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VIETNAMESE NEW YEAR RICE CAKES: ICONIC FESTIVE DISHES AND CONTESTED NATIONAL IDENTITY¹



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Vietnamese *banh Tet* (New Year rice cakes) are the most prominent culinary icons of the most important Vietnamese festival. This article examines the sociocultural ideas of contemporary Vietnamese national identity expressed by these dishes, and explores the implicit and complex ways by which they take part in developing Vietnamese cultural identity and nationalism. In terms of the “Imagined Communities” analytical framework, this food item serves as an important means for practicing and “concretizing” national identity. (Vietnam, national identity, food symbolism, rice cakes)

Tet, the Vietnamese New Year festival, is the most important event in the Vietnamese social calendar, and *banh Tet*, New Year’s special cakes (sticky-rice loaves stuffed with green beans and fatty pork, wrapped in bamboo leaves, and boiled overnight), are its ubiquitous culinary icon. Eaten at the onset of the new year by everyone within the country and elsewhere who consider themselves *Kinh* (ethnic Vietnamese), this festive dish is the essence of the festival and, hence, of being Vietnamese. The cakes are models of the cosmic order. They reflect Vietnamese rice-growing culture and its nutritional logic, and the anxiety that characterizes Vietnamese sociocultural arrangements and conventions. What seems a solid and unified fabric is challenged by ruptures that characterize the contemporary Vietnamese polity, such as the tensions between autochthonous and imported cultural elements, and the contradictions between regional orientations and national identity. The nation’s war-ridden history also finds expression in certain aspects of *banh Tet*. Thus, these humble rice cakes are multivocal and dynamic representations of Vietnamese national identity.

Despite their importance, these culinary artifacts have been ignored by social scientists and scholars of Vietnamese culture. This article, based on anthropological fieldwork conducted in Hoi An (Central Vietnam) during 1999 and 2000, and shorter stays in 1998, 2001, and 2004, explores the varied and even contradictory ideas expressed by *banh Tet* in regard to a multifaceted, and at times contested, Vietnamese national identity.

National identity has long been a contested construct, and an understanding of nationalism is still limited. Drawing on Anderson’s (1983) notion of the “imagined” nature of communities as theoretical and abstract, this article stresses

the ways by which food, and iconic national dishes in particular, take part in the construction and negotiation of various facets of this elusive entity. While some research on the practical and “banal” (Billig 1995) aspects of “doing nationalism” is recent, the role of food in constructing national identity has been largely overlooked. This article suggests that iconic dishes, due to various intrinsic qualities of food, are particularly suitable means for the negotiation and expression of complex and contradictory ideas concerning national identity, especially with authoritarian regimes such as Vietnam’s.

FOOD AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Iconic dishes are powerful markers of national identity. Mennell (1985), in his comparison of English and French cuisines, argues that recognizable national cuisines appear hand-in-hand with the appearance of the modern nation-state, while Bell and Valentine (1997:168) point out that “food and the nation are so commingled in popular discourses that it is often difficult not to think one through the other” In a similar vein, “[s]tories about eating something somewhere . . . are really stories about the place and the people there . . . the reading of a food’s story reveals, like any good biography or travelogue, a much bigger story . . . of particular times and places” (Freidberg 2003:3-4).

While these writers stress the strength and immediacy of the relations between food and national identity, they also point out that iconic national dishes are more often than not imagined (Anderson 1983) or invented (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Narayan’s (1997:164) analysis of curry, the universal and indisputable marker of Indian identity, is a good example:

[S]earch through the shelves of an Indian kitchen, or grocery store, and you will find no bottles labeled “curry powder.” What Indians buy or make are often called “masalas” . . . different mixtures of ground spices used to season a variety of dishes. . . . [The] British curry powder is really a “fabricated” entity, the logic of colonial commerce imposing a term that signified a particular type of dish onto a specific mixture of spices, which then became a fixed and familiar product.

Narayan (1997) warns against identifying a certain dish with a specific nationality as being simplistic and potentially misleading, and advises an inspection of the relations between iconic dishes and the nationalities they allegedly represent to allow for a more comprehensive, though more complex, understanding of national identities. Mintz (1997:189) points out that since the beginning of the twentieth century “masses of people everywhere were matter-of-factly eating food, sometimes as often as every day, that had come from (or originated) very far away,” while Freidberg (2003:4) adds that “it takes only a few seeds or a handful

of immigrant chefs to transform a particular locale's agriculture and food culture." Further, iconic dishes represent places "even if—as is so often the case . . . [culinary] traditions are exposed as mere inventions" (Bell and Valentine 1997:147). While these reservations complicate and even challenge the validity of a culinary representation of national identity, it is wise to bear in mind that even though the tomato reached Italy only a few centuries ago, and despite the fact that the origins of spaghetti are contested, pasta in tomato sauce and pizza are indisputably Italian. The question is how pizza and pasta reflect Italian identity or, for Vietnam, what New Year rice cakes say about being Vietnamese.

