



Coffee Drinking and Sociability from Domestic Kitchen to Public Fora History of Coffee Consumption in Costa Rica from 1840 to 1940

Elena Qleibo*

Laboratoire C3S USports UFC, Université de Bourgogne, France

Abstract

Anthropologists have been interested for many years on the study of food and eating. Through studies of foods we, the author of the review also an anthropologist, have been able to bring to light social and cultural processes, particular cultural meaning as well as the understanding of economic and political dynamics. Vega chooses to present the relevance of coffee in the development of the Costa Ricans' creation of their symbolic identity by showing how coffee from early years after its being planted there integrates family and later on social life. The fact that coffee is both associated with a sense of belonging and at the same time part and parcel of the economic production chain is one of the particular aspects of the commodity in the Costa Rican case.

Together with the professions of historian cum anthropologist, Vega has another interest and that is on the sciences of collective communications. We can understand thus her emphasis in the role of publicity for the dissemination of information. She has produced her analysis based on economic studies on consumerism, relating this to psychological responses *vis a vis* practice, *habitus* (using as Vega does) in the Bordieusian sense. She recurs to the Marxist approach to alienation due to capitalist consumer society and finally she offers insights into the cultural meaning of cultural material goods from the point of view of an anthropologist. She brings to the fore consumerism from the point of view of Fernand Braudel and Sidney Mintz. Using the citation of Arnold Bauer [1], *We are what we buy/consume*. Through the use of different examples of the treatment of food and eating through history she seeks validation for her hypothesis. Vega's book provides diverse leads for further research and exploration of the relation space and time focused on the single product: Coffee. Her research and analysis as she herself describes it is a pioneering work because of its perspective of analysis from the point of view of consumption and the explorations on the symbolic aspects of its use in the production of identity and nation.

As an example of the work of other anthropologists who also used food as an entry into the understanding of symbolic social phenomena, Franz Boas, in his book on

Tsimshian mythology in the late XIX century, provides a masterful description of the eating ceremony of the first run of salmon and the social injunctions surrounding it. Through the salmon hunting he describes taboos and rituals related to the sexual restrictions for the hunters and the preparation of the salmon in this society. Later on in the XX century, Lévi-Straus produces his series on the study of myth through the rituals around food utilization of the Amazonian Indians that shape social realities and behaviour. Through ethnographic observation Levi-Straus attempts to reconstruct the logical structure underlying food and cooking myths defining the intellectual laws unique to the community in question, laws that according to him, are universal, valid for any culture at all times. More recently in the 1970's Jean Briggs fieldwork and research on the Utku Eskimos in Canada shows light on the seasonality of food practices and its

***Corresponding author:** Elena Qleibo, PhD in Social Anthropology, Laboratoire C3S USports UFC, Université de Bourgogne, Franche-Comté, France, E-mail: elenaqleibo@gmail.com

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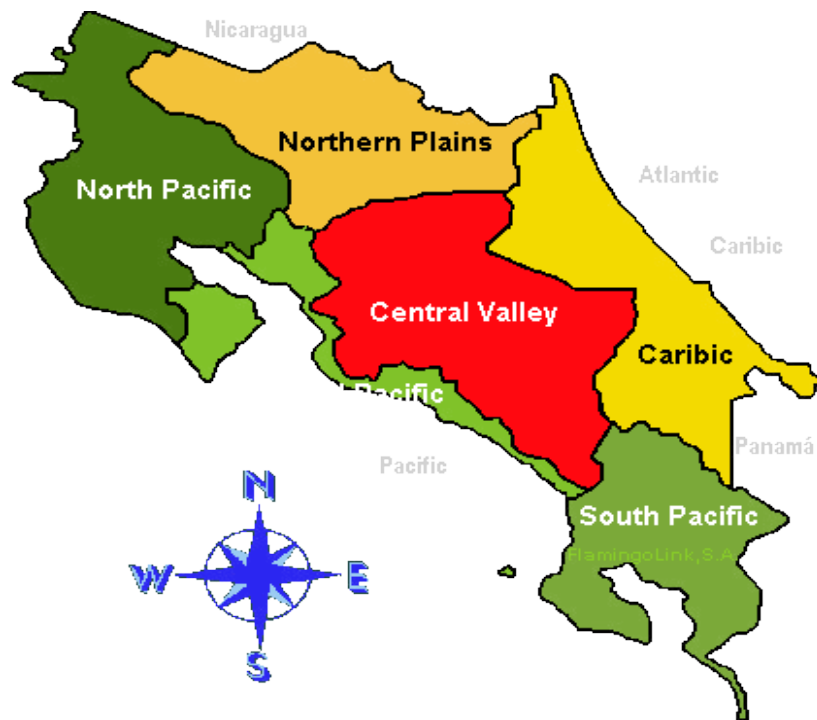


