

School of Oriental
and African Studies
Food Forum
Distinguished Lecture

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..Food and Diaspora



INTRODUCTION

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Recent years have seen growing interest in the study of food, whether in the humanities, the social sciences, or the natural sciences. Increasing academic interest in food reflects growing interest in, and concerns about, food more generally. Despite the millennium goal of eradicating hunger, significant numbers of people around the world remain undernourished. At the same time increasing numbers of people worldwide suffer the effects of overnourishment, with obesity and related illnesses becoming a problem in developing countries as well as developed ones. For many the rising price of food—linked to increasing demand in the global south, declining agricultural productivity attributed to climate change, and the diversion of grain supplies to the production of biofuels—is an acute concern. Others insist “We don’t pay enough for our food.” Indeed the inclusion of agriculture under the rubric of trade liberalization, and the vertical integration of corporate food supply chains may facilitate cheaper food prices, but may also threaten food security in many developing countries, not to mention the livelihoods of small-scale producers everywhere. Food and foodways travel the globe, contributing to the (re)production of ethnic, religious, class, and national identities. Critics raise concerns, however, about the detrimental consequences of corporate-led globalization of the food supply on the “food sovereignty” of various communities, not to mention the environmental effects of increasing “food miles.” For some the specter of contamination—as a result of industrial food processing, biotechnology, or bioterrorism—hovers over an increasingly distant food supply system. For others, increasing state and suprastate regulation of the food supply threatens to undermine the autonomy and integrity of traditional foodways. Policy makers, activists, and food writers have done much to elevate public awareness of these issues, but academics also have much to contribute to their analysis. Indeed many of these issues have deep historical roots, the study of which has occupied academics in various disciplines for some time. Effectively addressing these concerns will require the emergent field of food studies not only to draw upon disparate disciplinary traditions but also to develop methodological and theoretical approaches that bridge these disciplines and that communicate beyond the academy.

To that end the SOAS Food Studies Centre, located in the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies, convenes a series of lectures by scholars giving foundation to this emergent discipline. The SOAS Food Studies Centre is an interdisciplinary center dedicated to the study of the political, economic, and cultural dimensions of food, historically and in the contemporary moment, from production, to exchange, to preparation, to consumption. Contributors to the SOAS Food Forum Distinguished Lecture Series are invited to address a timely food-related issue while giving scholarly depth to its analysis. Lecturers are encouraged to demonstrate the importance of multiple disciplinary perspectives on the issue, and to demonstrate how such perspectives might be harmonized in its study. This article is based on the first Food Forum Distinguished Lecture, which inaugurated the SOAS Food Studies Centre as well as the SOAS Centre for Migration and Diaspora Studies. It is the first in an

I was honored by the invitation to take part in the inauguration of the new food studies program of the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies.¹ The establishment of the Institut Européen d'Histoire et des Cultures de l'Alimentation on the other side of the Channel in 2002, and now the SOAS program, hint that powerful forces—surely not only gastric forces—are at work. The French, who seemed not to talk much about food, presumably because they thought theirs was so good, are now “studying” food academically. And, lo and behold, the English—whom I did not remember as ever talking about food at all—have decided to do the same thing. This conjuncture strikes me as an odd sign of how the world may be changing yet remaining the same. I suspect that the motives for studying food in these two cases are probably rather different.

The subject on which I was invited to descant, as betrayed by my title, is vast indeed. It behooves me to begin by declaring what I hope to do here. I intend to talk about two lengthy and immense movements of population, and to look at the many-sided relationships between these movements and food. Given the constraints of time, I can only make some suggestions about those relationships.

Before discussing the movements of people, though, I will examine a few cases of the transfer of plants, animals, and other food substances, mostly to suggest the complexity of my subject. Any complete or even lengthy account, either of human migration or of food transfers, lies far beyond the feasible in a lecture of this kind.

