

Eating Jamaica: How Food is Used as a Tool to Create and Reinforce Cultural Identity

Every day people eat food to sustain their bodies. The majority of the time, food is consumed without much thought into how it influences, defines, or reinforces cultural ideas of who people are and where they come from. Food is primarily seen associated with nutrition and diet to help maintain life.¹ Alternatively, food is more than something one eats to maintain life, but has evolved over the course of human existence to become part of culture, or in some cases to create culture.² Food has lent itself to become the forefront of cultural identity formation and is centered around almost all cultural aspects of human life, including holidays, special events, religious and spiritual practices, and forms of belonging such as nationality. A common way food is used to represent identity is through dietary guidelines or cuisines. The island of Jamaica encapsulates the many ways in which food can be used to create and reinforce cultural ideas of identity formation as it is home to many cultures that exist across the island, such as Maroons and Rastafarians. Ranging from religious affiliation to being called a “true” Jamaican, food is interwoven in all aspects of Jamaican cultures.

Jamaica’s history aids in the creation of its cultures through the blending of European colonizers, enslaved Africans, and the Tainos (the indigenous inhabitants of the island). During the Atlantic Slave trade (15th-19th century), the migration of people gained the ability to move food along with them by using forms of preservation like smoke and salt. Foods from the New World and the Old World began to cross the Middle Passage into new territories. As food began to migrate along with people, the beliefs and practices to those which people used in conjunction with food traveled along with them. Ideas were exchanged from one culture to another and eventually became embedded into the current cultures seen today. Food culture was changing, growing, and adapting to meet the needs of the people as exploration and conquest of land was on its way. Jamaica, like many other colonized lands, was no exception to experiencing change to its food culture. Both enslaved

Africans and European colonizers alike were influencing how food was seen and used, including the unfamiliar food they encountered on their travels. It was common for foods to become adapted into a culture and given value and meaning. For example, the iguana an unknown creature to the Europeans when first found, resided next to the ocean in the Caribbean. Due to the iguana's location in close proximity to water, the Europeans deemed the creature a fish. This allowed Europeans to consume the iguana during Lent on Fridays when only fish was permitted to be served and eaten as all other types of meat were not to be consumed.

These beliefs and practices around food were derived from people's cultures, later to be blended together to create new ones. In Jamaica, food has continued to be an influencing factor in the development of self and community and has helped shaped the embodiment of cultural identity. Food is used to represent Jamaican culture as a whole but is also used to represent the individual sub-cultures that exist on the island, such as Maroons and Rastafari.³ Developed beliefs and practices around food are essentially used to aid in the formation of cultural norms and ideas. In turn, these ideas are reinforced by passing the beliefs and practices down the generational line through oral traditions, keeping them preserved for future generations. Nevertheless, these ideas are not always preserved the same way they were understood in the past but can be changed to meet the needs of the current environment.

This study seeks to provide a historical overview of some of Jamaica's most influential foodstuff in history: jerk meat and salt. These foodstuffs were used in the development of the island during the Atlantic Slave trade and have continued to be used in reinforcing Jamaican cultural identity. The study will demonstrate the power of food to aid in cultural identity formation when value and significance is bestowed on a foodstuff either in the form of symbolism or practicality. Thereby, creating beliefs and practices around food to be use as a tool to create, reinforce, and preserve cultural identity formation.

The Birth of Jamaica and its Cultures

The island of Jamaica lies at the intersection of African, European, and Caribbean cultures. Being an island that was subjected to the brutality of the European colonial powers during the era of the Atlantic Slave trade, food beliefs and practices were developed out of a culture of slavery. Jamaica was first invaded in the late 15th century by the Spanish, only to be completely overtaken a short 15 years later in 1509 when shiploads of Spanish colonists began to arrive to cultivate the land and dominate the Tainos.⁴ The Spanish staked their claim on the island in hopes of finding gold and other valuable resources, but unable to find any, they directed their attention toward sugar and salt production.⁵