Food and the Concretization of the Imagined Community

While Anderson's work (1983) has revolutionized an understanding of the nature of modern nation-states and nationalism, challenging the notion of natural and primordial (Giddens 1981:193) feelings of belonging-ness that subjects of nation-states supposedly harbor toward their respective nations, and showing how these are actually constructed (Foster 1991:252) imagined ideas, Alonso (1994:382) says, "Anderson does not go far enough in identifying the strategies through which 'the imagined' becomes 'second nature' . . . embodied in material practice and lived experience." Similarly, Palmer (1998:180) argues that Anderson "stop[s] short of examining the many ways by which a sense of nation-ness is maintained every day. . . ." She suggests that

the crucial point is how one moves forward from this understanding of structural changes that allowed the idea of a cultural community to emerge, toward an understanding of how individuals became *consciously* aware of the cultural community . . . how a sense of nationality is constructed that links individuals to a particular cultural tradition. (Palmer 1998:180)

Indeed, much of the anthropological and sociological writing on nationalism has focused on the "cultural praxis of national identity formation" (Lofgren 1989:5, quoted in Foster 1991:238), and on the various ways the nation is "concretized" (Alonso 1994:380) in an attempt to bridge the gap between the theoretical conceptualization of the nation as an imagined entity and the daily practices that produce and reproduce it. While Foster (1991:248-252) uses 'commodification' and 'consumption' to "objectify the nation," and while Alonso (1994) mentions "alimentary tropes" such as cooking, food, and digestion, the ways food and eating help produce and negotiate nationalism are rarely discussed. Even Palmer (1998:183), who explicitly defines food as one of the three "flags of identity" that potentially bridge the gap between the theory and practice of nationalism (the other flags being the body and the landscape²), and points out that "food is as

much a 'badge of identity' as are the more obvious symbols of national belonging, such as coins, anthems, costumes, and ceremonies," does not go beyond general statements such as the one quoted above. Thus, the main theoretical purpose of this article is to discuss the ways by which iconic national dishes bridge the gap between the theory and praxis of nationalism.

THE VIETNAMESE NEW YEAR FESTIVAL

The Vietnamese New Year festival, *Tet Nguyen Dan*, the festival of "the original sunlight" or "the arrival of dawn" (Huu and Cohen 1997:6), is the most important event celebrated by ethnic Vietnamese. Though there are several Tet in a year, when the Vietnamese talk about Tet they mean the New Year festival, which is also known as *Tet ca* (main festival). Discussing Tet, planning it, eagerly awaiting its arrival, and reminiscing about the previous Tet are frequent items of conversation among Hoianese in the months before the holiday, when preparations for the coming Tet begin.

Scholars and commentators on Vietnam often stress the salience of Tet as an event of incomparable magnitude. Jamieson (1995:28) writes: "It is difficult for Americans to grasp how important Tet was, and is, to [the] Vietnamese. Tet is Christmas, Easter, New Year's Eve, Thanksgiving, and Fourth of July all rolled into one celebration. Celebrating Tet with one's family was an essential part of what it meant to be Vietnamese, to be a complete human being." Other writers (Huu and Cohen 1997:6; Florence and Storey 1999:96-9; Kamm 1996:203-5; Ellis 1995:163; Crawford 1965:190) comment on Tet in similar superlatives.

Tet is celebrated on the first day of the first lunar month of the Vietnamese year,³ when the night appears to be the darkest of the year (Huu and Cohen 1997:12), somewhere between January 19th and February 20th, half-way between the winter solstice and the summer equinox (Huard and Durand 1998:108), and is considered the first day of spring. It is celebrated between the autumn rice harvest and the spring rice planting, "when the granaries are at the year's fullest" and when agricultural activity is postponed until the beginning of the planting season (Huu and Cohen 1997:12; see also Hickey 1964:130). Tet, then, is neither a harvest nor a planting festival, but an in-between period. In this respect, Tet does not merely celebrate the farmers' gratitude for the previous harvest or their hopes for future crops, but is also aimed at combating the effects of unstable weather and at ensuring the safety of the stored crops during this dangerous period (an issue that will be developed later).

Though the holiday is officially celebrated in contemporary Vietnam during the first three days of the New Year, Tet activities last much longer. The rituals begin on the 23rd day of the twelfth lunar month, when *ong Tao* (the God of the

Hearth), who routinely “observes the daily activities of the family” from his privileged position in the kitchen (Hickey 1964:130), ascends to heaven to report to the Jade Emperor (the supreme heavenly deity) about the family deeds during the past year. Frantic preparations continue until the last moment of the concluding year, and the festival peaks when the ancestors descend from heaven to join their families for the first meal of the New Year.

The next three days are spent visiting relatives (first day), teachers (second day), and friends (third day). As with most social activities in Vietnam, each visit involves a measure of drinking and eating, with the nature, quality, and quantity of food and drinks expressing the relative social closeness between the hosts and their guests. Tet wanes between the third and seventh days of the first lunar month, when the ancestors return to heaven. However, the planning and preparations begin well before the twelfth month, while the actual rituals of Tet begin on the fifteenth day of the twelfth month (the last *ngay ram* or full-moon worship of the year), and the festive air prevails at least until the fifteenth day of the first month.

It is important to know that the customs of the Vietnamese New Year Festival are almost identical to the Chinese, as the festival, along with its verbal and symbolic vocabulary, were adopted by the Vietnamese from the Chinese with only slight variations. The importance of this cultural borrowing will be expanded when discussing the role of *banh Tet* as Vietnamese national symbols.

New Year Rice Cakes

Tet’s traditional customs are summarized in a popular couplet:

Thịt mỡ, dưa hành, câu đối đỏ;
Cây nêu, tràng pháo, bánh chưng xanh
 (Fat pork, pickled shallots, red couplets;
 New Year pole, strings of firecrackers, green rice cakes).

Nowadays in Hoi An, Tet poles (*cây nêu*), and red couplets (New year wishes, traditionally written in rhyming verses on red paper) are rare, and firecrackers have been banned since 1994. In stark contradiction to these fading customs, the special dishes prepared for the New Year festival, especially *banh Tet*, are extremely popular, and can be seen and eaten everywhere. It could even be argued that Tet’s dishes and meals are now the main features of the holiday (as they likely were in the past). Indeed, when inviting someone to visit during the festival, the invitation is to “eat Tet” (*ăn Tet*), stressing the centrality of food and eating.