Figure 1: Map of Central Valley - Meseta Central.
Source: Angela Malek's site, Ciudad Colón.

relation to the social practices, describing the society's particular eating habits and social behaviour. Through the study of food and eating she throws light on the understanding of societal relations.

The Golden Bean in the Costa Rican Society 1840 to 1940

In the reviewed book, Vega analyses [2], through the study of a period of on hundred years, the history of one single commodity, coffee in this case, the relation between its production, the habit of consumption and the symbolism the commodity acquires in the process of social construction. Highlighting its relevance in the creation of the Costa Rican national identity and the local politico economic discourse. In her text, Vega identifies five important moments in the time line related to the practice, the habit of drinking coffee in Costa Rica in the XIX and first half of XX century and poses the relation between the production and its consumption practice. Coffee consumption concentrates in the Central Valley, cradle of the coffee production in the domestic sphere from 1820 to 1840. The Central Valley in the province of San José is one of the most fertile areas of the country. The land in the valley is a relative plain, a plateau, despite being surrounded by several mountains and volcanoes (Figure 1).

While in 1810 the well to do settlers would import or traded the grain to Panama, Haiti or Jamaica, barely ten years after, with the generalisation of its planting by the

small land owners, the drink becomes popular with the rural population. Larger landowners who planted extensive plots of land with coffee, sold part of it locally and used it also for the family consumption, exporting the remaining to for example Panama, or even much further to Chile.

In the next two decades from 1820 to 1840 the planting of coffee begins to expand out of the central area towards the west and east, favoured by the opening of new roads to the ports in the Pacific (Puntarenas) and Atlantic (Matina) oceans. Its preparations remain a household activity and it is done manually in the wood *pilones* or stone *metates*. There is not yet evidence that is offered in the few *fondas* that provided food and sometimes a place to sleep to voyagers, foreign and local. The request by foreign voyagers also produces its expansion away from the Central Valley and begins taking the place of chocolate, very popular among the settlers since the colonial period. This process was also a result of the reduction of the cacao production and the high cost of buying the cacao, making coffee more accessible for all the population (Figure 2).

Popular belief spread the word that coffee has curative powers and prevent diseases. During the hard work of opening roads, workers were given the drink twice a day to infuse them the energy necessary for long days of work. This belief was reasserted by the inclusion of the coffee in the diet of patients interned in the national hospital as will be mentioned later in the text.



Figure 2: Map of Costa Rican Provinces.

Source: U.S. Central Intelligence Agency site, 2016.