The Spanish were able to maintain ownership of the island until 1655 when the British invaded, claiming the island as their own to continue exploiting the island's resources

for profit. To keep up with the demand for commodity production, both the Spanish and British relied on enslaved labor, first that of the Taino population followed by the importation of African people mostly from the regions of West and Central Africa. For hundreds of years, enslaved Africans were forced to cross the Middle Passage by boat to be used as forced labor in the production of salt, later sugar.⁶ Records show that Jamaica had one of the highest importations of enslaved Africans with one million people.⁷ The majority stayed on the island as forced labor, but others were sold and shipped to other colonized lands throughout the New World. It was during this part in history the development of Jamaica's cuisine began to take root, being influenced by the different cultural groups residing on the island.

Over time, key dishes and ingredients became essential to the Jamaican identity. Dishes such as jerk chicken and salt fish have dominated the foodscape of Jamaica becoming identifiers for the Jamaican culture, regardless if consumed on the island or elsewhere. Furthermore, key foodstuffs like salt have aid in the cultural identity formation for several groups in Jamaica. Salt, a key commodity used to help fuel the Atlantic Slave trade, is used to develop the cultural identity among Maroons and Rastafari.⁸ The historical and contemporary beliefs and practices attached to salt have become an essential part of separating cultural groups from one another based on either the elimination or consumption of salt. The representation of food within a culture can have a lasting impact on their makeup of cultural identity. Having value and cultural significance attached to food helps to reinforce the cultural identity, thus separating groups from each other based on their beliefs and practices around food.

The Famous “Jerk” Meats

Many foods come to mind when people think of Jamaica. Whether you are a tourist or a local, it is clear that “jerk” chicken, pork, beef, or seafood is a dish that tantalizes the mouth when thinking about Jamaica and its food. Envisioning the idea of consuming a juicy piece of jerk meat along with sipping a cold *Red Stripe* (a Jamaican beer) or a smooth rum from Appleton Estates, all while listening to the sounds of Reggae, creates an iconic Jamaican scene among those who dream of the island vibes. Across the island, at road stops, restaurants, and home kitchens the aroma of jerk meats fills the surrounding area. The famous “jerk” or “jerked” meats has become an iconic symbol for the Jamaican culture where tourist and locals alike flee to nearby jerk stands or pits to enjoy a barbecued piece of meat bursting with the flavors of salt, scotch bonnet peppers, cinnamon, pimento (all-spice), and other seasonings. Initially, jerk was a method of cooking that involved either smoking and/or salting to preserve meat. However, over time the term “jerk” became representative of the particular blend of spices and herbs used in the cooking process leading to what is known as the famous jerk meat in contemporary Jamaica.⁹ The making of jerk meat was

contributor in the development of Jamaican food and its cultures during the Jamaica's growing connection to the Atlantic Slave trade.

The roots of this dish are convoluted, as most historians originally believed jerk cooking in Jamaica came out of the Maroon era in the 1700s because of their sought-after "wild" jerk hog.¹⁰ Maroons were reportedly the main source for non-Maroons and European colonizers to acquire jerk hog.¹¹ European developed an admiration for the dish, which later became an accepted part of elite banquets.¹² European would document their experience with consuming jerked hog in their diaries. Lady Nugent, the wife of Governor Sir George Nugent of Jamaica, and Matthew (the Monk) Lewis, an English novelist, both describe their encounter with the dish in the early 1800s, claiming it to be delightful and bursting with flavor.¹³ Needless to say, jerked hog became a predominant dish among Maroons, enslaved Africans, and Europeans.

Origins: Maroons or Tainos or Africans?

