

## *Notes and Documents*

### **GEOGRAPHY OF A FOOD, OR GEOGRAPHY OF A WORD? THE CURIOUS CULTURAL DIFFUSION OF SAGAMITÉ**

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Geographers have identified a number of mechanisms by which phenomena spatially diffuse. Fire and water, for example, spread by "expansion diffusion," moving into adjacent spaces that have the right fuel or topographic conditions. Languages and religions often diffuse by "relocation," in which migration or colonization physically relocates people and their cultural baggage into other societies. Infectious diseases spread through "contagion," requiring direct physical contact with a sick organism. Technological advancements and cultural trends often diffuse "hierarchically," by sweeping across top-level nodes (major countries, cities, universities, corporations, social networks, or empowered individuals) despite their geographical distances, and later appearing in mid-level and finally lower-level nodes, some of which may be only a few dozen miles from where the pattern first originated. Automobiles, progressive social movements, rap music, and sushi diffused across the United States hierarchically.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Andrew D. Cliff, P. Haggett, J. K. Ord, and G. R. Versey, *Spatial Diffusion: An Historical Geography of Epidemics in an Island Community* (Cambridge, 1981).

Diffusion is rarely univariate and linear; usually multiple processes occur simultaneously or sequentially. AIDS, for example, spreads contagiously hierarchically. Formosan termites diffused through relocation to American ports and then by expansion into portside neighborhoods. Diffusion is often conscientiously guided through planning and promotion. Wal-Mart, for example, diffused contagiously from rural Arkansas as the increasingly profitable local firm expanded cautiously into nearby counties and states. Later, as a matter of corporate strategy, it diffused in a reverse-hierarchical manner, targeting rural areas, then suburbs, and now inner cities.

Colonialism offers ample case studies of cultural diffusion, as alien groups suddenly occupying the same space interact and acculturate, transculturate, or deculturate over time. Often those exchanges are aggressive and malevolent; in other cases they are adventitious and benign, as groups attempt to figure out each other across cultural chasms and come away rife with misunderstandings.

This paper explores the curious distributions and definitions of a North American indigenous foodway called *sagamité* and situates it in the discourse on cultural diffusion. The findings indicate that, in seeking explanations for how foodways diffused to new areas, scholars may sometimes be asking the wrong question.

Linguists trace *sagamité* to the Algonquin Indian word *kijagamite*, which the philologist Father Jean André Cuoq translated to mean *l'eau est chaude*—"the water is hot"—in his canonical 1886 *Lexique de la Langue Algonquine*. Cuoq noted that "It's from this misheard word that the word 'sagamité' comes from, which can be compared to the 'little hot water' of the English...."<sup>2</sup> Algonquins apparently applied the term to hot broths regardless of ingredients, and broadly to the manner of cooking in which ingredients were immersed in boiling water—a method that usually rendered a one-pot soup or gruel. Therein lies a clue to the future semantics and geographies of this word.

When French colonials contacted Algonquins, they could not help but witness such foods at their encampments. Upon hearing what the natives called it, they scribbled the syllables pho-

<sup>2</sup>Jean A. Cuoq, *Lexique de la Langue Algonquine* (Montreal, 1886), 156. I thank Julie Hernandez for translating and interpreting the context of Cuoq's writing.

netically into their journals, turning kijagamite into sagamité as early as 1615.<sup>3</sup> For the remainder of the century, explorers, missionaries, and settlers in New France reported sagamité with remarkable frequency and geographical range, although they described it with equally remarkable inconsistency. The Franciscan Récollet Gabriel Sagard included it in his 1632 *Dictionary of the Huron Language* and described it as ground corn made into porridge.<sup>4</sup> Writing the next year, the Jesuit Father Paul Le Jeune expounded on the food in a discourse on the Lower Algonquin peoples:

[T]he Savages are very fond of sagamité. The word "Sagamiteou" in their language really means water, or warm gruel. Now they have extended its meaning to signify all sorts of soups, broths, and similar things. [It] is made of cornmeal; if they are short of that, we sometimes give them some of our French flour, which, being boiled with water, makes simple paste. They do not fail to eat it with appetite, especially when we place in it a little "pimi;" that is to say, oil, for that is their sugar. They use it with their strawberries and raspberries . . .

