

# The Curious Story of Sagamité

## To Understand the Origins of Cultural Traits, Ask the Right Research Questions

Students of Louisiana love debating the origins of our cultural idiosyncrasies, such as jambalaya, second-line parades, jazz, gumbo, and shotgun houses. Explanations usually range from “independent invention” based on local conditions, to “cultural diffusion” from elsewhere, mobilized by colonialism, migration, enslavement, trade, or other forces. But before we get to explanation, we frame the research question (e.g., “Where did the shotgun house come from?” “What is the origin of jambalaya?”) in a manner that presumes the phenomenon always existed as a cohesive package with an affixed appellation. In a paper recently published in *Louisiana History*, I suggest that this assumption may be faulty—and, as a result, we may be asking the wrong questions.

My research explored an indigenous foodway called *sagamité*, from *kijagamite*, meaning “the water is hot.” Algonquins originally used the term to describe immersing raw foods in boiling water, rendering a one-pot soup or gruel. When French colonists contacted Algonquins in Canada, they could not help but witness such cooking at their encampments, and upon hearing what the natives called it, they scribbled the syllables phonetically into their journals, turning *kijagamite* into *sagamité* as early as 1615. Throughout the 17th century, explorers, missionaries, and settlers in New France reported *sagamité* with remarkable frequency and geographical range, although they described it with equally remarkable inconsistency.

Printed references to *sagamité* increased markedly in the 18th century, as their geographical range expanded down the Mississippi Valley to Louisiana. Descriptions varied as well, becoming as much ingredient-based as process-based. Henri Joutel recorded in 1714 that the food was made by “pounding the *Indian Corn* and Baking the Meal.” A member of Iberville’s crew explained it as “groats of Indian corn mixed with water and lard to season it, then baked.” Iberville’s carpenter described it as “a soup [made from] a kind of oats” from cane grass, but later as “a boiled dish, made of corn and beans.” Le Page du Pratz described “Sagamity” as a “maize-gruel... which to my taste surpassed the best dish in France.” In New Orleans in 1727, the postulant Marie

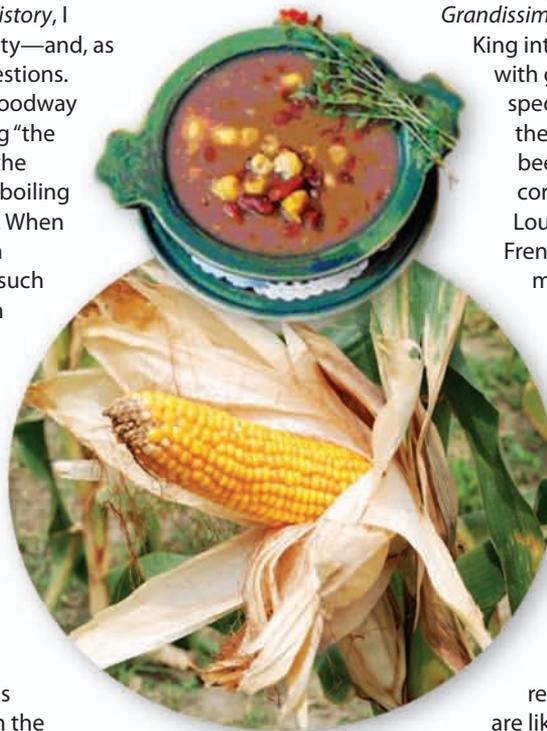
Madeleine Hachard explained it as “Indian corn crushed in a mortar, then boiled in water, and eaten with butter or cream”—roughly what Southerners now call grits.

*Sagamité* references diminish in 19th-century sources but do not disappear; Meriwether Lewis, for example, cited “sagamity” in his expedition journals, dubbing it “indian mush.” The dish and the word remained part of eastern Canada’s culture into the late 1800s, as well as in Louisiana’s Francophone Cajun region. *Sagamité* also made it to the pages of Louisiana literature.

George Washington Cable referred to it in *The Grandissimes* (1880), while his literary rival Grace King interpreted “sagamity” as “hominy cooked with grease and pieces of meat or fish” and speculated that it represented “the original of the Creole Jambalaya, in which rice has since been most toothsome substituted for corn.” Today, *sagamité* is all but extinct as a Louisiana food, but not as a word: Cajun French speakers use *sagamité* or “*sacamité*” to mean hominy corn, while in Creole “*sakamité*” is defined as a porridge of hominy.