Maroons were runaway slaves that escaped from bondage during the fight between the Spanish and the British over ownership of the island in 1655. Although evidence during the Spanish era, beginning in the 1500s, documents initial Maroon sightings earlier than 1655. Maroons ran away into the interior of Jamaica where lies the Blue Mountains. The colonial powers avoided these terrains, as it was viewed to be too dangerous to navigate. To provide provisions for themselves and their people, Maroon men would hunt wild hogs. The hog meat was preserved in a process of salting and smoking which later became known as a Maroon delicacy called "jerked" hog.¹⁴ This meat was consumed among the Maroon community and sold to nearby settlers.

The idea that "jerk" cooking originated from the Maroons has remained constant over the years where some descendants of Maroon heritage continue to claim this belief to be true as it has become part of their identity.¹⁵ However, in contrasting thought, historians have begun to question if the Maroons were the creators of "jerk" meat, but instead the Taino, the indigenous population of the Caribbean. The reason for this claim is the etymology of the word "barbecue" comes from the Spanish term "barbacoa." It is said that the Spanish term "barbacoa" is derived from the Taino term "barbacòa."¹⁶ "Barbacòa" a method of cooking similar if not identical to the cooking style of "jerk." Thus, the narrative of the Maroons being the creators of "jerk" meat is challenged by the idea it was the Taino that taught the cooking method known as "jerk" to the runaway Africans who later became Maroons. Additionally, there is another possible origin story to the creation of "jerk" meat. In West and Central Africa, smoked and salted meats were part of culinary traditions in those regions.¹⁷ This suggests another source, an African one, of the famous "jerk" meat of Jamaica. The blending of cultures on the island and the knowledge that this form of cooking is employed across many regions of the globe makes it difficult to pinpoint the origin

of this style of cooking. However, one thing is clear: jerked hog played a significant role in the identity of Maroons, and later in the identity of Jamaica.

The process of jerked hog was often a two-part process to ensure the longevity of its preservation. Salt was an essential ingredient in the making of jerked hog but was hard to come by. Additionally, salt was refrained from being eaten because it interfered with the Maroon identity and the ability to connect with their ancestors.¹⁸ Instead, sometimes the Maroons would dip their hog meat in a pickled concoction made from wood ash (a salt-like product), later to be smoked. In time, the process of jerk became more elaborate and involved where a “true” Maroon fashion according to the dairy of Matthew (the Monk) Lewis’ in 1815, is when the hog is “being placed on a barbecue (a frame of wicker works, through whose interstices the steam can ascend), filled with peppers and spices of the highest flavour, and wrapt in plantain leaves [sic], and then buried in a hole filled with hot stones, by whose vapor it is then baked, no particle of the juice being thus suffered to evaporate.”¹⁹ The final product resulted in a flavorful and juicy piece of meat enjoyed by many.

Jerked hog was an essential part of Maroon culture. Being referred to as hog hunters was a declaration of their ability to hunt. It showed the Maroons’ strength, survival skills, and adaptability needed to defeat the Europeans, granting them their freedom from slavery. Hog hunting was a part of who they were as a culture. Enough so, that hog hunting was written in the 1739 Maroon Treaty, permitting them the ability to continue hunting hogs and selling or trading them for other commodities. Jerked hog was adapted into the Maroon culture, later to be spread into the larger Jamaican culture.

At the beginning of the 19th century, jerked hog began to evolve into something more than just a cooking style, but instead became associated with spices and herbs used to season the meat.²⁰ By the end of the 20th century the term “jerk” or “jerked” was often in association with the type of seasoning used to flavor the meat, in contrast to how it was cooked.²¹ Although there seems to be a variation of jerk seasoning, the foundation is a mixture of salt, scallion, pimento (all-spice), cinnamon, and peppers (Scotch bonnet, preferably). Furthermore, the cooking method began to change as well, green pimento sticks and grates placed over hot coals allowed the meat to cook while still getting smoked, instead of using hand-dug pits as seen with the Maroons. Today, it is common to see jerk meat being cooked over contemporary barbecues made of metal, where either pimento wood or coals are burned as a heat source, but one can still find cooking over pimento sticks or grates as seen in the early 19th century.