The human movements to which I will refer are, first, that of enslaved Africans to the Americas; and, second, the global transoceanic movement of people, mostly for work, that marked the nineteenth century. This vast movement overlapped with the first. Indeed both of these movements encompassed many culturally more particular migrations; but for my purposes I shall treat them as only two. If asked my intentions in making these remarks I would say it was to offer examples of what can happen with food behavior when people have to move; as well as what can happen with foods when they move without people. Human movement is a primary cause of changes in food behavior. But food without people moves in many varied ways; and in modern history, people have often had to move without their foods. Hence the everyday facts of human mobility necessarily complicate our grasp of how people relate to the foods that they eat in the course of time.

I am an anthropologist by training, and I have cause to advert to my own formation in what I shall say here. When I was a graduate student well over

half a century ago, we were accustomed to think of anthropology as a unitary discipline made up of four parts: physical anthropology, archaeology, linguistics, and cultural anthropology. Cultural anthropologists who, for those interested in the history of the discipline, were a New World, and not an Old World variety, looked at arguably universal features of the behavior of *Homo sapiens*—phenomena such as incest taboos, musical behavior, systems of kinship, and ritual. But anthropologists had long known that the behavior of human groups varied in patterned ways—that such things as incest taboos, musical behavior, kinship systems and rituals, though occurring very widely indeed, were culturally specific; they were emphatically not uniform across cultures. Anthropologists wanted to know what explained that variety. They had once wondered whether it might be the outcome of climate—whence the comfortable but dead-wrong idea of “hot-bloodedness” among those who lived in tropical regions; or of race, whence there came such much-used and irrelevant adjectives as “primitive,” “gracile,” “saturnine,” and “warlike”; or the equally inane idea of “group genius,” an explanation most commonly invoked, of course, when anthropologists spoke of their own societies; or of some other factor, yet to be discovered.

It remained for anthropologist Franz Boas and his students to establish a principle, based on research, that race, language, and culture represented three different research domains that ought not to be confused with each other. Race, however defined, was a genetic concept, which told us nothing about either language or culture. Language and culture, though historically they often traveled together, were distinguishable phenomena. By the time of my studentship these ideas were taught quite matter-of-factly by most—not all—American anthropologists. Popular opinion at that time had not yet caught up with science, and surely lags behind it to this day, in many circles. As for culture, its importance as a uniquely human phenomenon, historically evolved and symbolically communicated, was broadly accepted by a majority of American anthropologists. We were taught to seek to understand both how and why human groups differed behaviorally, and race was definitively excluded as an explanation of behavioral difference.²

At the same time what people *believe* to be true was as interesting to us as what could be proved to be true. Folk taxonomies of human variation, as well as the restricted pre-DNA attempts by scientists of the time to talk about human beings in terms of human physical variety, were as interesting to anthropologists as anything else.³

So American a view of anthropology was surely marked by many faults and you are free to treat its unusual breadth and its quaint Yankee optimism as cavalierly as you wish. But if we mean to look seriously at ourselves as eating animals, then I think such a broad view had its virtues. Its target of study has been known for more than a century now, in James Boswell’s words (Murcott

1986: 108) as “the animal that cooks.” The works of Prof. Lévi-Strauss—and by now of many others—have enshrined that conception of us, even in popular discourse.

Before we became the animal that cooks, we were, like the rest of life, animals that had to eat. Our history as eating animals changed profoundly when we became cooking animals. Long before that, however, we had first to become fire-using, and then fire-controlling, animals. An unimaginably huge consequence of our mastery of fire was the conversion of substances into edible foods that could not have been food for us without cooking, among them many tubers, legumes, and cereals that are now mainstays of human diet.

You will note here how the steps that led up to our becoming animals that cook were progressive—“cumulative,” if you prefer. The distinctively human ability to interpose our proactive, inventive, social intelligence between our animality and nature is one of the clearest ways in which we are distinguished from other forms of life. Language, our unique form of communication, played a central role in building one historical success upon another. As the great Australian archaeologist Vere Gordon Childe once put it, we are the only time-binding animal. The history of our food systems sets us dramatically apart from the rest of the animal world.