*Sagamité* brings to mind many New World corn dishes, including New England’s succotash and hasty pudding, the South’s cornbread and hush puppies, the Acadian *macque-choux*, Mexico’s *tamale* and *pozole*, the Honduran *ticuco*, and Meso-America’s *atole*. By no means does this insinuate that all, or even any, originate from *sagamité*: there are, after all, only so many ways to render corn edible, and disparate cultures are likely to develop those methods independently.

But are disparate cultures likely to *name* them all the same way? How did this indigenous word gain such an expansive geography? Did natives throughout eastern North America use *kijagamite* (*sagamité*) to describe a similar food, implying startling pre-European interaction across thousands of miles? Perhaps *kijagamite* was a cognate used by tribes speaking dialects genetically descended from a proto-language. If this “cognate hypothesis” is accurate, then *sagamité*’s geography may have culturally diffused as native tribes expanded across eastern



North America.

Or, on the other hand, did Europeans learn the word from indigenous sources in one region, borrow it, and apply it liberally to similar foods in other regions as *they* diffused, describing them all as *sagamité* in their journals? This “loanword hypothesis” has plenty of precedents; English speakers borrow the Algonquin words *papoose*, *powwow*, and *tomahawk* to this day.

Evidence leans toward the loanword hypothesis. Frenchmen, I posit, learned this word from Indians early on and recorded it phonetically in their journals, which in turn were read by other Frenchmen, who thence applied it loosely to similar foods and passed the term on to the next generation, in the next outpost, and so on. Later, English translations introduced the term to new readerships. The result: one word used in at least three languages, with two pronunciations, multiple spellings, and sundry meanings across vast spaces. Use of the word diminished when its original owners and its agents of diffusion faded into the cultural background of North America, and new groups moving into the foreground found no pressing need for a specific word to describe a rustic gruel.

The story of *sagamité*, then, is not so much that of a native foodway, but of a colonial misapplication of an Algonquin word. “If the only tool you have is a hammer,” the saying goes, “then every problem you see looks like a nail.” Likewise, if the only indigenous word you’ve learned to describe one-pot Indian campfire concoctions is “*sagamité*,” then many concoctions, across great distances, strike you as being precisely that. Hence, a much-widened semantic shift over a much-expanded geographical range.

Now to return to our larger question. What light does the *sagamité* story shed on understanding the origins of other cherished cultural traits? I offer that, before asking how a particular trait—a foodway, a building typology, a musical or dance form—arrived to a society, perhaps we should ask how a particular *word for describing* that trait arrived to that society’s *language*. A simple one-pot meal with assorted ingredients may not have diffused as a recipe passed from cook to cook, but rather developed at the hands of thousands of cooks experimenting independently, aided by the sheer simplicity and variability of its preparation. It was the *word* that diffused, and in the process, it artificially bound together all those ad-hoc campfire experiments.

This insight may be relevant to other historical foodways research. Investigators trying to understand the origins of local dishes may be over-telling the recipe end of the story, while overlooking the nomenclature end. Consider, for example, *jambalaya*, whose origin scenario might go something like this:

Numerous disparate groups in rice-growing regions prepared rice in a pot (how else?) and, unsurprisingly, added available spices, vegetables, and meat to enhance the bland starch to their personal taste (who wouldn’t?). No pre-existing recipe was needed, and each group might have referred to the resulting meals differently—until external agents, who had previously heard or read that one variation of this dish is called *jambalaya*, applied this exotic-sounding term to all of them. Later, cooks and cookbooks codified the ingredients and preparation such that now we certainly have specific *jambalaya* recipes, and great fuss is made about which is “authentic” and where it came from. But they may have originally emerged variously, organically, and independently among spatially and socially disassociated peoples, unified only by their base commonalities and by the subsequent overlaying of the term “*jambalaya*.”

Likewise shotgun houses. When we research the question “where did the shotgun house come from,” we may be artificially yoking together a multiplicity of linear house types—built by



Timucuan Indians planting maize, from 'La Floride Française, scènes de la vie indienne peintes en 1564' par Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues. Charles Germain Marie Bourel de La Roncière, ed. Paris, Les Éditions nationales, 1928.

varied cultures in many shapes for sundry reasons in myriad places—with a nickname that was coined *after* the heyday of this cultural form.

My research has not yet taken me to these topics, but if and when it does, I'll be posing my guiding questions in light of what I've learned from *sagamité*.

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