At least a dozen other Francophone sources published in the seventeenth century, nearly all in reference to French Canada, mentioned sagamité. Reuben Gold Thwaites, who edited the Jesuit Relations in the 1950s, summarized that the term derived from *sôgmôipi* ("the repast of chiefs") and referred to hominy corn "usually pounded into meal...boiled in water, with the addition of meat, fish, or oil," if available. Sometimes "beans, peas, pumpkins" and other seasonal vegetables "were boiled with the corn, especially when the latter was still green: a survival of this usage remains in our modern 'succotash' . . ."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Gabriel Sagard, *Histoire du Canada: Et voyages que les Frères mineurs recollects y ont faits pour la conversion des infidèles depuis l'an 1615*, 4 vols. (1636; reprint ed., Paris, 1866), 2:426.

<sup>4</sup>Gabriel Sagard, *Dictionnaire de la Langue Huronne* . . . (Paris, 1632); see also Francis Parkman, *Pioneers of France in the New World: France and England in North America*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1897), 2:220.

<sup>5</sup>Father Paul Le Jeune, "Relation of What Occurred in New France in the Year 1633," in Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France 1610-1791, Quebec, 1632-1633*, 73 vols. (Cleveland, 1896-1901), 5:97, 5:281-82.

Printed references to sagamité increased markedly in the eighteenth century, as did their geographical range, which expanded from French Canada to the Great Lakes, Mississippi Valley, and most notably to Louisiana. The description of the dish remained equally varied. Henri Joutel's 1714 account of La Salle's disastrous 1684 expedition recorded that the food was made by "pounding the *Indian* Corn and Baking the Meal, or making the Pottage of the said Meal, by [the natives] call'd *Sagamite* . . . their Sort of Hasty-Pudding."<sup>6</sup> A member of Iberville's crew explained it as "nothing more than the groats of Indian corn mixed with water and lard to season it, then baked." Pénicaud, Iberville's carpenter, described it as "a soup" made from "a kind of oats" produced by native cane grass, also used to make bread, but later characterized it as "a boiled dish, made of corn and beans." Le Page du Pratz described "Sagamity" as a "maize-gruel"—adding, with no sarcasm—"which to my taste surpassed the best dish in France." He noted that Indians ate it "as we eat soup, with a spoon made of a buffalo's horn."<sup>7</sup> Jesuit Father du Poisson, traveling the lower Mississippi in 1727, described a French and an Indian variation of the ubiquitous dish:

The most ordinary food of this country[,] especially for travelers—is *gru*. Corn is pounded . . . to remove the outer skin, and then is boiled a long time in water, but the Frenchmen sometimes season it with oil; and this is *gru*. The Savages, pounding the corn very fine, sometime cook it with tallow [rendered animal fat], and more often only with water; this is

<sup>6</sup>Henri Joutel, *A Journal of the Last Voyage Perform'd by Monsr. de La Sale, to the Gulph of Mexico, to Find Out the Mouth of the Missisipi River*. . . (London, 1714), 111, 150 (emphasis in original).

<sup>7</sup>Anonymous, "Historical Journal: or, Narrative of the Expedition Made by Order of Louis XIV, King of France, under Command of M. D'Iberville to Explore the Colbert (Mississippi) River and Establish a Colony in Louisiana," in B. F. French, ed., *Historical Collections of Louisiana and Florida: Including Translations of Original Manuscripts* . . . , 7 vols. (New York, 1875), 7:67; M. de Pénicaud, "Annals of Louisiana, From the Establishment of the First Colony Under M. D'Iberville, to the Departure of the Author to France, in 1722," *ibid.*, (New York, 1869), 45, 49; Joseph G. Tregle Jr., ed., *The History of Louisiana: Translated from the French of M. Le Page Du Pratz* (1774; reprint ed., Baton Rouge, 1975), 138, 368.

sagamité. However, the gru answers for bread; a spoonful of gru and a mouthful of meat go together.<sup>8</sup>

In New Orleans that same year, Marie Madeleine Hachard, the recently arrived young postulant of the Ursuline Nuns, wrote that "[t]he people of Louisiana find very good a food called 'sagamité,' which is made of Indian corn crushed in a mortar, then boiled in water, and eaten with butter or cream,"<sup>9</sup> a description that closely resembles what Southerners now call grits. Hachard would have met with disagreement from the Jesuit Father Pierre Laure, who, writing from Quebec three years later, insisted that sagamité "never had the signification given to it through a misconception of its [meaning]; for it means nothing but 'the water'—or 'the broth—is hot,' *tchi sagamiteou* . . ." He then described how Indians in that region saved seals' fat to season their sagamité.<sup>10</sup> This description views sagamité's *form*—as a broth—rather than a primary ingredient (corn), as its defining characteristic. The philologist Cuoq would have concurred, as he viewed this as the original Algonquin meaning.