Jerk meat, especially pork and chicken, has become a staple cuisine in Jamaica. The dish has its roots in Maroon culture, but eventually became an identifier for the whole of Jamaican culture. Competitions across the island take place every year to see who has the best jerk meats. Cooking jerk meat has become a way of life and is quintessential to Jamaican culture. Jamaicans take pride in their jerk stands and pits. This dish has continued to

thrive among Jamaicans and now is popular globally. It is used to reinforce what it means to be Jamaican with its spicy Scotch bonnet pepper, to the native pimento spice all blended together to create what is known as jerk meat. Having jerk meat became embedded in the Jamaican culture and has helped preserve its long-standing history in connection with Maroons while embodying the essence of Jamaica and its nationality.

Salt: Preserving Identities in Jamaica

It is common to see a dish, like jerk meat be reflective of a culture's identity, but this is also true for individual foodstuff. Salt is an important ingredient in jerk meats, but is also a stand-alone foodstuff that has contributed to the development of Jamaica and the identity of two African-derived cultures: Maroons and Rastafari. As mentioned, Maroons were runaway enslaved Africans on the island of Jamaica who fought for their freedom prior to the emancipation in 1834. Rastafari is a religious and political movement that took place in the early 1930s in Kingston, Jamaica that eventually swept across the island and is now seen across the globe. The movement's message focused on decolonization by replacing

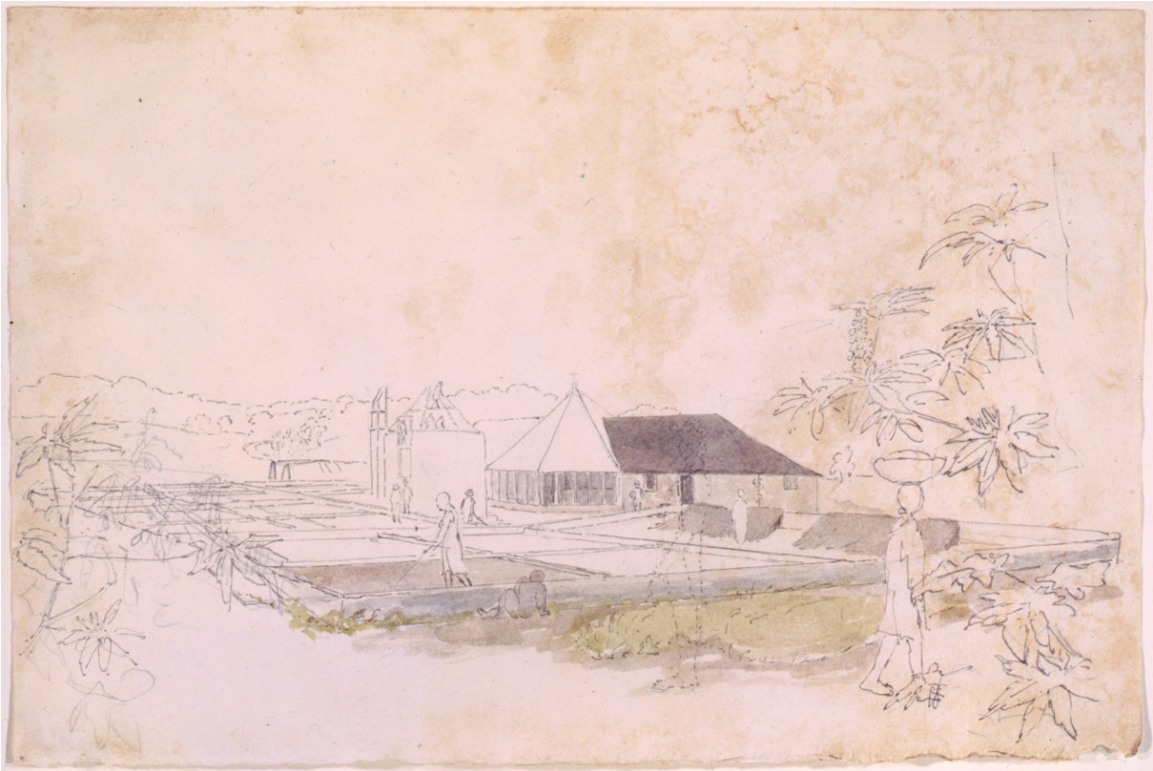


Image 1: "Workers on evaporation ponds at salt works, Jamaica," by William Berryman (1808–1816). Library of Congress of the United States, with clearance, at <https://www.loc.gov/item/94508846/>.

