

# Spreading Tradition: A History of Tamal-making and its Representation in Latino Children's Literature

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**Abstract:** Since pre-Columbian times, tamales have played an important role in Mexican diets. Tamales continue to have great significance as a form of sustenance and as a symbolic element in Mexican and Mexican American cultures. Tamales are strongly associated with themes of unity, celebration, family, kinship, and community. This essay examines the history of tamal-making in the Americas and focuses on the thematic portrayals of tamales and tamaladas (tamal-making events) in contemporary Latino children's literature, paying special attention to the thematic messages about family, tradition, and cultural values. Using something as culturally elemental as tamales and tamal-making, authors make statements of much wider importance. By offering resources that validate and support cultural heritage, the authors provide a venue for young readers to explore and express their unique cultural experiences while gaining strength from messages that reify the importance of culture and ethnicity.

**Keywords:** Tamales – Food – Identity – Mexican-American – Latino – Children's Literature

**F**or those unfamiliar with traditional Mexican foods, the sight of a plate full of tamales might not motivate much response. The dried corn husk wrapped around each tamal is an unassuming neutral color, and it carefully conceals the explosion of flavors that can be contained within such a demure exterior. Carefully spread within each husk is *masa*, a cornmeal dough, which is typically filled with one of an endless variety of spicy, sweet, or savory fillings. For those who do have experience with tamales, the same plate can be associated with many different levels of meaning. At the most basic level tamales are a staple of Mexican cuisine, but for many, they become symbolic of much more than just food. They are an embodiment of traditions, family, and cultural heritage that reaches far into the past. Tamales were served at great Aztec banquets and in the streets and homes of the Americas long before the arrival of the Europeans. Since colonial times, tamales have

been taken throughout many parts of the world, again being consumed by commoners as well as rulers, presidents, queens and kings. To some, they are a taste of the exotic; to others, a reminder and memory of home.

While there are certainly some changes that have resulted over the last 500 plus years, tamales remain characteristically similar to their ancient form, and tamal-making has maintained high significance since pre-Columbian history. Tamales continue to be prepared and consumed as a part of daily life, but they are also commonly associated with times of celebration and with themes of tradition, unity, family, kinship, and community. These themes appear regularly in the artistic and literary productions of Mexican-origin individuals in the United States, and they become a venue for cultural expression and an opportunity for the instruction and appreciation of cultural heritage and difference. This paper explores the tamal-making tradition using both ancient and contemporary works and focuses on the symbolic elaboration of themes associated with tamales and tamal-making as portrayed in Latino children's literature.

The history of tamales is rooted in the centrality of maize in indigenous cultures. Creation legends of the ancient Maya as recorded in the *Popol Vuh* tell of the gods' experiments in making the human race. The first attempt, fashioning individuals of mud, was fruitless. The results were mindless beings with no strength who were easily disfigured by water. Clearly another construction material was needed in order to be successful in their efforts. Making humans of wood held promise – the fashioned figures of the second attempt were sturdy and multiplied, but soon, it was evident that more development was necessary. While the creations were an improvement over the earthen men, "they did not have souls, nor minds... their face was without expression; their feet and hands had no strength; they had no blood, nor substance, nor moisture, nor flesh" (Goetz and Morley 89). The wooden race was destroyed from the earth. After much council and discussion, another plan was decided upon – humans were to be made of corn. A mixture of yellow and white corn formed the basis for blood, and flesh was made of corn meal dough. The results were "good and handsome men" who were "endowed with intelligence" (Goetz and Morley 168). The race of corn was agile and strong, and they were aware of their creation and grateful to the gods for their formation. So successful were the gods at this final attempt that they worried that the race of corn would equal their wisdom and understanding and become as the gods themselves, so the creators decided to restrict their vision a little. The gods "blew mist into their eyes, which clouded their sight as when a mirror is breathed upon" (Goetz and Morley 169) and so according to Mayan legend, the human race began.