Still there were other takes. A 1746 source describing the Indians of the St. Lawrence River region placed more emphasis on the food's ritualistic role than on its constitution: "At their assemblies, when the Sagamite or pottage, which is the most essential part of their meal, is boiled in a great pot, they place that pot on a stool of ceremony . . . and one of the elders stretches out his hands over it, muttering . . . , after which they fall to

<sup>8</sup>"Letter from Father du Poisson, Missionary to Missionary to the Akensas, to Father \* \* \*," in Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France 1610-1791, Volume LXVII—Lower Canada, Abenakis, Louisiana 1716-1727* (New York, 1959), 291-93.

<sup>9</sup>Letter of Sister Mary Madeleine Hachard of St. Stanislaus to Her Father, Letter II, October 27, 1727, in Henry C. Semple, ed., *The Ursulines in New Orleans and Our Lady of Prompt Succor: A Record of Two Centuries, 1727-1925* (New York, 1925), 192-93.

<sup>10</sup>Relation of the Saguenay, 1720 to 1730, by Rev. Father Pierre Laure, in Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France 1610-1791, Volume LXVIII—Lower Canada, Crees, Louisiana: 1720-1736* (New York, 1959), 91.



eating."<sup>11</sup> Quite different were the social uses of this same pottage reported in Louisiana in 1744: "The Slaves," it said, "are fed with Rice, or with Mahis [maize] husked and boiled, which is called *Sagamité*."<sup>12</sup>

Primary references to *sagamité* diminish in nineteenth-century sources, but they do not disappear. Meriwether Lewis briefly cited "sagamity" (note the English spelling) in the journals of his 1804-1806 expedition with William Clark, dubbing it "indian mush."<sup>13</sup> The dish and the word remained part of eastern Canada's culture into the late nineteenth century, although, as Johann Georg Kohl implied in his 1861 *Travels in Canada*, it had already started to transfer into the realm of "historical interest":

I found that the old Indian national dish called *Sagamité*, so often mentioned in the earliest reports of the Jesuits, is a favourite among the Canadian peasants. What the word means I have in vain inquired, but the dish consists of maize boiled in milk [or] water . . . . [S]ince it formed for a hundred years the daily bread of so many pious missionaries in the wilderness, there is a kind of historical interest attached to it. It is often met with at the tables of respectable citizens in Montreal and Quebec.<sup>14</sup>

*Sagamité* was far less known in the American South, but not entirely lost to history. As the region prepared for war in 1861, a Georgia newspaper recommended the food as nourishment for "our boys . . . before going on the march":

*Sagamite—Portable Food for Scouts—*The old historians and travellers, and Indian fighters, tell us of an admirable and easily portable food, which the Red men carried with them in

<sup>11</sup>"The Present State of the French Colonies of North-America," in Thomas Salmon, *Modern History: or, The Present State of All Nations*. . . , 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 3 vols. (London, 1744-1746), 3:605-06.

<sup>12</sup>Anonymous, *The Present State of the Country and Inhabitants, Europeans and Indians, of Louisiana, on the North Continent of America* (London, 1744), 25.

<sup>13</sup>Meriwether Lewis, entry of January 24, 1806, *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, <http://lewisandclarkjournals.url.edu>, University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Center for Great Plains Studies.

<sup>14</sup>Johann G. Kohl, *Travels in Canada, and Through the States of New York and Pennsylvania*, 2 vols. (London, 1861), 1:175.

their pouches . . . . It was a combination of Indian meal and brown sugar, three parts of the former to one of the latter, browned, together over the fire. This food, in small quantities, not only sufficed to arrest hunger, but to allay thirst. This is the famous sagamite of the Red men . . . .<sup>15</sup>

That the journalist found it necessary to explain the concoction—sounding here more like Southern cornbread than a broth or corn soup—indicates that most readers would have been unfamiliar with the term.

Not so in Louisiana: The word and the dish persisted in the Francophone "Cajun" regions of the state, whose populations derived from the Acadie region of eastern Canada and brought their indigenous-Canadian-influenced language and foodways to the Louisiana bayous in the late 1700s. Sagamité also made it to the pages of Louisiana literature in the late nineteenth century. George Washington Cable referred to it fleetingly in his 1879 novel *The Grandissimes*, in which colonists "sat down to bear's meat, sagamite and beans" during a fictional 1699 encounter with Louisiana Indians.<sup>16</sup> His literary rival, narrative historian 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."<sup>17</sup>

Sagamité today is uncommon but not unknown in Francophone eastern Canada. In something of a low-level cultural revival, culinary informants share over the Internet recipes remembered from elders, while the Sagamité Restaurant in Quebec endeavors to reintroduce patrons to this and other native foods. ("You absolutely have to try the traditional Huron 'sagamité' soup made of corn, squash, red beans and venison," reads its advertisement.)<sup>18</sup> In Louisiana it is all but extinct as a food; one

<sup>15</sup>"Sagamite-Portable Food for Scouts," *Columbus Enquirer*, September 23, 1861, 2, c. 3.