Many millennia after the mastery of fire, the domestication of plants and animals was begun. It happened independently and in many different places; stretched over thousands of years; and involved large numbers of individual plants and animals. The great Russian geneticist, Nikolai Vavilov (1993), pioneered the global documentation of edible plant history. Vavilov pinned down five major centers or domestication “hearths,” out of which troves of diverse foods would subsequently flow to other societies.

His work showed how universal had been the application of human genius to the problem of stable subsistence. There were centers in the Mediterranean, in the Americas, in Africa, and there were two in Asia. As a form of energy capture, nothing human beings have ever done could match the importance of domestication. I do not except here even such triumphs as the mastery of fossil fuels and, more recently, nuclear power—triumphs we are less inclined to celebrate quite so loudly, these days.

It may be worth noting here, as I have proposed elsewhere, that the history of domestication lays bare the early emergence of science as the human answer to the daily challenges of survival. The first domesticators of plants wore no white coats, carried no test tubes, and had no degrees from “aggie” schools. The majority of them were probably female; and all of them are anonymous. We know the names of the inventors of pet rocks and hula hoops—but we do not know the names of those who first domesticated barley or maize or rice. The science of these pioneers was social, collective, unpatented—and no doubt spread swiftly.

In then this connection, too, you are free to take exception, and to see domestication as simply a huge step backward. But it happened; and if it was a slippery slope, sure to lead us to our own destruction along the path of hubris, it has turned out at least so far to be quite unstoppable.

The consequences of transformations which humans have effectuated by producing their own subsistence, such as domestication and plant and animal breeding—a vital aspect of domestication, even at an early time—turned the question of what is or is not “natural” into a highly problematic issue. I think it is fair to argue now that truly natural foods for our species have been so thoroughly whittled away over time that all we can probably still claim as natural is mothers’ milk.⁴ Our first successes with fire go back at least 40,000 years, probably far longer. Our experiments in controlling living things besides ourselves began at least 12,000 years ago. Active interference with nature by our species is not a hormonal or instinctual matter; it is conscious and deliberate. The further differentiation of food systems followed, and has not yet ceased—in spite of growing pressures to make them all very much alike.

Today there has arisen an immense interest in the alleged pristine rise of a global food system, and that interest has led to new ways of thinking about food. Some enthusiasts fail to notice how ancient the transoceanic, intercontinental movement of both plant and animal foods has actually been. Others, though they have made themselves newly aware of the importance of locality in food history, remain much more enthralled by its opposite: an image of endless movement. For this reason it seems to me that both the antiquity of movement of humans and foods, and the abiding importance of place—locality—deserve to be kept firmly in mind. Let me look first at locale. The rise of a culturally specific food system characteristic of a human group occurs within *other* parameters—a specific territory with its own seasons; particular flora and fauna, soils, topography, hydrology; local technologies for gleaning, or herding, or farming, and with tools, techniques of processing and preservation and storage typical of that place; a system of production that includes a division of labor, at least along lines of sex and age; and so on.

I would note here that anthropology was the discipline to first afford us rich detail, both technical and human, on how such truly non-Western food systems worked. In the course of the last century, and on both sides of the Atlantic, anthropology made valuable contributions to our understanding of how human groups, no matter how modest their material culture, fed and reproduced their societies successfully, often in spite of terrible pressures, including those imposed by forbidding or meager environments. What we learned from anthropology about the Khoi-san peoples of the Kalahari Desert, for example, or the Inuit peoples of the Far North, firmly supports the anthropological assertion that our humanity is distinguished not so much by what people have, but what they do with what they have.

That aphorism still carries great ethical weight. However, not all human groups were pushed so hard by circumstance and by nature. Descriptions of the salmon fishing and whaling peoples of the Northwest Pacific coast from California to Alaska give us an image of rich food security, often even of splendor. Though they were hunters and gatherers, these folk prospered in a marine environment that enabled them to harvest fish as if they were farmers reaping grain; their art, great wooden houses, marine skills, and feasts justly enjoy worldwide renown.