During the period of 1840 until 1860's, coffee production expands towards the Atlantic Ocean in the east, to the province of Limón and also to closer areas in the port of Puntarenas and neighbouring areas only access ways from the Pacific to the Central Valley. Between 1860 and 1890 the coffee is fully established through the domestic space of the Central Valley and its use is generalised. It is the time when it begins to be offered in *pulperías*, hotels, guesthouses, restaurants and *cafeterías* that are slowly sprouting with the increase of the population and foreign visitors. During those years there are no coffee factories, *molinos* (coffee mills) or *toferrafaction* (coffee grinding factories) factories. The beans are provided through the *beneficios*, where it is processed and readied towards the place where it will be offered, processed or sold as beans, directly or though the owners or renters of the smaller parcels in the weekly market, through barter, or paid in cash. *Beneficio* is the word used in Costa Rica to refer to a wet mill where coffee beans or the berries found inside are processed. Although the coffee fruit is called a bean for its similarity to an actual bean, coffee is really a stone fruit. Few persons toast coffee to sell in the few *pulperías* that sell also a variety of other products. These "toasters" that do manual toasting, usually in *comales* of clay or iron, cannot provide the amount required for the de-

mand for consumption of the local population and thus coffee continues to be processed domestically.

Well rooted in the domestic sphere it starts to consolidate its public expansion. During these period in the decade of the 1870, the Costa Rica Railway Company initiate the construction of the railroad to the Atlantic to communicate the province of San José with the port of Limón. The larger numbers of workers coming for the project are Chinese and Italians. While the Chinese do not consume the product, Italians require the coffee and there were strikes when this was not present for a few days. The development of the United Fruit Company and the presence of investors and workers from Jamaica, increase the popularity of the best quality coffee that is sold in the *comisariato* of the banana company.

Still remaining a product of domestic production and consumption, it forms part of the diet provided in the national hospital in San José, Hospital San Juan de Dios where it is served morning at 6:30 am and evening at 21 pm and also after the lunch at 9:30 am if requested.

By the end of the XIX Century coffee is present in the areas of the Central Valley in the western parts and in Turrialba, both areas populated by peasants of the Central Valley that moved there in the process of colonisa-

tion of the lands and since they produced and consumed the coffee they planted it in the newly open parcels. We find the large landowners and the small parcels who work also as hand labour, *peones*, in the large farms.

Vega asserts that by this time coffee consumption generates a sense of shared belonging to all Costa Ricans and it becomes the indispensable drink in the daily diet. It has the place of honour at the breakfast table and also in the afternoon snack, both moments are usually called simply “*café*”. One invites for afternoon *café* or in the morning one takes coffee meaning breakfast. Vega explains that: “*The consumption of coffee generates a sense of belonging shared by all the Costa Ricans and it has become a necessary drink in the daily diet of the population. It occupies the place of honour at breakfast and often in the mid afternoon pause. The coffee is thought to have particular attributes that contribute to the healthy development of consumers: It wakes them up, fills them with energy and a good mood*”.

From 1890 to 1920 coffee factories, commercial grinders, proliferate developing systems of local marketing for the sale of the product that becomes generalised all through Costa Rica and not of the best quality during those years as Vega explains, since the pressure of quality control is not yet forced by the people, coffee growers and government yet. The various coffee roasting plants promote its conspicuous consumption. Publicity becomes crucial for the sale and promotion of diverse types of coffee and of different qualities, which produces a quickly expanding local market for the coffee. The end of the XIX century sees the local consumption and demand of good quality coffee increase as the knowledge in the local population increases, in the company, as Vega highlights, of white sugar a fusion that becomes more and more frequent. In December 1934 the newspaper *La Tribuna* publishes an article asserting the necessity and preponderance of coffee and sugar: Coffee as well as sugar is today a need for all countries in the civilised world, because they are indispensable staples of the daily human sustenance.