<sup>16</sup>George W. Cable, "The Grandissimes," *Scribners Monthly*, 19, November (1879), 105.

<sup>17</sup>Grace E. King, *New Orleans: The Place and the People* (New York, 1895), 67.

<sup>18</sup>Sagamité Restaurant (Québec) website, [http://www.bonjourquebec.com/qcen-touristservicesdirectory/restaurant/sagamite\\_151930546.html](http://www.bonjourquebec.com/qcen-touristservicesdirectory/restaurant/sagamite_151930546.html), visited August 10, 2011. See also La Belle Aurore's food blog at <http://labelleauore.wordpress.com/2009/10/04/sagamite-corn-sopa-de-elote/>. A French Canadian by

researcher reported that "sagamité, a dish not eaten today but remembered, without high regard, by the oldest people in Breaux Bridge, was prepared [as a boiled large-grain corn gruel] in[to] the early twentieth century."<sup>19</sup> Linguistically, however, the old Algonquin word survives: Cajun French speakers use *sagamité* or "*sacamité*" to mean hominy corn, while in Creole "*sakamité*" is defined as a porridge of hominy.<sup>20</sup>

*Sagamité* resembles a wide range of modern New World corn dishes, including New England's succotash and hasty pudding, the South's cornbread and hush puppies, the Acadian *macquechoux*, Mexico's *tamale* and corn soup *pozole*, the Honduran *ticuco*, and Meso-America's *atole*.<sup>21</sup> 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 extensive pre-European interaction across hundreds or thousands of miles? It is possible that those tribes shared a common linguistic root, not to mention similar foodways. Sister languages within the Iroquoian and Almic (Algonquin) linguistic families were spoken throughout northeastern North America, centered around what later became French Canada, while those within the

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birth, Aurore writes, "I made *sagamité*, with all the memories of my childhood attached with each tablespoon of this wonderful soup. [It has] two basics ingredients: cream . . . and corn. My grandmother used to make it to her fourteen children and my mother made it for her five children. I think I made it a few times over the years to my two children."

<sup>19</sup>C. Paige Gutierrez, *Cajun Foodways* (Jackson, 1992), 43-4.

<sup>20</sup>Albert Valdman, Kevin J. Rottet, et al., *Dictionary of Louisiana French: As Spoken in Cajun, Creole, and American Indian Communities* (Jackson, Miss., 2010), 764; Albert Valdman, *Dictionary of Louisiana Creole* (Bloomington, Ind., 1998), 535, 553. The word was documented among speakers of Acadian French in Iberia, Lafourche, St. Landry, St. Martin, and Vermilion parishes, in field research dating from the 1930s to the 2000s. Special thanks to Tulane linguist Thomas Klingler for information on this topic.

<sup>21</sup>I thank Marina Campanella, Shelley Meaux, Steven Meaux, and Carl Brasseaux for bringing some of these foods to my attention.

Muskogean family spanned much of the present-day American South. 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 be a case of pre-Columbian expansion diffusion. It spread 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; words are commonly borrowed "when speakers of a language acquire some new item or concept from abroad [and] need a new term to go along with the new acquisition."<sup>22</sup> Algonquin words such as *papoose*, *powwow*, and *tomahawk* were all borrowed by European-Americans and diffused throughout their range.<sup>23</sup>

Only a thorough linguistic analysis can confirm or reject absolutely either explanation. The loanword hypothesis, however, enjoys a preponderance of evidence. For one, despite the extensive ranges of Iroquoian, Algonquian, and Muskogean, no single native language family encompassed the entire St. Lawrence-to-Gulf-Coast range of *sagamité*, reducing the likelihood that it was a cognate spread by the geographical expansion of native speakers. Secondly, the greater frequency of *sagamité* occurrences in French documents and colonies, compared to other imperial powers, indicates that French borrowing drove the geography of this word. Thirdly, we have the testimonies of at least three informants (Paul Le Jeune in 1633, Pierre Laure in 1730, and Cuoq in 1886) who insinuated that some sort of semantic shift had occurred across cultural lines. Finally, the pronunciation change from "*kijagamite*" to "*sagamité*" may represent a phonological clue that this word passed from native to European mouths.