It was in documenting as precisely as they could how those many food systems, both generous and parsimonious, functioned that anthropologists developed their views of the way culture both grew upon and was imposed upon nature—and how nature yielded to or constrained human exertions. I think such studies of the food quest may be the unrecognized birthplace of the paired concepts of locality and culture. So crucial to our understanding of patterned human behavior has locality been that the culture concept itself, so dear to American (if not British) anthropology, arose in close relationship to the understood meanings of locality. Now that some globalists think of locality as disappearing, we may be less sensitive to how humans made new, culturally specific realities out of the resources that they grew to know best by being—and yes, by staying—in one place. Anyone familiar with the mukluks, snow goggles, igloos, kayaks, harpoons, and tailored clothing of the Inuit peoples ought to understand well how much is concealed by the deceptive phrase “simple technology.” And anyone who has seen how Inuit hunt, or fish, or build an igloo, should be able to grasp the many-sided ways in which the environment became for them not only where they lived and what they lived on, but also who they were. We should not let talk about the seeming decline of locality permit us to forget how those places—many of them very inhospitable—were transformed by human toughness, ingenuity, and social identity, into homes and hearths, anchored to place.

Indeed, from place on the one hand, and presence, preparation, and consumption of food on the other, there arose the anthropological idea of “culture area,” at one time a useful pedagogical and even theoretical tool of historical anthropology. Anyone who has bumped into this idea probably knows that culture areas began as “food areas” (Mason 1895, 1907; Wissler 1917, 1923, 1926). In fact the first anthropological maps of North America were of the major subsistence zones of native peoples: maize, manioc, salmon, acorns, potatoes, and so on.

And how could it have been otherwise? If our subject is human beings, then once that the physical nature of a region is known, what comes next if not the way that people there wrest their daily sustenance from it? We must eat, if possible every day; and as Audrey Richards told us long ago, “The impulse to seek food is, after all, a desire that cannot be inhibited or

repressed, at any rate beyond certain limits. Unlike the drive of sex, it is a periodic urge, recurring regularly every few hours" (Richards 1948: 1). I was once given to torment my students by declaring that, if they supposed that the sex drive was more powerful than hunger, it was only because they were young and overfed; and that a fast of a mere thirty-six hours or so would radically alter their priorities.

The North American anthropological concentration on place, food, and culture even reached across the ocean, as in the work of the late C. Daryll

Forde, anthropologist and formerly director of the International African Institute. His fine introductory text, *Habitat, Economy and Society* (1949), which he subtitled a "geographical introduction," makes much of the specific adaptations of technically modest peoples to local conditions. In every case food getting, food preparation, preservation, and use are central to successes in adaptation. I believe it may have been out of such adaptive successes that the concept of cuisine first arose, followed by the idea of commensality: the symbolic significance of people taking their food together. Food always has had great significance in its local associations. The collective eating of it by those who inhabit a locality is a social act, rich in symbolic meanings, in nearly all societies, large and small.

As the idea of ever-increasing movement of persons grows, we hear talk of the end of culture. I sense some contradiction between this obituary for culture, on the one hand, and the expectation that those in diaspora are committed to reclaim, at least figuratively, some particular locality, to which they will think back collectively. The fact is, I think, that locality is still very much with us. So by the way, is culture, the death of which has been—as Mark Twain famously remarked about himself—greatly exaggerated. As students of food I think we can profitably keep both locality and culture firmly in mind, even as we try to understand the bewildering flux of people, objects, ideas, and capital in today's world.

Let me start now to set forth some basic evidence on the movements of foods, as opposed to the movements of peoples. A good place to begin is with the two continents first occupied by migrants from Asia, discovery of which is credited especially to Columbus.⁵ Other than a couple of quite startling and barely possible exceptions, the food histories of the Old World and the New were absolutely separate and independent in 1492. But there took place thereafter a quite amazing exchange of food plants, animals, and food substances between the Americas and the rest of the world (Crosby 1972). The Columbian exchange, as it is called, is surely familiar to you already, at least in outline. The introduction of the world's foods to the Americas is better known, and I shall omit discussion of it here. But New World achievements in agriculture, including potatoes, tomatoes, maize, many beans, manioc, and all the capsicums, sweet and hot, would spread across the globe in the ensuing five centuries, first of all in Europe. Though foods

from all over were carried *to* the New World by migrants, particularly from Europe, nearly every bit of the food carried away from the New World was the result of diffusion—an old anthropological term—not migration. In my list above I mention only a few of the principal items. I omitted spices and flavorings, such as chocolate and vanilla, annatto and allspice; fruits such as papaya, guava, naseberries, sweetsops, soursops, passion fruit, and pineapples; squashes such as pumpkins, yellow, acorn, pattypan, spaghetti, and chayotes, and what we Americans now call zucchinis; not to mention a great many tubers, some nuts, such as cashews and Brazils; and at least one more cereal beyond maize.

