

Mexican Snacks Originated in Japan

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The Asian Conference on Asian Studies 2019
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Japanese immigrants played a prominent role in Mexican snack culture. *Cacahuete japonés*, *muégano*, *jamonsillo*, *chamoy*, and *habas fritas* are all snacks currently sold in Mexican markets that were invented by Japanese immigrants. In this presentation, I introduce the history of these popular Mexican snacks and sweets based on field work I conducted in Mexico City from 2015 to 2018. Mexico and Japan are distant and there were far fewer Japanese immigrants to Mexico as compared to other countries, including the USA and Brazil. As such, neither people in Mexico nor Japan expect that Japanese immigrants in Mexico contributed to the creation of some popular Mexican foods. However, this is precisely the case. The creation of these snacks dates back to World War II. Because Mexico was an ally of the USA in this war, all Japanese companies in Mexico were closed and Japanese immigrants became unemployed. In order to make a living, some immigrants became street vendors, selling home-made Japanese snacks and sweets. The story behind these popular snack foods is not well known in Mexico. Rather, many believe these snacks are Mexican, not Japanese. The Japanese immigrants who created these snacks are deceased and their family members are old. It is urgent for historians to interview their remaining family members to conserve the important history of Japanese immigrants' influence on popular snacks in Mexico.

Keywords: Japanese snacks, immigrants, Mexico, WWII

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Introduction

Japanese immigrants played a prominent role in shaping Mexican snack culture. *Cacahuate japonés*, *muégano*, *jamoncillo*, *chamoy*, and *habas fritas* are all snacks currently sold in Mexican markets that were invented by Japanese immigrants. In this presentation, I introduce the history of these popular Mexican snacks and sweets based on field work I conducted in Mexico City from August 2015 to September 2018.

There were far fewer Japanese immigrants to Mexico as compared to other countries, including the USA and Brazil. As such, neither people from Mexico nor Japan expect that Japanese immigrants in Mexico contributed to the creation of some popular Mexican foods. Moreover, Japanese and Mexican cuisine do not share a lot in common. Many Japanese tend to eat something light and healthy, such as white rice, miso soup, and fish. Whereas Mexicans often tend to eat something heavy, like tacos, tortas, quesadillas, and etc.

However, some Japanese immigrants played a big role in creating Mexican snacks. The creation of these snacks dates back to World War II. Because Mexico was an ally of the USA, all Japanese companies in Mexico were closed and Japanese immigrants lost their jobs. To make a living, some immigrants became street vendors, selling home-made Japanese snacks and sweets in Mexico, which is why we can find some Mexican snacks of Japanese origin.

First, let us look at *cacahuate japonés*, or Japanese peanut.

The origin of this snack is the Japanese *mamegashi*. Yoshihei Nakatani, who immigrated to Mexico in 1932, invented this snack in Mexico during WWII. When I saw this snack for the first time in Mexico, which was back in 2008, I did not expect a Japanese immigrant in Mexico to have invented it. I thought that some Mexicans or Mexican companies were imitating Japanese *mamegashi* and selling it in Mexico, because a Japanese geisha-look, old style woman from Meiji or Taisho period, is printed on the package. It is a stereotypical, ancient image of a Japanese woman, and there are not so many Japanese modern snacks with this type of outdated image, so I thought that someone not Japanese made *cacahuate japonés* in Mexico.

But to my surprise, years later, in April 2015, I learned that *cacahuate japonés* was invented by Yoshihei Nakatani. Coincidentally, there was an article about Nakatani's life in a textbook I was using at that time in my Spanish reading class. Based on this article I researched about the history of *cacahuate japonés*, and I discovered that his granddaughter, Emma Chishuru Nakatani Sanchez, is a historian teaching at a university in Mexico City. I planned my trip and interviewed Professor Nakatani Sánchez in August, 2015.

During the interview, Professor Nakatani Sánchez sent me a memoir written in Japanese by Yoshihei Nakatani, and asked me to tell her what is written on the memoir since she cannot read Japanese. So I read Yoshihei Nakatani's memoir and the historiography about Japanese immigrants in Mexico, and discovered the story behind *cacahuate japonés* and the Japanese immigrant community of the early twentieth century.

One interesting aspect about the relationship between Mexico and Japan is that Mexico has maintained amicable diplomatic relation with Japan since 1888. In this year, Mexico and Japan concluded the Treaty of Amity, Commerce and Navigation, which was the first equal treaty that Japan concluded among Western countries. Except for several years right after the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907-1908 and the World War II era, Mexico did not completely exclude Japanese immigrants, which contrasts starkly with American immigration policy, since USA enforced exclusionist immigration policies toward Japanese and Asians several times between the end of the 19th century until the end of World War II. In Mexico, on the other hand, Japanese immigrants tended to be welcomed since they were seen as trustworthy and hardworking people.

Even during World War II, Japanese immigrants in Mexico were not treated harshly because the American-style concentration camp never existed in Mexico. The Japanese living in Mexico's northern, southern, and coastal states were ordered to move either to Guadalajara or Mexico City, but those who lived in the two cities did not need to relocate. There were some restrictions for the Japanese during the war. The state froze their bank accounts, closed their companies, and imposed a curfew after 9 pm. Nonetheless, they could make their living by their own. Since most of Japanese immigrants became unemployed, some started cultivating rice, and others started making Japanese snacks at home and selling them in the street.