Tet features special dishes, some consumed nationwide while others are local versions. In Hoi An, at the Tet of year 2000, the most popular dishes after *Banh Tet* were *mut quat* (candied kumquat oranges), *si ro dau* (mulberry syrup), and *ruou dau* (mulberry liqueur), as well as a variety of pork dishes. The “five fruit offering” (*Ngu Qua*) that should have been presented on the Hoianese ancestral altars included custard apple, young coconut, papaya, mango, and watermelon. Dried watermelon seeds and a variety of dried and preserved fruits, served in a special multi-compartment plate, were served with tea to visitors. While all of these are symbolically meaningful (Avieli 2003:330-49), the New Year rice cakes were the most prominent culinary icons, appearing as the centerpiece on almost every ancestral altar, served at practically every meal during the first days of the festival and frequently in the subsequent two weeks.

The preparation of *banh Tet* is not difficult, yet requires time, labor, equipment, and some experience. Therefore, most urban families buy them in any of the several outlets that spring up everywhere in the week prior to the festival. To make rice cakes requires soaking sticky rice (*nep*) and mung beans (*dau xanh*, literally “green beans”) in water overnight. The soaked rice is pressed into a rectangular wooden mold and stuffed with mashed green beans and pork cooked in lard. Bamboo leaves are wrapped around the rice loaf and tightly fastened with bamboo splinters. The cakes are then slowly boiled overnight in a large iron barrel.

Hoianese *banh Tet* are cylindrical, about 30 cm. in length, 8-10 cm. in diameter, and weigh about one kg. There are also vegetarian cakes (*banh chay*) and a luxurious version stuffed with beef. The average price for a rice cake in Hoi An during the Tet of year 2000 was about 10,000 dong (then about 70 US cents). To eat the cakes, the leaf wrapping is removed and the rice loaf is sliced. To keep the rice cakes fresh, the wrapping is peeled from the end which is to be sliced. Due to the sticky consistency, knives can hardly cut the cakes. Instead, one of the bamboo splinters used to tie the leaf wrapping is used; a loop is made in the splinter, which is tightened around the unwrapped tip of the loaf, elegantly slicing portions 3-5 mm. in width. The outer rice layer of the cakes turns slightly green (colored by the bamboo leaves), while the center is yellowish and dotted with shining fat chunks and pale spots of pork.

Banh Tet are served with a savory-spicy dip made with soy sauce and chopped red chilli peppers. During the first few days of the festival, *banh Tet* slices are served fresh. But as the cakes tend to become somewhat dry after a few days (especially if the leaf wrapping is removed), the slices might be lightly fried to regain their zest. *Banh Tet* are sticky, fatty, heavy, and filling. Tet is characterized by overeating (and overindulging in general); the cakes are the most filling dish

of the festival and, for that matter, of the entire Vietnamese cuisine, which is usually light, crispy, and fresh.

Vietnamese explain eating banh Tet during the festival with the legend of *banh chung* (boiled cake) and *banh day* (elastic cake). Informants' versions were generally the same and congruent with the literature (e.g., Schultz 1994:54-62; Huu 1998:664-5):

The sixth *Hung* King had twenty sons and couldn't decide which one should be his heir. [The *Hung* kings are described by contemporary Vietnamese as being the founders of the nation.] One night, a genie appeared in his dream and advised him how to choose a successor. The king then summoned his sons and told them to "go everywhere in the world and get me the most wonderful food. The one that brings the tastiest dish will be my successor."

The sons all rushed to look for delicacies, except for the sixteenth son, prince *Lang Lieu*. Motherless, poor, and lacking political support, he was very discouraged. One night he dreamed of a deity who told him that the heavens, knowing his despair, sent him advice: "Nothing is more precious than rice, man's staple. Take sticky rice, wash and soak it. Shape two loaves from the rice: one square like the earth, and the other round like the vault of heaven. Use pestle and mortar to grind some pork-meat and fat with some green beans and stuff the square loaf, wrap it with leaves, and boil both cakes for a whole night. Present the cakes to your father and you'll be chosen the successor." Assisted by his elderly maid, his wife, and children, Prince *Lang Lieu* learned how to prepare the rice cakes.

When the awaited day arrived, the princes offered their father the most wonderful, exotic, and unusual dishes from all corners of the earth, but the king wasn't satisfied: "These dishes are all worthy of curious admiration, but they are expensive and strange." Then, *Lang Lieu* presented the rice cakes. The king, after tasting the cakes and hearing of their divine origins, immediately appointed him heir.

Since that day, it became the custom to prepare *banh chung* and *banh day* [or *giay*, in Schultz 1994:55] for Tet. However, the practice of making the round *banh day* has been lost with time and *banh chung*, when prepared for the spring festival, are called *banh Tet*.

Nutrition, Cosmology, and Rice-Farming

It is important to note that the legend reflects the sound nutritional logic underlying *banh Tet*: a wholesome combination of carbohydrates, proteins, fat, vitamins, and minerals. The soy and chili dip supplies further protein, vitamins, and minerals. This nutritional logic serves as the basis for much of the symbolic meaning of the rice cakes, as only comprehensive dishes can sustain ideas such as those conveyed by *banh Tet*.

The most explicit symbolic feature of the cakes is the shape. According to the legend, the cakes should be square and round, and the text clearly states that these are the shapes of the earth and heaven, respectively (reflecting Chinese cosmology). Thus, preparing sets of round and square cakes for a festival that celebrates the beginning of a new year and the rebirth of nature in spring (Huu and

Cohen 1997:30) is a symbolic act of creation and recreation of the universe. Banh Tet, then, are a model of the universe, a “*microcosm* of the lived-in world—a simplified, specialized, relatively closed system that operates in parallel with the indeterminate world that it models” (Handelman 1998:xxii).