European imagery with African imagery, and to reclaim agency over oneself, one's culture, and one's land. By way of beliefs and practices that have attached itself to salt, both Maroons and Rastafari have utilized these ideas to build and reinforce their cultural identity and connection to their African heritage stemming from the Atlantic Slave trade.

During the rise of the Atlantic Slave trade, the need to preserve foods for long distances was in demand. Salt, was a key ingredient in preservation and salted meats. It was, and arguably still is a valuable substance among Europeans and Africans alike. Having a significant role in food preservation, salt became a fueling factor in the Atlantic Slave trade.²² Salt was highly sought-after that it eventually became a commodity mass-produced in the Caribbean. Salt production later deemed certain islands, including Jamaica, "salt islands."²³ Although the production and use of salt were crucial, the symbolism of salt had an equal if not stronger influence on the identity of Maroons and Rastafari.

Maroons and Rastafari both have claimed not to consume salt. As previously mentioned in this study, Maroons did consume salt as clearly noted with the making of jerked hog. However, Maroons eliminated salt for the intention to connect to the spiritual world and their African ancestors; the removal of salt is dependent on the situation and need of a Maroon. In Maroon history, connecting to the spiritual world granted them the ability to obtain human flight used to travel back to Africa.²⁴ It was important that one could fly as it was the only way for an enslaved African to return home to Africa. However, to access the ability to fly one had to eliminate salt from the diet. Salt was associated with the earth and being connected with earthly possessions, or in other words bonding anyone who consumed salt to the land and sea.²⁵ The idea of human flight and lack thereof is due to salt having roots in the African thought of "malevolent forces" and spirits possessing the power of flight.²⁶ These African beliefs around salt made their way to Jamaica and can be seen in discussion on how to prevent "duppies" (spirits) from flying.²⁷ Eventually, the idea of flight and salt was adapted to human flight during the Atlantic Slave trade. Zora Neale Hurston, an anthropologist, explained in her 1939 book, *Tell My Horse*, how all Africans could fly once because they did not consume salt, and those who were enslaved and refused to eat salt were able to fly home, while those who ate salt remained in Jamaica.²⁸ This idea of human flight and salt was later used to distinguish between those who were Maroons and those who were non-Maroon Africans.

The emphases around not consuming salt in the Maroon culture has been traced to the honorable and fierce leader of the Maroons, Queen Nanny. She had a significant role in creating the Maroon culture, later becoming an iconic symbol of the Maroon community. She was a spiritual leader among other high-status rankings.²⁹ Queen Nanny reinforced the ideas of what it means to be a Maroon. It is said that Queen Nanny was born in Ghana. The identity of the Maroons aligns themselves with Queen Nanny and her resilience against the British. It was said that Queen Nanny originally came to Jamaica with her sister, Granny Sekesu, who is said to be connected to the Bongo, another West-Central African community.

Out of the relationship between Queen Nanny and Granny Sekesu, the story of the “*Two Sister Pikni*” emerged explaining how these two women aid in the cultural division between who were Maroons and non-Maroons. Although there were several reasons for who were deemed Maroons and non-Maroons, one reason in particular resided in the consumption of salt.³⁰

Salt prevented the connection to the spiritual world which granted Africans their strength and connection to their culture. Europeans knowing this, attempted to destroy all connection with the spiritual forces the enslaved Africans possessed by forcing them to consume salt. However, it is said that Queen Nanny refused to consume salt, and to take extra precaution also swallowed her obeah (spiritual powers) which possessed all the spiritual beliefs and practices of her African culture.³¹ However, unlike Queen Nanny who kept in touch with her roots in West African culture, her sister Granny Sekesu consumed salt bounding her to a life of enslavement. It was at this moment Queen Nanny and Granny Sekesu separated. The influence of salt aided in the creation of the narrative of the Maroons versus the non-Maroons through the accounts of Queen Nanny and her sister, Granny Sekesu.