The sum total of evidence suggests that Frenchmen learned this word from Indians early on and recorded it phonetically in their journals, which in turn were read by other Frenchmen, who

<sup>22</sup>Lyle Campbell, *Historical Linguistics: An Introduction* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), 59. Special thanks to Tulane anthropologist William Balée for insights into this topic and for recommending Campbell's work.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 69.



thence applied it loosely to similar foods and passed the term on to the next generation, in the next colonial outpost, and the next, and so on. France's defeat in the French and Indian War stymied sagamité's North American diffusion, but did not completely halt it, because English translations of French-acquired indigenous knowledge introduced the term to a new readership. The result: One word used in at least three languages, with two pronunciations, multiple spellings, and numerous 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 the new groups moving into the foreground found no pressing need for a specific word to describe a rustic one-pot meal.

Folklorist Janet C. Gilmore, whose research I came across after I developed the above interpretation, studied sagamité in the Great Lakes region and arrived independently at a similar conclusion. Characterizing it as "a boiled, one-pot meal, with flexible ingredients [which] can be made very simply as basic, everyday fare [or] dressed up to be a feast food," Gilmore concluded,

French missionaries and explorers . . . applied a Native American-based designation, "sagamité," to a family of indigenous concoctions that had a much more varied range of terminology, processes, and conceptual relationships within and across [Native] peoples, legitimating the native cuisine while simultaneously homogenizing and reducing it to a single concept.<sup>24</sup>

The story of sagamité, then, is not so much the geography of a native foodway, but of a colonial misperception of an Algonquin word broadly describing a common meal. Sagamité diffused spatially not because Indian tribes shared culinary and linguistic knowledge amongst themselves across eastern North America, but because French colonials spread into their territories, equipped via the publications of their predecessors with an authentic and exotic-sounding native vocabulary that they subsequently applied copiously without local validation. "If the only tool you have is a hammer," the saying goes, "then every

<sup>24</sup>Janet C. Gilmore, "Sagamité and Booya: French Influence in Defining Great Lakes Culinary Heritage," *Material History Review*, 60 (Fall 2004): 65, 67.

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 sundry concoctions, across great distances, strike you as being precisely that. Hence, a much-widened semantic shift over a much-expanded geographical range.<sup>25</sup>

The curious cultural geography of sagamité sheds light on how earlier generations of colonials informed subsequent ones through the publication of their journals, how colonists borrowed indigenous words and (mis)interpreted native cultures, and how loan words gain meanings that might surprise the donors. It serves as a reminder to researchers of traditional foodways that "primary" sources, even when plentiful and oftentimes mutually validating, can be fickle, deceptive, and anything but primary.

This study also suggests that, in some cases, researchers may be asking the wrong question in investigating the origins of foodways. Instead of asking how a particular dish arrived to the tables of a society, perhaps we should ask how a particular *word* for *describing* that dish 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. What we have, then, is not a culinary geography, but rather a linguistic geography. This insight may be relevant to other historical foodways research: Investigators (including popular food writers and Louisiana cooking aficionados) trying to understand the origins of local dishes may be over-telling the "recipe" end of the story while overlooking the nomenclature end. One wonders if jambalaya—which is essentially the rice-based equivalent of sagamité—might tell a similar story.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup>Campbell, *Historical Linguistics*, 256-67.

<sup>26</sup>If jambalaya indeed traces a similar story to the one argued for sagamité in this article, the scenario may go something like this: Numerous disparate groups in rice-growing regions prepared rice in a pot (how else?) and unsurprisingly added spices, vegetables, and meat to enhance the bland starch (who wouldn't?), without the benefit of a learned or transferred recipe. Each group might have referred to the resulting meal differently—until external agents who had previously heard or read that this dish is called *jambalaya* applied to them this exotic-sounding term. In doing so, they spread the word "jambalaya" into new

In the literature on cultural diffusion, *sagamité*, according to the loanword hypothesis, is a case of a relocation of a cultural (mis)understanding, in the form of a word, which diffused through the writings and readings of hierarchically selected agents operating across spaces conscientiously targeted by imperialists, overlaid upon a preexisting geography of indigenous occupation. Literate and empowered colonials moved across those indigenous territories, encountered a native trait they presumed they had already brought within the control of their cognizance, duly recorded it, and moved on—confident that they understood all they saw.

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cultural regions, despite that a particular recipe may never have originally circulated therein. In modern times, cooks and cookbooks codified the ingredients and the preparation such that now we certainly have jambalaya recipes, and great fuss is made about which is "authentic" and where it came from. But they may have originally emerged spontaneously and independently from spatially and socially disassociated peoples, unified only by the simple commonalities of the dish and by the subsequent overlaying of the term "jambalaya."