It is curious that neither informants nor published sources (Schultz 1994:54-62; Huu 1998:665) could explain why only the square banh chung became banh Tet, while the round banh day are rarely prepared for the festival nowadays. However, the square cake, shaped like the earth, stresses the nature of the holiday as oriented toward the earth and, hence, farming. Schultz (1994:56) suggests that “the square shape is considered a symbol of the Vietnamese people’s gratitude for the earth, which has supplied them with nutritious food. . . .” Huu (1998:665) says that for the Vietnamese, “banh Chung [are a] symbol of their gratitude to the earth which feeds them,” while in Nguyen and Sachs’ version (2003:81), the prince says: “[o]ne will have a square shape and will symbolize the earth, reminding us of the square plots of land from which we grow our crops.” The legend and the cakes, then, are not only models of the cosmos and of the natural elements but also a model of traditional Vietnamese farming, with rice, beans, and pork representing its three essential elements: grains, legumes, and husbandry.

The cakes highlight rice (their defining ingredient) as the epitome of Vietnamese agriculture. Indeed, rice is the most important item in the Vietnamese diet, and cultivating it is the most common activity in Vietnam (Nguyen 1995:218)—some 80 per cent of the population is rural, and roughly 80-90 per cent of those people are engaged in rice farming. Although only 125 days per annum are spent directly in rice cultivation (D. Nguyen 1993:316), most other rural activities revolve around the exploitation of rice residues (Jamieson 1995:34) or over-coming its nutritional deficiencies. For example, peanuts, beans, and coconuts are cultivated to supply proteins and fats; leafy greens and aromatic herbs provide fiber, vitamins, and minerals lost in polishing rice; pigs are fed with rice bran and the meal scraps (mostly rice); and ducks are herded over newly harvested rice fields to ensure that every grain is gleaned; even dogs, whenever fed, get rice. Finally, a farmer is interred in his rice field, returning physically and symbolically into the rice circle, which is the source of human life.

Green beans and pork are important for banh Tet but hidden, as it were, under a thick layer of rice. Indeed, the cakes can also be perceived as a model of the spatial organization of the countryside—endless rice fields surrounding villages, where small patches of legumes (and other vegetables), and pigs and other farm animals are tended near the houses. One informant suggested that the green color of the cakes, resulting from boiling the rice in leaf-wrappings, stands for the green rice fields.

Most Vietnamese festive rice cakes (e.g., mid-autumn moon cakes or midsummer ash cakes) are not made of plain rice (*gao te*) but of glutinous (sticky) rice (*gao nep*). This distinction is so important that the term *nep-te* is used to express contradictions such as good-bad, right-wrong, and even boy-girl (Nguyen 2001). Glutinous rice was domesticated thousands of years before long-grained (plain) rice, but nowadays plain rice is cultivated on a much larger scale because it yields significantly larger crops and can be cultivated on poorer soils (Huu 1998:186). While glutinous rice was the only kind available during the reign of the Hung kings (to when the legend and the cakes are dated), it seems to have certain qualities that call for some reflection.

First, Nguyen (2001) claims that the historical precedence of glutinous rice singles out *nep* as “real” rice, the ancestral staple of Vietnamese society and its authentic fare. Thus, *nep* in various guises always replaces plain rice in ceremonies and rituals. In this respect, sticky rice transcends time and allows contemporary Vietnamese to re-enact their ancient past and re-experience the mythological period of national formation celebrated by the legend.

Second, some informants suggested that glutinous rice stands for togetherness due to its sticky consistency. Thus, sticky-rice cakes (which feature in different names, shapes, colors, fillings, and tastes in most Vietnamese festivals) represent social cohesion and unity, the feelings that festivals and other social rituals aim to invoke. *Banh Tet* expresses Durkheim’s (1915) understanding of using festive food to distinguish between the sacred and profane. Everyday time is plain-rice time, profane, shapeless, colorless, tasteless, and loosely structured. Sacred time is extraordinary, carefully molded into distinctive shapes, and marked with color. Thus, the shapes and colors of *banh Tet* distinguish them from the ordinary and daily plain-rice cakes and, hence, express sacred time.

Last, an idea expressed by the legend is that political power relates to the ability to feed people. “The fortunes of the state, whether in Europe or in Africa or Asia, have long been closely bound up with the containment or prevention of famine and, more generally, with provisioning the populace” (Arnold 1988:96, quoted in Counihan 1999:7-8). The legend defines the ideal Vietnamese king as one who nurtures the nation, and as one who feeds it with rice.

It is significant that, although it would be reasonable to expect the Vietnamese to have the fiercest warrior, the shrewdest tactician, the most moral, or the best educated of the princes selected as their king, they opted for a cooking competition to determine royal succession, suggesting that the ability to nurture is the most essential quality of Vietnamese leadership. Moreover, the legend rejected the most expensive or exotic dish in favor of rice.

Banh Tet and Rice-Farming Anxiety

All Vietnamese Tet are celebrated during a transition period, marking a shift from one farming season to the next. The New Year Tet comes at a time when unpredictable weather threatens the stored crops, the future harvests, and the health and well being of the people. While most commentators stress the optimistic and joyous aspects of Tet, the fact is that this festival occurs at a dangerous time. This is reflected in some symbolic elements that denote danger, but it is in the festive dishes, and especially in banh Tet, that anxiety is most clearly evident.