But what happened to these things, once they left the Americas? Of the potato's history in Ireland we know a good deal (e.g. Salaman 1949); we may also know how popular paprika would become, especially in Hungary, but also in Spain (Freeman 1999). Because maize spread in Europe without the knowledge that it had to be cooked with lime to make its limited niacin digestible by humans, there were terrible outbreaks of pellagra, what the Germans call *Maiserkrankheit* (maize eater's illness), in much of Europe and elsewhere (Warman 2003). Still, maize led to the *polenta* of Italy and the *mamaligen* of Rumania, as it spread from west to east. As maize moved east from Spain to Russia, it paralleled another eastward spread, that of potatoes to the north. I will not try to deal with the fates of these and other plants from the New World when they reached Africa and Asia, except to say that few parts of the world elsewhere were as deeply affected by the Columbian exchange as was Europe. To my knowledge there is little in the acceptance of New World foods in China, say, to compare to what happened with the potato (*Solanum tuberosum*) in Ireland—or for that matter, to its eventual acceptance in Europe as a whole. Again, I know of nothing in the borrowing history of other regions that compares to how the Americas would affect Italian cuisine, where the intensely creative integration of tomatoes, sweet peppers, hot peppers, potatoes, maize, squashes, and many beans in local diet was quite remarkable.

Other New World borrowings were less spectacular. The odd liking in Europe for the “Jerusalem artichoke” (*Helianthus tuberosus*), which the French call by the name *topinambour*, and that we know as Jerusalem artichokes—though being neither artichokes nor from Jerusalem⁶—is a modest example. The worldwide spread of the squash *chayote*, though minor, is of interest because it has now become known in so many places.

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 “indigenize” it. Witness the history of American sushi, with its California rolls, rock-and-rolls and other innovations; the common and copious adding of sugar to tea, coffee, and

chocolate drinks in European practice; or the mammoth crescent-shaped rolls that Americans produce and call, a little quaintly, *croissants*.

I want now to turn away from food and to speak about the movement of human beings. The term “diaspora”—etymologically Greek and biblical in its associations—has become so common that it turns up now in newspaper articles describing almost anyone going anywhere. Its mounting popularity is suggested, Waldinger (2008: xi) writes, by the appearance of a journal with that name; and there is now a rich literature, theoretical and substantive, on diasporas.⁷ I will not seek to integrate diaspora theory into these comments; but the link between the movement of people and their food-related behavior is obvious and important.

In earlier work of my own (1996) I have referred to the drastic changes in food-related behavior brought about by war (Mintz 1996: 25 et seq.), and in passing, I have suggested elsewhere the equal importance of migration in effectuating such changes. Many migrants must move to work elsewhere, and many come from societies where people eat mostly at home, in familial settings. When moved to work elsewhere—either by force or otherwise—they must adjust their eating to what work discipline ordains. Not only what they eat, but when and under what conditions, often becomes contingent upon the dictates of the job (Ray 2004). Obviously when such people move alone, without families, the difficulties of maintaining their eating habits are even more serious.

