CALL FOR PAPERS

Food, power and the African diaspora: Exploring intersections

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This issue seeks to explore socio-cultural, economic and political aspects of the foodways of the African diasporas. The focus is the dynamics and interplays of power shaping current African food systems and how African diasporas relate to and engage with their food traditions. Over the last decade the concept of decolonisation has circulated not just in academic circles but also in the political arena and activism in the global North-West. To what extent do decolonisation efforts carry the potential for food justice and in what ways are African diasporas concerned about the decolonisation of food systems and engaged in efforts to make their foods more accessible? We seek contributions that engage with the experiences of diasporic communities and their aspirations, struggles and actions to reshape African food systems.

Moving foods and persons

Since the inception of anthropology, ethnographers have described how people identify themselves and others with the ways in which they grow, prepare, trade and consume their foods (Levi-Strauss 1964, Malinowski 1935, Richards 1939 etc). The anthropology of diaspora food brings together the study of the transfer of food substances (plants and animals) and the movement of people. Mintz (2007) points out that these movements rarely happen simultaneously.

The advent of European colonialism had a major impact on food systems worldwide, in terms of the movement of food substances as well as human displacement and migration. Food studies from a historical perspective, have described the migration of edible plants like maize, manioc, potatoes, rice, cacao, and many others across continents (Smith 2015; Wurgaft & White 2023; Joassart-Marcelli 2022). Through colonial trade, many of these plants were introduced to different continents and exploited on large scale farming projects in the “European” colonies (Collingham 2018).

According to Mintz “When food objects, processes –even ideas– spread from one society to another, the receiving society is likely to modify, often to misunderstand, and usually to redefine what it has received. When using a new vegetable, fruit, or spice the borrowing society is also likely to ‘indigenise’ it.” (Mintz 2008: 517). The reappropriation and indigenisation of foods is a fascinating aspect of food studies as it shows how food objects become linked to regional and ethnic subjectivities. This special issue is interested in how some foods are appropriated as “black” or “African” through this process of indigenisation and how, after some culinary alterations, the “Africanness” of some foods is effaced in the making of national cuisines. We explore how dimensions of race, social status, and other hierarchies are reflected in the indigenisation process of certain African foods and especially how this is formulated as part of colonisation practices.

Alongside food and crops, European colonialism also traded human beings, who were forcibly displaced against their will mainly for European commercial agriculture ventures. The crops that colonial subjects and slaves had to farm and process as part of their daily work routine and the racist ideologies that accompanied and justified this process shaped how African diasporas related to the foods they consumed, leading to the evolution of culinary innovations and dishes that were born in this very particular context.
African American literature has explored the emergence of ‘soul food’ as a cuisine that celebrates how slaves and their descendants were able to maintain a human soul under draconian conditions (Avieli & Markowitz 2018; Dodson & Gilkes 1995; Stanonis 2015).

Some describe soul food as a vessel of African American memories of slavery, discrimination, and poverty, an expression of their ingenuity, courage, and resistance against subjugation. It is perceived and consumed by many African Americans as a unique cultural achievement, to be loved and celebrated (Poe 1999; Henderson 2007; Jennsen Wallach 2015). For others, soul food dishes are considered debilitating, degrading, and unwholesome, its consumption supposedly facilitating slavery in the past, and later weakened black Americans physically and spiritually (Avieli & Markowitz 2018; Lee 1996; Rouse & Hoskins 2004).

Recent studies focus on dimensions of race, food justice, socio-economic marginalisation and vulnerability in what is called “Black” foodways (Reese 2019; Garth & Reese 2020; Smith 2023). This literature describes the absence of black Americans in the making of the popular American cuisine and food production (Garth & Reese 2020) and addresses inequalities in the American food market, which is characterised by lack of supply of nutritious and fresh foods in predominantly black neighbourhoods in the US (Reese 2019; Turner 1994).

Limited attention has been paid to the “African cuisine” among other African diasporas such as more recent migrants who have settled in the global North/West and East in the postcolonial era (Duru 2017; Bodomo & Ma 2012). Whereas the association between home foods, memory, nostalgia and food tourism has been extensively explored among other diasporas (Ayora-Diaz 2010; Belasco & Scranton 2002; Duruz 2010; Kershen 2002), these themes are less prevalent in the literature on African migrants and their foodways.

There now is growing interest in African entrepreneurship and its potential for development among policy makers. Thus, examining how this trend is affecting access to food by African migrants across the globe, can show how African migrants strategize to procure their valued food supplies. What food traditions are maintained or adapted to make up for lack of ingredients? What kinds of food traditions are passed on to next generations, which memories, recipes and preparation techniques are cherished and preserved, and which ones are considered redundant? What is the role of diaspora associations in the process of making and effacing food traditions? How do people connect to others through their foodways or refuse to maintain social relations by rejecting home foods? In what ways does the term ‘decolonisation’ reflect the food procurement strategies and political agendas of Afro-descendants in contrast to older and more recent African migrants? To what extent are decolonial foodways and activism gendered?

Submissions for articles may be sent in French or British English, and should include a title, an abstract (500 words maximum), 4-5 keywords, and an indicative bibliography. The journal also accepts suggestions for book reviews linked to the central theme, as well as review articles covering multiple recent publications on this topic. Proposals should be sent before 15 September 2024 to the editorial assistant of the journal: RevueCivilisations@ulb.be

References


Collingham, Elizabeth (Lizzie), 2017. *The hungry empire: How Britain’s quest for food shaped the modern world*. London: Bodley Head