The most problematic aspect of this season is the safe storage of the recently harvested crops. After the threshing, rice is dried in the sun, then put in large sacks that are stored in elevated spaces, usually on the horizontal roof beams in attics. The rice must be protected from direct sunlight, rain, rodents, insects, occasional summer floods and, most importantly, from humidity, which can cause sprouting and mold. Symbolically, banh Tet also protect the rice due to the long boiling, the large amount of lard, and the leaf-wrapping. Informants claim the rice cakes can keep for at least a month. The festive rice cakes are a preserved food item among an array of New Year preserved foodstuffs—candied oranges (*mut quat*), mulberry syrup (*siro dao*), a variety of candied and/or dried fruits (pineapple, papaya, coconut, peaches, and apricots)—and the ubiquitous watermelon seeds, which are dried for preservation. Even the dish of pork cooked in lard (*thit mo*) mentioned above in the Tet couplet, as well as the Hoianese version of pork in fishsauce, are essentially preserved foods.

In a certain respect, the various festive dishes, and particularly banh Tet, are practical, psychological, and possibly magical means aimed at overcoming the threat of food spoilage. Eating preserved food expresses this anxiety (perhaps to reduce it), and may even be regarded as a charm to protect the stored crops. Other Tet practices—thoroughly cleaning the house, whitewashing it with a lime solution and, most importantly, cleaning the kitchen, replacing the hearth bricks (Huu and Cohen 1997), and ceasing to cook for a few days during Tet—are aimed at ensuring that substances threatening the stored rice are eliminated.

Banh Tet do more than celebrate rice farming and express gratitude for the successful harvest; they also reveal the Vietnamese farmers' concern that the harvested crops can be lost or that the harvest of the coming season may fail. At the same time, the rice cakes, preserved as they are, symbolize perseverance and the will to survive any calamity. The exceptional endurance of banh Tet is one of their most important characteristics and, as such, provides the basis of further interpretation.

CONTESTED FACETS OF VIETNAMESE NATIONAL IDENTITY

While the symbolic notions of cosmology and of rice farming, which make for the essential Vietnamese sociocultural common ground, can be clearly discerned in the legend, other ideas are more implicit, elusive, and complicated. Some of my informants' interpretations of *banh Tet* were mainly concerned with Vietnamese/Kinh national identity and had a clear contemporary tone.

When I asked *co* (miss/teacher) *Nguyet*, my Vietnamese language teacher, what was the moral of the legend, she pondered for a while, then said: "the moral is that we don't like foreign things!" *Co Nguyet* was suggesting a patriotic interpretation that highlights a local (that is, Vietnamese/Kinh) artifact, as simple and humble as it may be, as being more desirable than imported luxuries, no matter how sophisticated. In contemporary post-revolutionary Vietnam (Malarney 2002), where the impact of the flow of foreign culture, information, and ideology upon "traditional values" (Drummond and Thomas 2003:8) is passionately debated, the legend and, hence, *banh Tet* are interpreted as expressing national pride and a feeling of cultural superiority. When eating the humble rice cakes, the Vietnamese make a point about their preference for Vietnamese culture and artifacts over imported items, as luxurious as those may be. The cakes, then, denote patriotism.

Co Nguyet's interpretation could stem from either of two possible contexts. It could be attributed to the original, millennia-old independent spirit of the Vietnamese—who have preferred their homeland and its produce over foreign goods, ideas, and rulers ever since the semi-mythological era of the Hung kings—a spirit that persisted during the nation's turbulent history of continuous struggle for independence. It could also be attributed to a contemporary patriotic/nationalistic education system, which encourages Vietnamese kids (and adults) to venerate their homeland. However, when asked if someone had suggested this interpretation or whether she learned it in school as a student (or as a teacher), *co Nguyet* claimed that this is simply how she understands the legend. In any case, the sequence of struggles for independence that characterize Vietnamese history suggests that this tendency is not merely a modern and implanted idea. In fact, *co Nguyet's* interpretation seems to be a contemporary manifestation of an ancient, deeply rooted cultural tendency for self-assertion and independence.

Moreover, both the legend and the rice cakes depict an independent pre-Chinese Vietnamese culture. The Hung kings ruled before the arrival of the Chinese, and the legend recounts a custom that was presumably established before the arrival of these long-term foes and, at times, conquerors. As *Huu* (1998:117) points out, "the Vietnamese have adopted many customs of the Confucian

Chinese New Year but they have indigenized their form and content and added new practices of their own, drawing from the pre-Chinese folkloric treasury of their Viet culture patrimony.” Further developing the issue of indigenization, he adds: “The most popular food eaten in Tet is undoubtedly the *banh chung* . . . [whose] origin is linked to . . . the time of *Hung* Kings, who were the founders of the first Vietnamese state.” Indeed, while other festive rice cakes, such as midsummer ash cakes (*ban u tro*) or mid-autumn moon cakes, were acknowledged by my informants as having Chinese origins, there seems to be no Chinese New Year dish parallel to *banh Tet*. My informants insist, just as Huu does, that the cakes are uniquely Vietnamese. Thus, the most prominent dish in the most important Vietnamese festival features not merely patriotism but also stands for a pure, autochthonous Vietnamese culture not yet influenced/corrupted by Chinese influence.

Here we face the first paradox that emerges when coming to analyze the meaning of *banh Tet* in relation to the Vietnamese national identity: *Tet* festival (along with the Vietnamese calendar itself), the words *Tet* and *Tiet*, as well as the word *banh*, were all borrowed from Chinese. Thus, the (presumably) non-Chinese cakes, along with the legend and its emphasis on “localness,” are the crucial elements that “Vietnamize” the festival, even though they, too, might very well be of Chinese origins. Indeed, the fact that soy sauce and not *nuoc ma*—the Vietnamese ubiquitous fishsauce, the essential taste agent and marker of Vietnamese cuisine—is used for the accompanying dip further hints that, despite the claims made by the legend and by my informants, *banh Tet* have a Chinese background.