The significance of corn, or maize, in indigenous cultures can not be overstated. As the staple crop of the Americas, maize was the "all-important carbohydrate source the lack of which meant famine and the presence of which, even alone, meant that one was fed and contented" (Coe 9). It is no wonder that indigenous creation myths focus on maize as the life source of humanity. Capable of being consumed in a plethora of ways, two of the most pervasive preparations of maize were in the form of tortillas and

tamales. Processed maize could be laboriously ground into masa. Pressed and patted flat and quickly toasted on a hot, flat surface, it formed tortillas which served relatively equally in the roles of dish, utensil, and food source (Pilcher, *Que Vivan* 11). The preparation of tamales utilized the masa in a different manner. The corn dough was spread inside a pliable corn husk or other suitable leaf, filled with one's choice of culinary additions or left plain, folded, secured, and cooked until it was ready to be consumed.

There is no definitive historical moment that marks the creation of tamales. Fossilized evidence indicates that they were consumed in Teotihuacán, a civilization in the valley of central Mexico that flourished from about 250 B.C. to A.D. 750 (Pilcher, *Que Vivan* 11). Many scholars, however, speculate that tamales have been around for a much longer time. Coe notes that early nixtamalization equipment, which is used to soften and remove the tough outer shell of the corn kernel and is the first step in making masa for tamales, can be dated as early as 1500 to 1200 B.C. (14). Other authors speculate that their creation could be as old as 8000 to 5000 B.C. (Clark and Tafolla; Hoyer). Regardless of the exact date, the presence of tamales can be found in what is believed to be the earliest known indigenous record from the Americas, the Dresden Codex. Hull notes that the codex contains textual and pictorial references to tamales and has "clear iconographic depictions of deer, iguana, turkey, fish, and other types of stuffed tamales" (236). Unfortunately due to the destruction of almost all indigenous records at the time of the conquest, it is impossible to see exactly how far back tamal-making reaches in the historical record.

It is possible, however, to see the prevalence of tamales in indigenous societies during the time of the conquest. Fray Bernardino de Sahagún records many of the daily and ceremonial uses of tamales in the *General History of the Things of New Spain*. In this compendium of Aztec life, one can read of the ceremonial preparations of tamales as offerings to the gods, of feasts and royal banquets and their array of tamales and other foods, and of the tamales that were available daily in the Aztec markets, among other things. As an illustration of the great variety of tamales, one can read Sahagún's account of the food vendor in the markets. Sahagún relates:

He sells meat tamales; turkey meat packets; plain tamales; tamales cooked in an earth oven; those cooked in an *olla*... grains of maize with chile, tamales with chile... fish tamales, fish with grains of maize, frog tamales, frog with grains of maize, *axolotl* with grains of maize, *axolotl* tamales, tadpoles with grains of maize, mushrooms with grains of maize, *tuna* cactus with grains of maize, rabbit tamales, rabbit with grains of maize, pocket gopher tamales: tasty—tasty, very tasty, very well made, always tasty, savory, of pleasing odor, of very pleasing odor; made with a pleasing odor, very savory. Where [it is] tasty, [it has] chile, salt tomatoes, squash seeds: shredded, crumbled, juiced.

He sells tamales of maize softened in wood ashes, the water of tamales, tamales of maize softened in lime—narrow tamales, fruit tamales, cooked bean tamales; cooked beans with grains of maize, cracked beans with grains of maize. [He sells] salted wide tamales, pointed tamales, white tamales, fasting foods, roll-shaped tamales, tamales bound up on top, [with] grains of maize thrown in; crumbled, pounded tamales; spotted tamales, pointed tamales, white fruit tamales, red fruit tamales, turkey egg tamales, turkey eggs with grains of maize; tamales of tender maize, tamales of green maize, brick-shaped tamales, braised ones; plain tamales, honey tamales, bee tamales, tamales with grains of maize, squash tamales, crumbled tamales, maize flower tamales. (Coe 116)

Sahagún's record continues with even more types of tamales available at the market, but this list makes it clear that the tamal could be suited to practically any taste and economic level.

Cooking and the preparation of tamales has historically been the work of women, and instruction in grinding corn began early in life. Coe notes that the umbilical cords of infant girls were buried under the grinding stone, symbolic of the future that life would hold (108). Girls were responsible to study and emulate the actions of their mothers, which undoubtedly included learning how to process maize and prepare various foods at a young age. The Codex Mendoza outlines the typical responsibilities for children of various ages. The duties become more substantial and complex as the child matures, year by year. By age 13, girls are responsible for grinding maize and preparing food, and the codex details a mother giving instruction to her daughter who is laboring over a grinding stone (Berdan and Anawalt 162).