Today salt still holds a significant role among Maroons. Although it is generally consumed, it still is attached to the spirit world where Maroons will not consume salt or place salted food on the alters to honor their ancestors as it prevents their connection to the spirit world. The stories told about salt and Queen Nanny help to reinforce what it means to be a Maroon. Salt has been embedded into the Maroon culture and has played a significant role in the making and preserving of their identity. Her contributions to Maroon and Jamaican identity are recognized by placement of her image on Jamaica’s national currency:



Image 2: “Nanny of the Maroons,” from the “Slavery and Remembrance” digital archive at PP023_image0002.jpg (800x366) (slaveryandremembrance.org). Courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Just like Maroons, Rastafarians have used salt to create and reinforce their cultural identity as a Rastafarian or commonly known as a “Rasta.” In the early years of the Rastafari religion when it began in the 1930s, many ideas were rooted in Maroon culture, such as salt and human flight.³² Other abstract ideas around salt were developed out of the Rastafari culture such as salt being used to preserve flesh (i.e., salted meats) and the death of their African ancestors.³³ Salt initially was tied to symbolic beliefs in the Rastafari culture but overtime views about salt was adopted to more practical ideas such as diet and health.

Today, most Rastafari beliefs and practices around salt are associated with dietary habits. Eliminating salt from the diet is an essential part of eating an i-tal way. Eating and living an i-tal way is a foundational component in what it means to be a Rastafarian. I-tal is a variation of the word *vital* used in the Rasta’s belief system of consuming unmodified foods only from the earth. Its meaning includes the ideas that natural is life-giving and a diet must be pure and saltless.³⁴ The phrase “I-tal is Vital” is commonly spoken in reference to a Rasta’s diet and lifestyle. The need to eliminate salt is because of two main reasons. The first is Rastafari believe there is enough salt that naturally occurs within whole foods, and there is no need to add additional salt, or what is called “free salt.” The second is associated with the balance of the body. Rastafarians strive to create balance within their bodies, mind, and soul.³⁵ Over time the significance of salt and the role it plays in shaping a Rastafarian’s identity has shifted from a symbolic influence to a more practical one for most Rastafarians; although, symbolism around salt does still exist.

The makeup of a Rastafarian identity leans heavily on how one eats. Rastafarians are health-conscious people and tend to only eat foods that nourish the body, creating a sense of balance. Since Rastafarians believe naturally occurring foods already have enough salt within them, adding additional salt can create an imbalance to the body.³⁶ The reason behind this is salt’s connection with high blood pressure. Studies have shown increasing levels of sodium in the blood can increase blood pressure. Having high blood pressure is the result of an imbalance body. Rastafarians live their life with the intent for a balance body and will eliminate anything that may cause a disruption of that balance. Therefore, a saltless diet and the ideas around salt continually reinforce their i-tal way of life. By eliminating salt, Rastas emphasize their identity by enforcing the practices and principles placed on their religion.

Salt demonstrates how individual foodstuff can hold significance and value among Jamaican cultures. Being used as a tool, salt aids in the creation and preservation of several cultures in Jamaica both historically and contemporarily. Within these cultures, these historically constructed beliefs and practices placed on salt have continually fueled how salt is viewed and used. These ideas reinforce cultural ideas and norms that are essentially tied to one’s identity and culture.

