at a time when trends in other countries were toward decreasing levels of regionalism, Haiti seems to have been moving to a degree in the opposite direction, a movement paralleled by and related to linguistic developments in Haitian Creole.

---

#### Works Cited

- Buccini, A.F. (2014a) 'Un vrai jambalaya 'A true mess': The complex etymologies of *jambalaya* and *hoppin' John* in their transatlantic historical context.' Paper presented at the Atlantic World Foodways Conference, University of North Carolina Greensboro, 1 February 2014.
- Buccini, A.F. (2014b) *Jambalaya, Congri, & Hopping John*: Culinary history in an Atlantic context 'from the bottom up'. Paper presented to Culinary Historians of Chicago, 8 March 2014.
- Buccini, A.F. (In press) 'Defining 'cuisine': Communication, culinary grammar, and the typology of cuisine', in McWilliams, M. (ed.) Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium 2015, Totnes: Prospect.
- Buccini, A.F. (Forthcoming a) 'Prejudice, assimilation, and profit: The peculiar history of Italian cookery in the United States', in Chou, C., & Kramer, S. (eds.) Food, Identity and Social Change.
- Buccini, A.F. (Forthcoming b) '*Jambalaya, Congri, Hopping John*: The complex etymological, ethnic, and culinary connexions between three iconic dishes of the Atlantic World.'
- Chaudenson, R. (2001) *Creolization of Language and Culture*, London: Routledge.
- d'Ans, A. (1987) *Haiti: Paysage et société*, Paris: Karthala.
- de Cauna, J. (2003) *Au temps des isles à sucre*, Paris: Karthala.
- Debien, G. (1974) *Les esclaves aux Antilles françaises (XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles)*, Basse-Terre: Société Historique de la Guadeloupe.
- De Pauw, C. (1770) *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, Berlin.
- Eriksen, T.H. (2007) 'Creolization in anthropological theory and Mauritius', in Stewart, C. (ed.) *Creolization: History, Ethnography, Theory*, Walnut Creek: Left Coast, 153-177
- Freeman, B. and Laguerre, J. (1996) *Haitian-English Dictionary*, Lawrence: Institute of Haitian Studies.
- Geggus, D.P. (1993) 'Sugar and coffee cultivation in Saint Domingue and the shaping of the slave labor force', in Berlin, I. and Morgan, P.D. (eds.) *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 73-98.
- Hall, R.A. (1953) *Haitian Creole: Grammar, Texts, Vocabulary*, Philadelphia: American Anthropological Association.
- Mintz, S.W., and Price, R. (1976) *An Anthropological Approach to the Afro-American Past: A Caribbean Perspective*, Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues.
- Mufwene, S.S. (1996) 'The founder principle in creole genesis', *Diachronica*, 13, 83-134.
- Mufwene, S.S. (2005) *Créoles, écologie sociale, évolution linguistique*, Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Nieves-Rivera, A.M. (2001) 'The edible *psathyrellas* of Haiti', *Inoculum*, 52, 1-3. Available online: <http://msafungi.org/inoculum/> [accessed April 2016].
- Ortiz, F. (1923) 'La cocina afrocubana', *Revista Bimestre Cubana*, 18, 401-423.
- Pertierra, A.C. (2012) 'The more things change, the more they stay the same: Rice and beans in modern Cuba', in Wilk, R. and Barbosa, L. (eds.) *Rice and Beans: A Unique Dish in a Hundred Places*, London: Berg, 35-59.
- Valdman, A. (2015) *Haitian Creole: Structure, Variation, Status, Origin*, Sheffield: Equinox.
- Valdman, A., and Iskrova, I. (eds.) (2007) *Haitian Creole-English Bilingual Dictionary*, Bloomington: Indiana University Creole Institute.
-