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Just Throw it in the Pot! The Cultural Geography of Hidden Landscapes and Masked Performances in South Louisiana Gumbo Cooking

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Abstract

One of Louisiana's gifts to the world is gumbo. Yet, gumbo is not just a local dish of renown. It is a metaphor which describes the people, a food that represents a region, and a symbol that stands in for the state. It is also the official dish of Louisiana. The association of gumbo with South Louisiana is recognized worldwide. The word itself evokes images of Louisiana's swampy Cajun landscapes. Yet gumbo is not indigenous to Louisiana nor is it a strictly Cajun dish. This dissertation is about the cultural and historical geography of gumbo. This study delves into the background, evolution, and how gumbo became a symbol for south Louisiana. In the historical perspective we see that gumbo is not just a Louisiana food but a dish that has ties to the greater history of the Atlantic world. Gumbo is a dish born of colonialism with heavy influences from the African diaspora. Yet, gumbo goes beyond history. The meaning embodied in gumbo can be found in the cooking of the dish. However, in the cooking of the dish only one geography and one voice is realized. Cooking gumbo illustrates a hidden landscape, which is not often studied in the discipline of geography. By looking at masked performances/hidden landscapes, geographers can get a more nuanced idea of what is actually happening in landscapes and thus realize a true human geography of space. Studying gumbo can help geographers better understand the regional/cultural/historical implications of what a food and its preparation can say about a place.

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The cultural geographies of landscape¹ Claudio MINCA² Abstract The concept of cultural landscape has been at the core of the scientific concerns of generations of geographers and geographical understandings of landscape have also influenced the ways in which modern landscape has been conceived in cognate disciplines. This paper, a modified version of the author's Inaugural Lecture as Professor of Cultural Geography at Wageningen University, will briefly reflect, with the help of some biographical hints, on the nature of Geography and in particular on the 'power of landscape' for spatial Louisiana's cultures and a region by region history of each major group are provided, including European, African, Native American, and more. An essay adapted from one originally published in the book *Swapping Stories: Folktales from Louisiana*. Introduction. A basic principle in the study of folklore and anthropology is that in order to understand a cultural feature, one must understand the context in which it exists. Therefore, to understand a basket, dance, song, ritual, or story, one must know about the maker, dancer, singer, practitioner, or teller. One must understand the culture or setting in which it is made or performed. Only then can one know its significance and function within the cultural region for the people. Culture is shared because it involves things people do together or in the same way. Culture is about patterns, rather than one-time idiosyncrasies. And culture involves both people's overt behaviors (swinging a stick to one side) as well as the meanings or interpretations people have of them (hitting a home run). In addition to exerting practical constraints on cultural activity, landscapes can also embody meaning. We refer to such landscapes as symbolic landscapes (Meinig 1979). In some cases, the meaning is directly inscribed on the landscape through the construction of monuments. Take the case of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan (Power 2004).