Vega considers this to be the period where “modernity” becomes a part of the essence and reality of Costa Rican society; it is the beginning of the transformation of the coffee into a commodity that is consumed and desired and acquired through market dynamics. Coffee is drunk with or without sugar or with *tapa de dulce*, (the raw sugar formed in cakes) and also prepared with milk like the chocolate. Although it is unknown exactly when the coffee is prepared with milk and in the well-to-do homes with white sugar, it is not strange it was prepared like the chocolate, a beverage used in the country since the XVII century. The preferred way of making the coffee in Costa Rica is by infiltration, *chorreado*. The prepa-

ration of the grain was in the XIX and part of the XX centuries a lengthy process of toasting in a *comal* for 45 to 60 minutes and then to remove the skin from the berries after its toasting and then grinding it in the *pilón* or in a mill. After the powder was of the fineness desired then one puts around 20 grams for each cup, pouring the boiling water first slowly and then faster according to the number of cups. Some people would add milk and some other a piece of “*tapa de dulce*” or some white sugar, to heighten the taste. The coffee drinkers take it plain to get the full aroma of a good cup of coffee. It is also used for all kinds of foods, meat and sweets.

Consumption of coffee in the public sphere begins in the last quarter of the XIX century. It is sold and drunk in *pulperías*, *cafeterías*, and restaurants or simply in the places called *café*s. In those places the coffee becomes in a short period of time the beverage drunk in places of *détente*, meeting, rest and solace. It is used at the moment of socialising. Emulation of European *café*s is present in certain establishments in Costa Rica in modern settings. *Pulperías*, *cafeterías* and *hosterías* sell different products and do not present necessarily a refined set up for drinking coffee. People stand by the counter talking in an environment of informality. They become places of meeting and buying. Vega proposes that it is when the coffee enters the public space, that its consumption becomes socially differentiated. This heterogeneity is due to the price of the coffee itself according to quality, the structural conditions and the prestige of the place where it is served and sold and the social groups who frequent those places and in whose company the coffee is drunk. We can suppose that those where the *élites* go to be are somewhat an emulation of the European modernity and their habits. For the others, in *cafeterías*, *fondas*, *clubes*, *pulperías*, the practice of coffee drinking develops local forms of sociability giving way to a local version of modernity. Both social sectors develop ties of identification and the social differentiation of their particular group.

A precious source of related information are the commercial advertisements that appear between 1840 and 1940 highlight not only the quality of the coffee served but refer to the groups that frequent the place as well as chronicles of travellers, foreign and local, biographies of writers that in many cases indicate with details the social dynamics of their particular groups. It is important that by the end of the XIX century and beginning of the XX the government and coffee merchants make an effort to highlight the commercial situation locally. There are diverse magazines and newspaper articles whose audience goes also beyond the Costa Rican borders. Among some of those publications are *El libro azul de Costa Rica*, *Revista de Costa Rica en el siglo XIX*, the commercial guide of the 1920's, census and materials from the Costa Rica

Chamber of Commerce. Not negligible are photographs and folk literature.

Vega presents the coffee as a crucial product in the Costa Rican political, economic, and socio-cultural spheres for over one hundred years. It is not a surprise that coffee, as a product planted and produced and exported has had this responsibility in the historical journey of the country since it has been the main export product for over a century and to its cycle of planting, production and export has depended the life of thousands of Costa Ricans together with the national economy subordinated to the changing prices of the valued grain, fluctuations that have affected the political upheavals and the process of cultural construction of the Costa Rican identity.

Costa Rica has been a rural country since its independence. It was discovered as the rest of Central America, by Christopher Columbus in the XVI century and it only gains its independence from the Spanish Crown in 1821. It has seven administrative provinces (Cartago, San José, Heredia, Alajuela, Guanacaste, Puntarenas and Limón) and although the capital was Cartago for many years, the central valley, in the province of San José has always been the centre of activity before it finally became the capital. Large part of the population was analphabetic land workers. Their rhythm of life was regulated by the rural work schedules and the absence of electricity forcing very early rise and sleeping habits following a seasonal agricultural cycle well into the XX century.