Yoshihei Nakatani was no exception. He too became unemployed, since the company he worked for as a shell bottom craftsman was closed down. Nakatani, married a Mexican woman and had 5 children at that time, had to take care of his family. Then, one night, he remembered what he learned in a confectionary store in Awaji, Japan: how to make Japanese snacks and sweets such as *karinto* and *mamegashi*. First, he started to make a dough snack called *muégano*, which is similar to Japanese *karinto*, with his family. *Muégano* became very popular in his neighborhood and Nakatani's business prospered for two years. However, one of his friends whom Nakatani taught how to make *muégano* started selling it cheaper than he did, so Nakatani lost his clients. Then, he came up with a new idea of making *cacahuate japonés*, noting that Mexicans like peanuts and other beans. He needed a special machine to mass produce it, so he and his wife invented it by themselves and started to sell it in the neighborhood. *Cacahuate japonés* became very popular among his neighbors, and many started to produce a similar snack. Now, there are several companies that produce *cacahuate japonés* in Mexico. Thus a Japan snack became a Mexican staple.

Jamoncillo, *dulce de leche*, or Mexican fudge as is known in Texas, is another Mexican food of Japanese origin. It is a sweet candy made by milk and sugar. The inventor of *jamoncillo* was the Tanaka family from Fukuoka. The Tanaka father and his two sons first immigrated in 1906 to La Oaxaqueña, a sugar plantation in southern Mexico. They worked there for about one year, then, due to bad working conditions, dispersed. The father went back to Japan, and the two brothers moved to Guadalajara. The older Tanaka brother married a Japanese woman from Fukuoka, had 5 kids and started selling sweets in a small town of Ures in the northern state of Sonora. During the summer, they sold ice cream and shaved ice, and during the winter sold *jamoncillo*, a candy totally new to Mexicans at that time.

Jamoncillo became very popular in the town, but only in Ures and its vicinity. Then, with the beginning of World War II, the Tanakas had to move to Mexico City. They first lived in the neighborhood of Tlalpan, since many other Japanese immigrants from the northern Mexico relocated there during the war. Since they were unemployed, the Tanaka family started selling *jamoncillo* and other Japanese foods such as tofu there. *Jamoncillo* started to become popular in Mexico City and other states, and now it is a Mexican sweet sold in all over the country.

We know about Tanaka family's life during World War II and the story behind *jamoncillo* from the book *La gallina azul: Historia de una familia japonesa durante la segunda Guerra mundial* by Celicia Reyes Estrada (2014). Cecilia was a client of Rene Tanaka, a dentist and the fifth son of Tanaka family, and while she was treated, she heard about the story of the family from Rene Tanaka. She then proceeded to write her book.

Next, let's look at *chamoy*. *Chamoy* is the extract of a Mexican fruit which looks like Japanese plum or *ume*. During the war, a merchant Tadakichi Iwadare encountered this fruit by chance, and thought that he might be able to make something like pickled plum. Going back to his house, he experimented, and succeeded in it. He bottled the extraction and sold it, and Mexican consumers really liked it. Now, *chamoy* is very popular among children in Mexico. The most common way of using it is putting *chamoy* on potato chips. Mexicans also sometimes treat cold symptoms with a sip of *chamoy*. Tadakichi Iwadare passed years ago and now, a Mexican owns the *chamoy* company.

And now, I digress a little bit from the topic, but while I was preparing this presentation I coincidentally found out that Japanese immigrants in Brazil also had a similar experience regarding Japanese plums. Japanese immigrants in Brazil also looked for plums so they could eat *ume onigiri*. But, since they could not find a plant similar to *ume*, they looked for something sour, and realized that they could make something like pickled plums using hibiscus. So they experimented and invented *hana-ume*, a pickled hibiscus. Of course, *hana* means flower and *ume* means plum in Japanese. Now, *hana-ume onigiri* is very popular among Japanese Brazilians. They think that *hana-ume onigiri* is a Japanese food, believing that it is common in Japan too. But, in Japan, *hana-ume* is totally new, and *hana-ume onigiri* is not sold in convenience stores. So now, when Brazilian Japanese come to work in Japan, they get surprised by learning the fact that *hana-ume onigiri* is a "foreign", Japanese Brazilian food.

Lastly, let us look at *habas fritas*. During the war, several Japanese immigrants in Mexico City started to sell a Japanese popular snack, fried broad beans, or *habas fritas* in Spanish, in the street. We don't know exactly who started it first. Many Mexicans liked it so they also started to make and sell it. Now, Japanese immigrants and Mexicans began competing with each other, each insisting they had invented it first. To resolve this problem, Nakazo Sugawara tried hard for several years and finally patented *habas fritas* as a Japanese snack. After that, Japanese were selling it for a while but after the war, almost all the Japanese street vendors took new jobs and stopped selling *habas fritas*. Since then, Mexicans have been selling it on a street as a Mexican snack.

Conclusion

In this presentation, we have seen how Japanese immigrants played a major role in creating Mexican popular snack foods. The story behind these snacks is not well known in Mexico. Rather, many believe these snacks are Mexican, not Japanese. The Japanese immigrants who created these snacks are deceased and their family members who remember the history of these snacks are now old. So now, it is urgent for historians to interview their remaining family members to conserve the important history of Japanese immigrants' influence on popular snacks in Mexico.

Acknowledgements

Thank you very much for Shozo Ogino, who told me interesting stories behind these snacks in Mexico. This presentation is based on my interview with Ogino on September 8, 2018.

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