It is important to note that the notion of a Vietnamese/Kinh identity that is distinctive from the Chinese is an important and sensitive issue in contemporary Vietnam. While for most of their history as a people the Vietnamese struggled against Chinese occupation, the long periods of Chinese rule had an undeniable impact on almost all aspects of Vietnamese society and culture. The outcome is an ambivalent feeling toward the Chinese and their culture. While many of the most cherished Vietnamese values and costumes are originally Chinese, the Vietnamese are very keen to prove (to others as much as to themselves) that their culture is distinctive and unique.

Along similar lines, when Western scholars, usually trained in Chinese studies, turned to study Vietnam, they stressed the likeness between Chinese and Vietnamese social institutions and cultural arrangements and tended to downplay the differences, depicting the Vietnamese civilization as a pale reflection of the more advanced Chinese (see, e.g., Huard and Durand 1998). Only post-1975 research gradually shifted attention towards Vietnamese cultural distinctiveness and uniqueness (e.g., Marr 1981; Taylor 1983; Jamieson 1995); but even in these

works, Chinese impact is acknowledged and usually emphasized. Therefore, while the impact of Chinese culture on Vietnam is undeniable, it is easy to understand why contemporary Vietnamese feel compelled to prove that theirs is a distinctive non-Chinese culture.

A good example of the ways in which Vietnamese scholars emphasize Vietnamese cultural independence can be observed in their handling of the so-called *Dong Son* drums. *Dong Son* drums are the contemporary icon for “things Vietnamese,” appearing on a wide range of artifacts from history book covers (e.g., Tran and Ha 2000) to street posters concerning family planning, the aprons of the Vietnam Airlines stewardesses, and as of recently, to disposable toothbrush cases in five-star hotels in Hanoi. According to Pelley (1998:375), the drums also appear on the “endless array of knick-knacks manufactured with the burgeoning tourist industry in mind.” In this respect, *Dong Son* emblems are used both for internal consumption and “foreign relations.”

I have often asked about the meaning of the drums and the reasons for using them in such contexts. Though most of those I talked to did recognize them as *Dong Son* drums, they could hardly explain their relevance to the aprons or street posters, and tended to offer the following answer: “These are ancient Vietnamese objects,” implying that the drums mark their bearers as Vietnamese.

However, just like *banh Tet*, the origins of these supposedly pristinely Vietnamese artifacts are contested and highly controversial. While Pelley (1998:376) suggests that the drums are stressed as a consequence of the Vietnamese postcolonial “cult of antiquity” that “emerged as the centerpiece of a complex attempt to recontextualize Vietnam within a distinctively Southeast Asian rather than East Asian framework,” Xiaorong (1998:45) points out that the drums are also claimed as symbols of distinct (that is, non-Han) cultural identity by the southern provinces of China, especially Yunan and Guanxi, renowned for their large non-Han ethnic groups. Thus, he says, “Vietnamese and Chinese scholars try to make exclusive claims to a tradition that was possibly shared by the ancestors of both the Vietnamese and the minority peoples of Southern China” (Xiaorong 1998:45).

It seems, then, that *Dong Son* drums and New Year rice cakes are invoked in Vietnam in similar contexts. Though the origins of both are contested, and though there are clear indications of their Chinese roots, the Vietnamese perceive both as pre-Chinese artifacts that support their claim for an independent, pristine, pre-Chinese Vietnamese culture. Indeed, the claim made by Vietnamese archeologist Pham Huy Thong (quoted in Xiaorong 1998:44), “the *Dong Son* drums were cast on Vietnamese soil by the bearers of the *Dong Son* culture . . . [t]hey were the handiwork of the forebears of the present-day Vietnamese . . . who were conscious of their ethnic and cultural identity,” is remarkably similar to Huu’s

assertion quoted earlier concerning the nature of banh Tet as an indigenizing element, and is indeed as dubious.

Banh Tet as Combat Rations

Banh Tet have been discussed so far as being a means of distinction (Bourdieu 1984), standing for an independent, pre-Chinese Vietnamese culture (the shaky grounds for this claim notwithstanding). However, saying that the Vietnamese opt for a unique festive dish to distinguish themselves from the Chinese hardly concludes the analysis. What must be further explored is the nature of the difference, that is, point to the elements that single the Vietnamese out as unique and as different from the Chinese. In this respect, the points discussed so far concerning rice farming would not suffice since both Vietnam and China are rice-farming societies. The same goes for the cosmological ideas embedded in the shapes of the cakes, as these, too, are essentially Chinese. Therefore, there must be something else about the cakes that is distinctively Vietnamese.

The distinctive feature of the cakes, the one that singles them out as the most salient Vietnamese dish, is the fact that they are preserved and, hence, were often carried by the Vietnamese as “iron rations” during the nation’s endless wars. The cakes are specifically mentioned by the Vietnamese historian Nguyen Khac Vien as provisions for the troops of King Quang Trung (Nguyen Hue) in his victorious campaign against the invading Chinese Manchu troops. On the 20th day of the 12th lunar month (of December 1788), ten days before Tet, Nguyen Hue rallied his soldiers in Ninh Binh and promised that they would celebrate Tet in Liberated *Thang Long* (Hanoi) on the 7th day of the first lunar month (K. Nguyen 1993:104-5).⁴ He then rushed “his troops [to the] north, supplied with banh chung, which did not require much time to prepare before consuming” (Huu and Cohen 1997:90). Similarly, one of my informants pointed out that in the very same historical moment, the dwellers of Thang Long resorted to cooking banh Chung as a means of precaution against the anticipated Manchu conquest and pillage. They hid the rice cakes in their wells “as banh Chung keep very well even in very difficult conditions.” Thus, the cakes were used by civilians, as well, as durable and transportable iron rations in times of trouble and war.