Making tamales continues to be largely the domain of women. Grinding stones, for the most part, have been replaced by mechanized technologies, and while superstition and rituals still hold a place in the lives of many individuals, it is unlikely that birth rituals are conducted in exactly the same manner as they were hundreds of years ago. Still, there are thematic cultural elements that remain consistent throughout centuries. Children are taught early in life how to help in the tamal-making process, and typically, their responsibility grows as they mature. Gwendolyn Zepeda's bilingual children's book, *Growing Up with Tamales / Los tamales de Ana*, is an example of the progression that might take place in one's life. Told from the perspective of six year-old Ana, the reader can experience her family's division of labor when making tamales. At age six, she is excited to be able to mix the cornmeal dough, but she wistfully daydreams about the responsibilities of her older sister Lidia, two years her elder, who has slightly more complex and detailed tasks. As she eagerly anticipates what she will be able to do when she is Lidia's age, she realizes that Lidia will always be two years older and have a different task. The book follows her thought process of what she will do at each successive age, and how she will mature in the tamal-making process. At the end of her

thought process, Ana mentally arrives at adulthood, where she is faced with the question, “What will I do when I turn eighteen?” Her response is emphatic:

I know. I will keep making tamales. I will buy the cornmeal, the corn husks, and the meat. I will mix and spread the dough. I will cook the meat and fill them. I will roll and steam the tamales. I will do it all in my very own factory. And when Christmas comes around, I will deliver tamales to Grandma, to my cousins, to my neighbors, and to all my customers around the world, in delivery trucks that say ‘Ana’s Tamales.’ And when I am eighteen, Lidia will be twenty. If she wants to, she can come and work for me. (Zepeda)<sup>1</sup>

The tamal-making tradition is reinforced in Ana’s mind as she envisions herself “growing up with tamales.” The wider significance of the book itself, however, becomes twofold. On one level, Ana’s mental progression through life illustrates the various steps involved in making tamales, offering an opportunity for readers to experience aspects of the cultural traditions of the character’s life; traditions to which, depending on the readers’ backgrounds, they may or may not have cultural access. Perhaps more importantly, the book conveys a tone of empowerment for Ana as she participates in the tamal-making tradition. The work is not portrayed as drudgery; rather, the character looks forward with excitement to the day that she can do more in making the tamales, and the book ends with her picturing herself successful through the embracing of her cultural heritage. By extension, young Latina readers can feel this same sense of cultural empowerment as they share Ana’s excitement for tamales.

Although tamal-making is typically learned early in life, it is not restricted to the young. It is often the older women who are looked to as guardians of traditions, and they work beside younger participants teaching and refining techniques of tamal-making at a communal event known as a *tamalada*. Sahagún relates what could be interpreted as the earliest recorded description of a *tamalada*, in which individuals prepare for an Aztec banquet. He states:

Among the ashes was the labor of the old women. They made tamales using dried grains of maize; . . . they made tamales of meat. Some cooked tamales in an *olla*. Some washed the maize grains which had been cooked in lime. Some carried and drew water, or poured it. Some broke up, ground, and pulverized cacao beans. Some mixed cooked maize with chocolate. Some cooked stews, or roasted chiles—different kinds of chiles. All night they remained there. Vigil was kept. They kept

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<sup>1</sup> Several of the works of children’s literature utilized in this essay are non-paginated, therefore no page reference is given with direct quotations. These include books by Lachtman, Rodríguez, Soto, and Zepeda.

watch. There was constant awaiting of the light. They sat holding vigil and chattering. (Coe 112-113)

This passage, although detailing food preparations observed in the mid-1500s, is in many ways strikingly similar to tamaladas of today. Commonly at tamaladas, one can find some individuals preparing the meat while others blend spices and chiles, or knead the masa, or wash the corn husks. Tamales are a labor and time intensive food to prepare, but when many people work together at the finished product, the workload is easily distributed. There are tasks that can be assigned to both the young and the old, so the tamalada is a venue where various generations of participants can work together with the same goal – to make tamales.

