

Race and gender in Bolivian middle class food culture

Sarah Kollnig

ABSTRACT: Bolivia is a highly unequal social context, with the country's elite being mainly white and westernized and the indigenous majority being largely discriminated against. This paper is based on one year of ethnographic fieldwork in the country's "gastronomic capital", Cochabamba city. The author lived and worked with the traditional middle class of Cochabamba, which identifies itself as white and western. In their everyday food practices, the middle class reproduces social inequalities along the lines of ethnicity and gender. While many food practices are expressions of a "mestizo" culture that emerged out of the appropriation of indigenous ingredients and recipes into a cuisine with European roots, discrimination abounds in everyday life. Places for eating out are stratified, with certain restaurants being reserved for the white elites. When street food is consumed, the middle class assesses the ethnic "cleanliness" of the person preparing the food critically. The consumption of healthy food remains a privilege of few. The people the author lived and worked with regard the consumption of western food items as a sign of being well-educated. The preparation of food is still mostly assigned to women, who are confronted with a new, lean and western body image. The author concludes that the white middle class distinguishes itself from the rest of the population through specific food habits and also touches upon the serious ecological and social consequences of this need for distinction.

I have spent many years investigating the food culture of Cochabamba city. The focus of my ethnographic research lies with the privileged middle class of the city. Cochabamba is also known as the gastronomic capital of Bolivia. It has a variety of food to offer, which stems from the meeting of products from different ecological and cultural areas, but is also a remnant of colonialism.

Bolivian meals often show a mixture of indigenous and western ingredients, which expresses the force of colonialism to *impose* and *appropriate* preparation techniques and ingredients. In order to conceptualize this colonial process, I use Aníbal Quijano's *coloniality* as a central analytical lens. Quijano defines *coloniality* as the continuation of colonial power relations into the present (for an English language account, see Quijano 2007). From this perspective, contemporary food practices have been shaped by colonial forces. A central colonial movement is to, on the one hand, impose a Eurocentric way of thinking and European practices, while, on the other hand, appropriating the indigenous knowledge and practices that seem commercially beneficial. An example of an external imposition of food practices is the fostering of the consumption of generic chicken meat. The export of ancient grains such as Quinoa is an example of the contemporary appropriation of indigenous food items.

A central organizing principle of colonial power relations is, according to Quijano, race. The privileged middle class of Cochabamba identifies itself, and is perceived as, western and white. I use Bourdieu's constellations of capital to bring out that this social group might not have the highest economic capital, but they possess valuable social and cultural capital. They have good connections to the country's economic elites, and they have acquired western cultural capital. This distinction particularly from the indigenous population is emphasized in everyday food practices.

The people I lived with in Cochabamba enjoy eating traditional regional meals with many indigenous aspects. They eat their maize stew or their highland potatoes with a sense of nostalgia, reminiscing about the times when social stratification was still more rigid, when the indigenous population still lived in the countryside to serve the Bolivian elite. These are the memories attached to traditional meals. When it comes to everyday food, often street food, the middle class has conceptualizations of hygiene that portray food prepared by the indigenous population, and particularly indigenous women, as a health risk. In Mary Douglas' sense, this expresses the fear of the transgression of social boundaries (see Douglas, 1966). A similar principle can be observed in the segregation of places for eating out, with some restaurants being de facto reserved for the privileged population. Racial discrimination intersects with gender, as particularly indigenous women are portrayed as unclean. Women who are part of the white population are subject to western body images, and it is seen as appropriate to control one's diet and body accordingly.

All in all, in a country that has historically been racially divided between the indigenous and the white population, food practices largely reproduce these historical divisions.

About the author

Sarah Kollnig is a PhD candidate at the Human Ecology Division at Lund University, Sweden. She has an interdisciplinary background in Environmental Studies, and her current work focuses on social inequalities in Bolivia. She has conducted several years of ethnographic fieldwork in the Bolivian city of Cochabamba.

Works cited

- Douglas, M. (1966). *Purity and Danger: An analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo*. London: Routledge.
- Quijano, A. (2007). Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality. *Cultural Studies* 21(2–3): 168–178