Banh Tet (or, probably, their more common version, banh Chung) were also used as iron rations by the Vietnamese troops at Dien Bien Phu. A French military pilot, presently living in Israel, who flew cargo planes during the Franco-Vietminh war, told me that Vietnamese POWs captured in the vicinity of Dien Bien Phu in 1953 had “simple but clean clothes and only a bit of rice in some kind of leaf pocket as provisions.” Indeed, even nowadays, banh Chung are sold as civilian

iron rations in stalls along the exhausting mountainous roads of the Northern Highlands.

As pointed out earlier, banh Tet are durable, easy to carry, and highly nutritious, not only in terms of calories but also in terms of vital nutrients, and can sustain people for a long time. Moreover, as “whole-meal dishes,” they provide an essential feeling of cultural and psychological satisfaction. Banh Tet, then, make for perfect iron rations and, indeed, were used as iron rations in different historical periods and contexts. Thus, the iconic dish in the most important Vietnamese festival, the one that potentially condenses the essence of being Vietnamese, is actually an iron ration, the food that soldiers take to war.

Here again, understanding banh Tet as iron rations can be interpreted in two ways. They can be seen as reflecting the essential nature of the Vietnamese as a warlike people who worship the battlefield and celebrate it on their most important day by feasting on combat rations. Alternatively, they can be perceived as the outcome of a long history of military challenges by external powers, which shaped even the most important Vietnamese festive dish into the form of a sturdy iron ration.

Indeed, it is most plausible that the cakes represent both historical necessity and some sort of pride over such long-term endurance and repeated victories against superior powers. But no matter how we choose to look at it, the idea that the most prominent Vietnamese festive dish is essentially a combat ration is thought-provoking and intriguing. Whether we choose to perceive banh Tet as reflecting the Vietnamese fascination with wars (that is, as aggressors), or as an outcome of a long history of military challenges by outside forces (that is, as victims of violence, courageously resisting aggressors), or as expressing both, the festive rice cakes make a point about the uniqueness of the Vietnamese. These are people hardened by uncountable wars, which they won due to their ability to use the meager resources available to them in order to resist and, eventually, overwhelm their enemies who, more often than not, were much stronger. Banh Tet, then, are not only about a distinctive Vietnamese culture. They also stand for the spirit that achieved the repeated military triumphs at Bach Dang River, Dien Bien Phu, and in the guerilla warfare that exhausted the US army.⁵

Banh Tet and Regional Identity

While the legend clearly describes banh Tet as “square like the earth,” and while northern banh Tet are square indeed, the Hoianese New Year rice cakes are elongated and cylindrical. Dung, one of my most valuable and knowledgeable informants (and one of the few Hoianese to have an M.A. in Vietnamese literature), suggested:

When our ancestors moved to the South, they took *banh Chung* to eat on their way, because *banh Chung* can keep for a long time. However, they shaped them into cylinders, not squares, because in this way they were easier to pack and wouldn't break as easily as the square cakes would, as when the cakes break, they spoil faster. This is why our *banh Tet* are cylindrical.

In Hoi An, the cylindrical *banh Tet* are called *banh Tet* (with a rising *sac* tone), meaning "sliced cakes," as the proper way to cut them is to use one of the bamboo splinters used as packing strings in order to slice them. When I asked the reason for this method of slicing (which couldn't be applied for the Northern cakes due to their square shape), I was told that when using this technique, "it is possible to cut very thin slices, so as to eat as little as possible and to save the cakes for a longer time," and because "only one tip of the cake is unwrapped, and even if this tip becomes dry or moldy, it is still possible to slice the spoiled part off and use the rest of the cake." Here again, all these preservation and saving techniques can hardly be achieved with the square cakes.

This is another example for both practical use and abstract conceptualization of the cakes as iron rations, which further supports the suggestion that *banh Tet* have become such prominent culinary icons because they were one of the most important means of survival used by the Vietnamese in the long process of establishing, expanding, and protecting their country. However, the differing shape and the way in which it was explained suggest that there are other issues at hand.

Dung's explanation defines the nature of the distinction implied by the differing shapes of the cakes. This is not merely a culinary statement about distinction (we are different and hence our festive cakes are different) but, rather, a point about the essential cultural difference between Northerners and those of the Center and South. While the ancestors of present day Northerners stayed behind in the relative comfort and safety of the Red River Delta, contemporary dwellers of the Center and South are the descendants of those who had the courage and initiative to move south and expand Vietnamese culture to its present territory. The cylindrical rice cakes are a manifestation of the self-assertion of the Vietnamese now living in the central and southern parts of the country as being braver and as having initiative and, thus, are a symbol of local patriotism and regional identity.

Just as with the "Vietnamese versus Chinese identity" debate, the issue of cultural hegemony and regional variation is both important and sensitive in contemporary Vietnam. Among many contemporary Vietnamese ideologues, publicists and intellectuals, especially Northern ones, "Northern culture" is depicted, explicitly or implicitly, as the authentic and pure Vietnamese culture (see Drummond and Thomas 2003:8), with the Northern village surrounded by the

bamboo hedge as its epitome (Wheeler 2004). Indeed, this understanding is so well established among contemporary Vietnamese that many of my Hoianese informants, especially the more educated ones, insisted that the local culture (and especially the local dialect, the heavy vernacular *tieng Quang* or Quang [Nam Province] language) is “not correct,” “not pure,” and even “corrupted.” Obviously, such predications reflect the contemporary power structure, with the politically hegemonic North depicting its own culture as authentic and pure, while implying that the cultural characteristics of the other regions are the outcome of a polluting encounter with other cultures, both autochthonous and external. This tendency can be observed, for example, in the clear preference for Northern broadcasters on the national TV and radio channels.⁶

However, while North Vietnamese culture is officially hailed as “the real Vietnamese culture,” and while this claim seems to be accepted without much reflection or resistance by most of those living in the center and south, the cylindrical shape of *banh Tet* in these parts of the country hints at a different story that these people “tell themselves about themselves” (Geertz 1973). In fact, the cylindrical shapes denote valiance, initiative, and strength and, thus, the idea that *Trungky* and *Namky* (“Centreners” and “Southerners”) are not only different but in some respects better than *Backy* (“Northerners”). The cakes, then, are vessels for differing and even contradicting ideas. While *banh Tet* essentially celebrate Vietnamese identity—a pre-Chinese rice farming people who had to struggle for independence for much of their existence as a distinguished group—the cylindrical version suggests that Vietnamese culture is not only about unity and uniformity, but also about regional differences and local patriotism.

