

From the Heart of Haiti to the Crossroads of the Americas: **Joumou Soup and Cassava, Symbols of Our Identity**

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In March 2023, Republic of Haiti, Cuba, Honduras and the Dominican Republic presented a multinational nomination for its inscription on the Representative List (RL) of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, under the 2003 UNESCO Convention. Thus, the five countries jointly completed a long process to have the traditional knowledge and practices for the elaboration and consumption of Cassava bread to be included in the RL.

Cassava, a word that today refers to a whole range of traditional preparations made from manioc flour, developed a thousand years ago on the fringes of the Amazon basin. These knowledges and practices were spread by indigenous civilizations who migrated throughout Central America and the whole of the West Indies arc. For several months, experts' teams from the five involved countries worked together to produce a strong nomination file. The nomination highlights what we share and have in common. It also recognizes the specific local characteristics of Cassava traditions in each country and region.

The Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage will examine this application in December 2024.

This is the second nomination presented by Haiti for its inclusion in the 2003 Convention listing system. The Joumou soup, known as soup of the independence, was Haiti's first nomination inscribed by the Committee on the Representative List, on December 16, 2021. For Haiti, the inclusion of Cassava in this list carries vital symbolic significance, particularly in the current national context and in the wake of the historic inclusion of the soup.

The Joumou soup is prepared with giraumon⁹⁸, or turban squash, a variety of native gourd from the Haiti island. It was already cultivated in pre-Columbian times. During the

97 Ambassador, Permanent Delegate of Haiti to UNESCO. Speech delivered on the occasion of the presentation of the Cassava nomination file, UNESCO, March 2023.

98 The term giraumon derives from jirumum, borrowed from Tupi, a Native American language. A variety of dishes prepared from this gourd exist in Caribbean and Latin American cuisines.

French colony, eating this soup was a privilege reserved for colonists because it was seen as a refined dish. When independence was proclaimed on 1 January 1804, this soup was shared by the entire Haitian population as a symbol of freedom, equality, and fraternity. Since then, it has been ritually prepared and shared by all Haitians, everywhere, every year as the heart of the traditional New Year's Day menu, which is also Haiti's Independence Day.

It was highly symbolic that this element of our culinary heritage, emblematic of our fight for freedom and independence, for equality and self-determination, an icon of the anti-colonial and anti-slavery ideals of our African forebears and Afro-descendants, should be the subject of our first contribution to this list. This dish, which tells the essence of our identity as a people, should enter in conversation with other practices from the four corners of the world that have already been included in the listing system.

The soup inscription reminds us, and the rest of the world, of our intrinsic identity and highlights the contributions of our struggles to human history.

On the other hand, the inclusion of the Cassava, a multilateral, multinational, multi-country nomination, reminds us that Haiti also belongs entirely to a much wider geographical area and identity. Furthermore, the country shares a common heritage and identity with the Latin American region. This reminder may be necessary both for Haiti and for the rest of the world.

Cassava also extends the time around the history of Haiti. It reminds us that our history precedes European colonization and is also rooted in thousands of years of history. Following in the footsteps of our neighbors, this inclusion illustrates how we have been able to preserve, against both human and natural threats, this traditional know-how and knowledge that is so important to our people, past and present.

This millennial Cassava is one of the rare and important witnesses of the brutal encounter between Europe and America, since the end of the 15th century. It also witnesses the fragile and critical transmission that, however, took place at a time when the indigenous Taino population was on the verge of total extermination, due to the violence produced by contact with Europeans. However, this is also a period in which the first sons and daughters of the land of Haiti were able, despite everything, to transmit their knowledge to the enslaved African populations, who were transported and forcibly implanted by the Europeans to work in these new colonies.

It was an unprecedented climate of tension, under the yoke of colonial oppression that led to the virtual disappearance of one indigenous population and the brutal exploitation of another. However, there were still, among these men and women, Tainos and Africans, opportunities to share, mutual help and transfer valuable knowledge. All this of knowledge, art of transforming bitter manioc into Cassava, will survive the genocide of the Tainos. As well as centuries of slavery, a crime against humanity, so that today it fully belongs to our peoples, our republics, and our free and democratic societies.

Cassava, like Joumou soup, is an element of resilience, a resilience that entails both trauma as well as triumph. We must recognize and heal these traumas so that we can shape our triumphs and proudly present them to the world. These successive nominations mark this new stage of triumphs, and it is precisely what we are celebrating today.

In addition, for us Haitians, the symbolism of recognizing the Cassava has a resonance that can be linked to our most fundamental landmark, the very name of our homeland, Haiti. In fact, during the drafting of the Declaration of Independence our founding fathers and mothers decided to name this first independent black nation, Haiti, while sharing a bowl of soup. This nation, born of the first and only victorious revolution in the history of humanity, was led by an enslaved people. Haiti, a word that in the Taino language means land of mountains, was the name chosen in homage to its first inhabitants, the Tainos.

Together, Cassava and the name of our country serve as a reminder of everything our ancestors bequeathed us on this land. Furthermore, they remind us that we are custodians of skills and knowledges that we must preserve and transmit to future generations, as key elements of our identity.

For all these reasons, it is with great enthusiasm that we present Cassava to the world. This commitment is also a way of expressing that, despite the crises that our countries are going through, together as fellow people we can raise our traditional knowledge to the noblest register of humanity. It is also a way of affirming that we can engage in conversations with the rest of the world and propose solutions to the current crises.

In Haiti today, 4.5 million of my compatriots face food insecurity. Cassava, this millennial tradition, is a bulwark against hunger and a means of surviving and adapting to contemporary challenges, particularly the effects of climate change. In 2019, the United Nations declared Cassava the food of the century, not only for its ability to nourish us, but also for its contribution to the advancement of our peoples. Each of our five countries is facing difficulties, whether national, regional, or global. Together, united around the Cassava, we are contributing to the difficult task of building peace, which is above all the mandate that brings us together at UNESCO.

Joumou soup and Cassava are symbolic elements of our past and our progress as a people. They contribute to refocus Haiti in its history, in the heart of its unique and deeply African identity. At the same time, the country is placed in the heart of the Caribbean and Latin American regional space, at the crossroads of the Americas.