Earlier, in discussing the Columbian exchange, I noted that foods coming from the New World moved mostly *without* people. Let me turn now to people moving *without* food. I refer to two human movements, the first dealing with Afro-America, and the second with the nineteenth century. Those two movements overlapped. The first enslaved Africans to reach the New World were taken there within ten years of the Discovery, and the last enslaved Africans were smuggled into the New World by slavers from Europe and North America around 1850, nearly 350 years later. Considerable research of high quality has gone into documenting that trade—a separate matter, of course, from slave reproduction in the New World. The latest work I have seen suggests that if we assume a mortality rate of 15 percent for African captives from their capture until their landing in the New World, which is probably reasonable, a total of around 13 million persons were stolen from Africa during those 350 years. That was surely the largest, most terrible diaspora in the history of the world. I cannot dwell here on the economic and political context for the slave trade, its abolition, the eventual abolition of slavery itself, and what replaced it. But I do want to say a little, at least, about its relationship to food.

In spite of the horrific conditions under which the slaves were carried across the ocean, then sold and put to work, there were important food and culinary connections between Old World and New that survived them.

There were also enormous changes, and considerable improvisation. It is thrilling, all the same, to discover both lexical and culinary evidence of continuity. The second edition of *The Dictionary of Jamaican English* by Cassidy and Le Page (1980) is heavily laden with English words, often with changed phonology or meanings. Yet perhaps as many as half of the nouns originate in African languages, and many are food words. African domesticates including some sorghums, yams, plantains and bananas, watermelon, okra, malagueta pepper, and trees such as the oil palm and ackee, reached the New World, and some no doubt came with the slaves, or in the course of the trade.⁸ Recently Carney's fine book, *Black Rice* (2001), which deals with rice cultivation in Africa and in South Carolina, sets forth convincingly the thesis that South Carolina's great rice plantations were far more the product of enslaved African rice cultivators than of their white masters. It is hardly news that the so-called Southern cooking of the US was much more the work of black cooks than it was of white belles in their crinoline dresses.

The second movement to which I wish to refer here was even larger. Nobel laureate Sir W. Arthur Lewis talked about world migration in the nineteenth century in his book on international trade (Lewis 1978). During that century he tells us, around 100 million people left their homes—or were stolen from them—to make journeys across oceans, primarily in search of gainful employment. Fifty million of them were Europeans who went mostly to European colonies or former colonies run by people of European origin, such as Canada, Argentina, Uruguay, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, and the United States, among others. We know a lot about those migrants. They became citizens of the societies they joined, most of which were social democracies; their cultural identities changed, some more and some less, but all in a quite familiar manner.

We also know a great deal about their food. Indeed my first comment on these European migrants would be that their foods mostly took on their ethnic character only after they arrived where they were going, and found out that they were ethnic. As Vincent said a long time ago (Vincent 1974), you can't be ethnic unless there is someone next to you who is different from you culturally. In the case of the US there was a familiar pattern in which the first generation lost—or deliberately forgot—its ethnicity, but soon enough its children began to complain bitterly because their parents failed to retain their ethnic identity. Ethnic foods in a country like the US have a special potency. Until quite recently, new migrants ate foods “from the old country” privately, and rarely in public. Their children wanted to be like “other Americans,” and did what they could to conceal their background. In the US, until they began to be eaten by everybody, such foods were ethnic. But in today's world, once everybody has begun to eat them, they become American. Hence I have been able to observe that now, when an ethnic food

loses its ethnicity and becomes American—like the bagel, or pasta, which used to be called spaghetti—somebody of that ethnic identity usually gets appointed to our Supreme Court. *Hummus* and *chapatis*, your day will come.

I am not able to say whether the emphasis on becoming American is as true for Brazilians, say, or Argentines. But certainly the American nations can be joined by newcomers in a way that most European ones cannot. I believe that differences in the conception of citizenship, membership, and group identity enter importantly into the retention, loss, or modification of food habits, and in a general fashion Europe differs markedly in these ways from the Americas.