CONCLUSION

Banh Tet are the material manifestation of Vietnamese national identity, bridging the gap between the theory and praxis of nationalism. When eating the cakes or, rather, when “incorporating” them (Fischler 1988), the imagined becomes concrete and tangible. Vietnamese nationalism, when shaped into *banh Tet*, is not abstract but substantial, and when the cakes are digested, the nation becomes physically embodied by its subjects. My main argument, then, is that food is nationalism.

However, as opposed to the conventional notion of material objects as rigid and static, *banh Tet* are exceptionally dynamic, flexible, and multivocal, managing to convey varied and, at times, contradicting ideas that reveal much about the ways in which contemporary Vietnamese think about themselves. Indeed, the cakes are not mere reflections of the hegemonic conceptualization of Vietnamese identity, nor are they stiff representations of the existing cosmic and social orders.

Banh Tet convey tensions, ambivalence, and even ruptures in the “Grand National Narrative,” standing not only for rice farming and worship of the elements or for proper leadership and love of country (ideas that are expected to be expressed by national icons), but also for critical dilemmas and difficulties which Vietnam as a modern nation state faces, such as the love-hate sentiments towards the Chinese and their culture, or the problematic center-periphery (or, rather, center-regions) relations. Subsequently, iconic dishes are exceptionally suitable for conveying the strategies and complications of “doing nationalism.” In this respect, then, food is nationalism, not merely in its explicit and manifest facets, but also when it comes to tensions, contradictions, and dilemmas.

The question remaining, however, is “why food?” What singles out the culinary sphere as an appropriate arena for the negotiation of complicated, multivocal, controversial, and even subversive ideas. This question is further accentuated when considering the specific Vietnamese political context. Indeed, the authoritative regime of this nation would hardly tolerate the expression of ideas such as those conveyed by banh Tet in any other sociocultural realm. What is it, then, that makes the culinary sphere both flexible and relatively free of censorship, even in authoritarian/repressive political contexts such as that of contemporary Vietnam? In order to answer these questions, we should return to some of the basic qualities of food as a cultural artifact.

For one, the elastic and dynamic nature of food makes it a perfect vessel for complicated and polysemic ideas. Food, as opposed to most other material artifacts, is a matter in constant, fast-paced change (Levi-Strauss 1966; see also Clark 2004). “Raw” is transformed into “cooked” and/or to “rotten,” and the cooked is eaten (digested and defecated) or discarded (before/after rotting) within a few hours. Moreover, food is less prescribed and canonized than most other cultural elements, always featuring great personal, local, and regional variation. Indeed, “season according to taste” is an instruction that follows even the most meticulous recipe. These qualities—flexible essence, constant change, and vast disparity—allow for exceptional dynamism when it comes to symbolic meanings. It is the elasticity of the means that allows for the elasticity of meanings.

Secondly, the very same qualities that led anthropologists and other social scientists to ignore this domestic, routine, and unassuming domain explain the relative license of food to express ideas that would not have been tolerated in any other sociocultural arena. It is the mundane and feminine nature of cooking as well as the perishable nature of food that define the culinary realm as non-important, non-threatening, and therefore in less need of control. Paradoxically, it is precisely this taken-for-granted and transient nature of cooking and eating that facilitates the expression and negotiation of problematic, sensitive, and even forbidden issues within the culinary sphere. After all, banh Tet are only rice cakes.

NOTES

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2. “Flags” is borrowed from Billig’s (1995) concept of banal nationalism, as the mundane, routine, and unaccounted for expressions of nationality in everyday life.
3. The Vietnamese calendar (adopted from the Chinese) is luni-solar. The 355-day lunar year must be amended to keep pace with the 365-day solar year. Thus, a thirteenth month is added every three years, between the third and the fourth months (Huard and Durand 1998:106; Ellis 1995:159).
4. Nguenyn Khac Vien does not offer references for the description of this event, raising serious doubts about its historical validity. However, the work of contemporary Vietnamese historians can be partly understood as reflecting official narratives rather than historical ones. Thus, even if Nguyen Hue’s soldiers never had *banh Tet*, the important point is that contemporary Vietnamese think that they did. Thus, conceptualizing the cakes as soldiers’ fare, even if this is an “invented tradition,” reflects on their understanding as contemporary vehicles of symbolic ideas.
5. In order to somehow counterbalance this heroic rhetoric, it should be noted that Vietnamese history can also be read as oscillating between the unifying effects of the threat and/or conquest posed by foreign aggressors, and the internal struggle that bisected this society whenever the Vietnamese were left on their own. Indeed, the wars in Indochina during the former century, especially the one that came to be known as the “Vietnam war” (1965-1975), can be understood as civil wars between various Vietnamese parties. But even from this perspective, *banh Tet* as combat rations express the central role of warfare in Vietnamese history and national identity.
6. When I asked a Hoianese friend why the national channels (VTV channels 1-4) feature broadcasters having northern accents, he said that *tieng bac* is “more perfect” and that “everyone in the country can understand it.” However, my experience is that the northern accent is as alien to the Hoianese as their accent is to the northerners.

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