Conclusion

Food is essential to life. Through the sequence of production, preparation, cooking, and consumption, food has contributed to the existence of humans and their cultures. As shown in this study, whether it be a dish or an individual foodstuff, food has a significant role in the creation of identity and its preservation. Jerk meats, once used for preservation reasons, is now an iconic Jamaican dish that has its roots dating as far back as the 1700s, if not further. Spiced rubs and seasonings available in supermarkets, along with the competitions of who can make the best jerk on the island have embodied Jamaican culture. In addition to jerk meats, salt might have less influence on the larger Jamaican culture but has certainly displayed its ability to create, shape, and preserve cultural identities from the past to the present in other sub-cultures that exist on the island. Each of these food dishes and foodstuff has shown when significance and value are placed on them, it allows humans to begin creating beliefs and practices associated with food culture. Food is and always has been used as a tool to create, reinforce, and preserve cultures and cultural identity.

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NOTES

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⁶ Sperry, "Salt Production and Consumption," as above.

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⁸ "Just a Dash of Salt," *passim*.

⁹ Barry W. Higman, *Jamaican food: History, Biology, Culture* (Kingston: University of West Indies Press, 2008), 380–383; and Barbara Klamon Kopytoli, "Maroon Jerk Pork and other Jamaican Cooking," Jessica Kuper, ed., *The Anthropologists' Cookbook*, (London: Kegan Paul International, 1997), 135–137.

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¹² Goucher, "Congotay! Congotay," 32.

¹³ Maria Nugent, *Lady Nugent's Journal of Her Residence in Jamaica, from 1801 to 1805* (Kingston: Institute of Jamaica, 1966), 64–70; and Matthew Gregory Lewis, *Journal of a West India Proprietor* (London, 1834), 151.

¹⁴ Kopytoli, "Maroon Jerk Pork," 135.

¹⁵ Zach Myers, "Barbecue as a Historical Looking Glass," *Legacy*, Vol.18, no. 1 (2017), 3.

¹⁶ Myers, "Barbecue," 1.

¹⁷ Goucher, "Congotay! Congotay," 31.

¹⁸ Kopytoli, "Maroon Jerk Pork," 135; Sperry, "Just a Dash of Salt," *passim*; and Kenneth Bilby, *True-Born Maroons* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2008), 72–73.

¹⁹ Lewis, *Journal of a West India Proprietor*, 151.

²⁰ Higman, *Jamaican food*, 380.

²¹ Higman, *Jamaican food*, 382.

²² See Sperry, "Salt Production."

²³ Cynthia M. Kennedy, "The other white gold: salt, slaves, the Turks and Caicos Islands, and British Colonialism," *The Historian*, Vol. 69, no. 2 (2007), 215–230. See also Sperry, "Salt Production," *passim*.

²⁴ Kenneth M Bilby, "'Two Sister Pikni': a historical tradition of dual ethnogenesis in eastern Jamaica," *Caribbean Quarterly*, Vol. 30, nos. 3–4 (1984), 13.

²⁵ Lorna McDaniel, "The flying Africans: extent and strength of the myth in the Americas," *New West Indian Guide/Nieuwe West-Indische Gids*, Vol. 64, nos. 1–2 (1990), 28–40.

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²⁷ Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse* (New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1938), 62.

²⁸ Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, 62.

²⁹ Harcourt Fuller, "Maroon History, Music, and Sacred Sounds in the Americas: A Jamaican Case," *Journal of Africana Religions*, Vol. 5, no. 2 (2017), 278.

³⁰ Bilby, *True-Born Maroons*, 72–73.

³¹ Bilby, *True-Born Maroons*, 71.

³² See Sperry, "Just a Dash of Salt," 96 and Meredith Gadsby, *Sucking salt: Caribbean women writers, migration, and survival* (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 26.

[33](#) Barry Chevannes, *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 35.

[34](#) Ennis B. Edmonds, *Rastafari: A very short introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 47.

[35](#) See Sperry, "Just a Dash of Salt," 109.

[36](#) See Sperry, "Just a Dash of Salt," 109.