The “chattering” that Sahagún references is also an important aspect of tamaladas. A typical tamalada takes most of a day and there is a great deal of time for socializing, which becomes one of the defining hallmarks of the event. Gossip, jokes, and personal stories are frequent and expected. Those attending a tamalada are normally close friends and family members, and although there is much work associated with making tamales, the individual tasks are often repetitive enough that they can be done almost subconsciously, allowing one’s attention to be focused on the social exchanges that are happening around the tables. Both in camaraderie and division of labor, an understood cultural value associated with the tamalada is working together. When all work, all reap the benefits.

This theme is developed in the book *Green Corn Tamales / Tamales de Elote* by Gina Rodríguez. Told in a fashion similar to the children’s classic *The Little Red Hen*, the book is about an extended family working together to make tamales from the grandparents’ corn harvest. The grandmother begins by asking “Who will help pick the corn in the fields?” and she poses additional questions as each step toward making the tamales is completed (Rodríguez). At each point in the process, there are those who are unwilling to help; but, there is always someone willing to lend a hand. As the tamales finish cooking, the grandmother asks, “Now, who will help eat these *tamales*?” Of course, everyone is willing to eat the results of the labor. After hearing this, one granddaughter points out that there were certain family members who were unwilling to work at certain tasks. Her grandmother counters this argument by explaining that those same individuals were willing to do other jobs to help make the tamales, and she notes, “Everyone in the family helped in some way, *mi hija*, so everyone will share. It has always been that way, and that’s the way that it should be!” (Rodríguez). This statement highlights the traditional cultural value that is placed on the family collective in Mexican-American cultures and is a direct counter to the anglicized story of *The Little Red Hen*, where only those who contribute fully reap the rewards of the work.

Another story that helps to illustrate the theme of working together as a family is Gary Soto’s *Too Many Tamales*. In the story, Maria and her mother are making tamales for a Christmas get together with extended family. When her mother leaves the kitchen

to answer a phone call, Maria picks up her mother's wedding ring from the table, places it on her finger, and imagines that she is all grown up. She goes back to kneading the masa, forgetting that the ring is still on her finger. Hours later, after the family has arrived and the cousins are upstairs playing, Maria realizes that the ring is missing. Believing the ring is cooked within one of the two dozen tamales, she enlists the help of her cousins to try and find the missing ring. Standing in front of the platter of tamales, the youngest cousin asks, "What do you want us to do?" "Eat them," comes Maria's reply. "If you bite something hard, tell me" (Soto). The four cousins eat twenty three of the tamales to no avail. Their stomachs, stretched from the task, are at their limits. Thinking that the ring must be in the last tamal, they each take a bite, chewing carefully so as not to miss it, but the ring is not there. Maria dejectedly walks in to confess her deeds to her mother only to find that the ring has been on her mother's finger the whole time. Her mother had found it in the masa as they were making the tamales. Maria then further confesses that she and her cousins ate all of the tamales in the efforts to find the ring. As the extended family files into the kitchen to make up a second batch of tamales, Maria's aunt tries to console her, saying, "Hey, niña, it's not so bad. Everyone knows that the second batch of tamales always tastes better than the first, right?" At this comment the already tamal-stuffed cousins "let off a groan the size of twenty-four tamales" (Soto).

Both of the previous two stories illustrate the centrality of family and a collective effort for the group. Whether it is making and sharing the green corn tamales, or eating two dozen tamales in efforts to find the lost wedding ring, the work is shared. In Soto's book, the collective effort is doubly presented, first when the children come together to help Maria eat the tamales in the attempt to find the ring, and second when the extended family works together to help create another batch of tamales and to rescue Maria from her feelings of guilt and embarrassment. Toward the end of the story, Maria's aunt offers words of comfort and even Maria's mother's ring "[winks] a silvery light" (Soto) as if to signal that part of the responsibility of being in a family is looking out for the well-being of all.