Coffee Drinking Becomes a Favourite Drink Part of the Costa Rica Identity

Before the introduction of coffee in the Costa Rican diet in 1840, the favourite drinks of Costa Ricans were *aguadulce* (water sweetened with the moulded round blocks - *tapa de dulce*- of non-processed sugar from the sugar cane factories, *trapiches*), and chocolate. Gradually the coffee becomes also a favourite drink and even the preferred one. The usual way of making the coffee in Costa Rica is by infiltration, *chorreado*. The preparation of the grain was in the XIX and part of the XX centuries a lengthy process of toasting in a *comal* for 45 to 60 minutes and then to remove the skin from the berries after its toasting and then grinding it in the *pilón* or in a mill. After the powder was of the fineness desired then one puts around 20 grams for each cup, pouring the boiling water first slowly and then faster according to the number of cups. Some people would add milk and some other a piece of *tapa de dulce* or some white sugar, to heighten the taste. The coffee drinkers take it plain to get the full aroma of a good cup of coffee. It is also used for all kinds of foods, meat and sweets.

We can think of the coffee as a “civilizing good” that was chosen as an imitation to European habits to show

status only in relation to the notable population who were in touch with those habits. The peasants had no idea of those habits and nevertheless develop the taste and the need for the coffee as already mentioned in the text, that was considered by popular belief to have curative properties. The practice of drinking coffee drinking becomes confused with its production. Costa Rica was home of large-scale producers and small scale almost for house consumption. Vega portrays how the passage of time is punctuated by the offering of coffee, as Mary Douglas [3] writes in relation to food consumption practices: “*the calendar has to be notched for annual, quarterly, monthly, weekly, daily and shorter periodicities... so the passage of time can then be laden with meaning*”. Mary Douglas goes to expand in her research to symbolic aspect of food in social interactions and to develop her work is not the purpose of this article.

In Costa Rica as we will see the coffee becoming ever present at breakfast that takes the name of the product itself, then at mid morning, after lunch, in the afternoon and even as an evening drink in spite that some think it keeps one awake, in funerals, baptisms, weddings, holidays: “*a time for living, a time for dying, a time for loving*”. Human rationality presses us to make sense of the world by the punctuation of time and celebrations, happy or sad. Coffee becomes ever present in all kinds of celebrations from births, to death and also in the religious holidays and in the church fund raising events.

As Vega notes the circumstances in which a new habit is acquired are as important as the habits/practices of those who learnt it. The habit becomes frequent, regular and is surrounded by certain symbolism. Its use becomes ritualised and its place is prominent for the population in general. It becomes the way to show hospitality par excellence and the ever-present beverage because essential in all ceremonial occasions. Her hypothesis is that the consumption of coffee in the domestic sphere symbolises a pause, affection, friendship, appreciation, feeling of family and familiarity and satisfaction shared by all social groups. The main sources of this hypothesis are the chronicles written by Costa Ricans and foreign travellers as well as journalistic texts that expound descriptively the importance of the consumption of coffee and its relevance in the social dynamics. They describe the moments of the “*café*” and the diverse social activities of the communities. These narrations, product of the shared memory of the actors that lived the experience and are helpful to reconstitute de daily life of Costa Rica through the past XIX and XX centuries.

To conclude, it is relevant to highlight that the practice of coffee consumption, does not involve only its physical reproduction, more importantly it involves its cultural reproduction. Its practice integrates people

within a social intelligible world, linking them through the understanding of codes of consumption and the sociability practices that are essentially geared to the creation of intelligibility and social coherence. In this process, the coffee acquires the function of building and/or strengthening the social relations of different groups by demarcating their class difference, be it real or imaginary in front of the other groups and within the larger national consciousness. The gold bean, the coffee bean becomes for Costa Rican a sign of identity individual and collective sense of belonging shared by the Costa Ricans. Vega's work, explores, through the habits of coffee consumption, the construction of the national myth that the coffee provides to the Costa Rican leaders and coffee oligarchy in giving to the world the image of an "ideal" context, that she suggests without developing, it is not the reality in the ground. What is for Vega particular for Costa Rica is that coffee infiltrated through the family realm and only later on spread to the public realm as it happens in Europe and other countries of Latin America [4-12].

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