Tamales are a food that is strongly associated with Mexican-American ancestry. They are often consumed at holidays and other times of significance, and are noted by many Mexican-heritage individuals as a primary food that is identified with cultural heritage (Knepp 71-72). In a way, tamales are a perfect illustration of the cultural fusions that have impacted the Americas, and they are an embodiment of the resiliency of culture. The tamales that existed prior to contact with the Europeans were markedly different than the tamales thought of today. Coe states that due to differences in milling techniques, the indigenous peoples of the Americas did not utilize oils in their cooking (36). She further notes that many records exist indicating the indigenous dislike of and aversion to animal fats used widely by the Europeans (Coe 234). This fact, combined with the absence of large meat-producing animals like goats, sheep, pigs and cattle prior to the conquest (Pilcher, *Que Viva* 30), helps to illustrate two of the biggest

changes in tamales over the centuries. Indigenous tamales would have been greaseless with a denser masa, filled with native ingredients like turkey or other meat sources like rabbits, amphibians, and rodents, or available greens, herbs, plants, and fruits. Today, the masa for tamales is typically mixed with large quantities of some sort of lipid, whether shortening, oil, or lard, and pork is one of the more common fillings, especially in parts of Mexico and the borderlands of the southwestern United States. The cultural fusions in tamal ingredients and preparations certainly were not evidenced instantly, but today the various fusions illustrate the power of foods to bridge cultural divides and establish common ground between different groups of people.

As Europeans came to the Americas, they brought significant animals and plants associated with European diets. While animals thrived in the new locations, crops like wheat, olives, and grapes were more difficult to establish and cultivate, particularly in parts of Mexico. Pilcher notes that wheat “required substantial investments, both agricultural and industrial” (*Que Viva* 31) and that overall yields from wheat harvests did not come close to matching the productivity and yields of corn harvests (*Que Viva* 36). While persistence at cultivating wheat did eventually lead to some successes, efforts to totally replace indigenous crops with European ones were not successful. In addition to environmental obstacles, there was staunch resistance by indigenous populations whose societies had been built around native staples of maize, squash, and the like. According to Pilcher, what developed was a “pronounced regionalism” with European foods found more in city centers and to the north, and indigenous foods found more in rural areas and to the south (*Que Viva* 3). This divide was also a class divide, in that upper classes ate more European fare while lower classes ate a more indigenous diet.

Some individuals worked to overcome these culinary divides in Mexico. Pilcher writes of Josefina Velázquez de León, born in 1899 to an upper-class Mexican family, as an “apostle of popular cuisine” (*The Human* 209). In Pilcher’s words, she was “the foremost advocate of culinary nationalism, [writing] more than 150 cookbooks revealing the mysterious nuances of regional cuisines and exalting lower-class dishes such as enchiladas as symbols of national identity” (*The Human* 200). Josefina’s efforts were certainly important in motivating eventual social change, and in the mid 1900s, “an inclusive national cuisine [emerged] that combined Indian corn tortillas with European wheat bread” (Pilcher, *Que Viva* 3).

Much like Josefina used cuisine as a medium to unite the nation of Mexico, there are daily instances where foods are used to mediate cultural interactions. Pilcher notes, “Cuisine provides one of the most basic components of human identity” (*The Human* 200). From this assertion, sharing food is a way of sharing details about one’s life and one’s culture; it is a comfortable way to introduce something that may be looked upon as different or foreign. Katacha Díaz’s book, *The Girl Who Loves Tamales*, illustrates this concept well. The story tells about a girl named Victoria who is in grade school. Everyday she takes her mother’s homemade tamales in her lunchbox to school. Her friends, who have never eaten tamales, dislike their appearance and make faces at

the food which makes Victoria self conscious. She decides that rather than eating tamales, she will eat the foods her friends eat. “One day she eats some pizza. The next day she eats a sandwich, but nothing tastes as good as Mama’s homemade tamales” (Díaz 8-9). Victoria decides to invite her friends to sample her tamales the next day at school. After each taking a piece, Victoria’s friends find that they like the tamales. Victoria starts bringing extra portions in her lunch so that she and her friends can “*all* eat tamales” (Díaz 16).

This story speaks to the struggles that one can face negotiating cultural divides. Victoria first tries cultural assimilation by foregoing her own food and eating that of her friends, but ultimately she finds that is not what she wants. The tamales themselves become the currency for cultural exchange, and her friends are able to learn of Victoria’s heritage as she shares something that is important to her.

Ofelia Lachtman’s story *Tina and the Scarecrow Skins* also addresses overcoming cultural divides. Tina has no friends in her neighborhood until Little Bell moves in. While the girls get along well from the start, Tina’s mom disapproves of their friendship. Little Bell walks around barefoot in dresses that drag the floor, and she uses made up words like “bandlebond bones” to refer to her broken seashells collected from the beach, or “slithery crittles” to describe short jumbled pieces of rope and strings. Tina’s mom feels that Little Bell needs a “sensible name,” some “sensible clothes,” and “to learn proper talk!” (Lachtman). Hoping that her mother will eventually come around to the friendship, Tina impulsively invites Little Bell to her house to learn what tamales are. After her brother’s friend mistakenly burns the corn husks as kindling, Tina and Little Bell race back to the store to try and buy some more, but they find the store is closed. In despair, Tina turns to go back home. Wanting to help, Little Bell offers to get her “scarecrow skins” from her house. Tina initially refuses, but finally agrees to go with Little Bell after she sees her friend’s disappointment. Reaching to the far back corner under Little Bell’s bed, Tina pulls out the box that could be “filled with anything” (Lachtman). She mentally projects how her family will react to the box of scarecrow skins – “If she took it home, Robert would sniff, Pablo would snicker and Mamá would say, *What is this?*” – but Tina decides that nothing would be worse than hurting her friend’s feelings (Lachtman). Racing with the box, the girls run back to Tina’s house, where they put the box on the table for the moment of truth:

Tina tugged at the strings until it was open.  
 ‘Oh, my,’ Tina said, with a sly look at Little Bell, ‘this box is filled with scarecrow skins.’  
 Robert sniffed.  
 Pablo snickered.  
 And Mamá sighed.  
 Then Tina reached into the box and pulled out a handful of crackly corn husks. She held them up and said, ‘See?’

'I see, I see,' Mamá said. 'Not too green, not too dry, just perfect for tamales. Why did we ever use anything but scarecrow skins?'  
'I know,' Tina said. 'But some people will always call them corn husks.'  
Little Bell nodded.  
Mamá laughed.  
And Tina thought the best of thoughts: Mamá and Little Bell were friends at last! (Lachtman)

Tina's invitation to Little Bell to come learn about tamales was more than just an invitation to learn about the food; it was an invitation to share an important element of her heritage with her friend. Making tamales together is an event that indicates close social and family bonds, and Tina was going to be able to include Little Bell in the process, which was significant. Although Tina's mother had reservations about her daughter's friendship with Little Bell, and the girls had disparate cultural backgrounds, Tina and Little Bell were able to establish common elements in their combined efforts to replace the corn husks and make the tamales. Tina's mother also comes to realize that even though the girls might not always speak the same language, cultural differences can be appreciated rather than criticized.

Often times, the simplest of stories can carry profound messages. The Latino children's literature examined in this essay is filled with thematic messages about family, tradition, and cultural values. Using something as culturally elemental as tamales and tamal-making, authors can make statements of much wider importance, and in doing so, contribute their voices to the resources of tradition that children can draw from. It becomes significant that not only the messages about tamales and the tamal-tradition, but the books themselves, are uniquely suited to reach a very impressionable set of readers. Children have to constantly negotiate their understanding of life and cultural situations. By offering resources that validate and support cultural heritage, young readers can find a means to express their unique cultural experiences, and can gain strength from messages that reify the importance of culture and ethnicity.

Tamales and their communal preparation have been an integral part of the society of the Americas as far back as history can trace them, and they continue to play an important role in the lives of Mexican Americans. Wrapped up in each tamal is more than just masa and filling; each wrapped tamal includes the essential ingredients of tradition, family, unity, the past, and perhaps most importantly, the future. Traditions exist to be shared and continued. As authors craft stories about tamales, cultural traditions are spread both in the physical form of the books, but also these traditions are imprinted on the souls of all those who read the authors' works and embrace the message of which they write.

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