But let me talk briefly now about those other 50 million migrants of the nineteenth century: the non-European half of the diaspora that Europeans saw as nonwhite. These “blackbirds,” “coolies,” “Chinks,” and “kanakas” went to a different set of European colonies, many of them still colonial, and few to any sovereign or democratic countries. They came from European colonies, such as parts of Africa or India, or from old and politically weakened states, such as China. The lands which received them included islands in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, such as Mauritius and Fiji, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore; Caribbean colonies, such as French Guadeloupe and Martinique, British Jamaica and Trinidad, along with the coastal mainlands, including British, Dutch, and French Guiana; and some other parts of South America, and Africa, especially East and South. Of the non-European migrants hardly any got to such places as Canada and the United States, or Argentina and Chile, or New Zealand and Australia—though there were a few exceptions. The contrast between the European and non-European migrants—their lives, their fates, the life chances of their children—is striking in nearly every way. Whereas the food-related behavior of those people who went to the mostly white and democratic societies is better documented because their institutions of research and learning, as well as their press, were more highly developed, those of the colonial and mainly tropical countries were clearly less so. Not surprisingly the lives of immigrants to societies such as Canada or the US have been documented in fact and fiction. Yet we know little of what happened to the food habits of the half-million or so Indians who migrated on contract to the Caribbean Islands and their nearby shores; to those of the 150,000 Chinese who reached Cuba; or to the more than 80,000 Chinese who reached Peru. Large numbers of those original migrants did carry a few of their food habits with them; they brought plants and spices, when they could. In their new homes they added new foods to their own food systems, meanwhile introducing strangers to their ways of cooking and eating. But it was difficult to maintain continuities when migrants were unable to bring their families, as happened, for instance, to Chinese laborers in Cuba. We know less about these people than we do about white migrants, because of where they went, and the

circumstances of their migrations. That is not to say that ancestral traditions were wholly forgotten or disappeared. Current successes of curries in New York City had a precedent in Trinidad and British Guiana, over a century ago; the Chinese restaurants in Lima and Havana at the end of the nineteenth century—if we only had their menus and recipes—might usefully be compared to those that entertain New Yorkers on the Upper West Side today.

For the most part the non-European migrants of the nineteenth century came from poor rural settings and moved into colonial situations, where social and economic advancement was difficult and public education either inferior or nonexistent. The opportunities available to the average migrant in a colony such as Trinidad or Malaysia in 1850 would be tiny, when compared to those for the average migrant to Canada or the US—if, indeed, the “average” Indian or Chinese had been able to get in at all. Yet by what look now like strange miracles some of these migrants did succeed in recreating some part of their food practices.

I have tried here to sketch in some of the historical movements of foods and of peoples that have marked the emergence over time of a more globalized food system. I have stressed at the same time the enormous importance of place—of locality and its distinctive natural characteristics—in the shaping over time of culturally specific food systems. In dealing both with foods and with the migrations of peoples I have been confined by the broadness of my subject to only a handful of examples. Perhaps some of those examples will be helpful to scholars dealing with particular historical or ethnological cases, who seek to build and refine their hypotheses by example and comparison.

The rapid growth of the world economy in recent years has threatened to outstrip the building of global order; but current events and crises hint that now we may be on the edge of a significant turndown in globalization. It seems clear, in any event, that we still know only a little of what we need to know, in order to understand fully what is happening with food systems—production, processing, distribution, and consumption—worldwide.

I would like to conclude by urging students of world food to keep the importance of locality and culture in mind. The persistent drumbeat that implies perpetual movement, then defines it as progress, ought not to get in the way of our remembering not only how food systems began long ago, but also about where—if we are fortunate, I would say—they may end up once again, sometime in the future.

Notes

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- 1 This lecture, now edited, was delivered at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, on October 11, 2007. The author wishes to thank Dr Jakob Klein and his colleagues for inviting him and for academic hospitality, and Jacqueline Mintz for assistance with this article.
- 2 I trust that it will be clear that, when persons react to judgments made of them based on their physical appearance, these are not cases of behavior being “explained” by “race.”
- 3 To anthropology students of my generation, perhaps even more interesting—in light of the eugenics craze, and some of its worst consequences: the more murderous fantasies about “purity” that had so recently masqueraded as science in Europe.
- 4 Surely this assertion will not be deliberately misread to mean that this makes indifferent, in nutritional, environmental, aesthetic, or other terms, the foods that we eat.
- 5 Everybody now seems keenly aware that Columbus was “discovering” many people and civilizations that had been where they were for a very long time. But that knowledge ought not to make us underestimate the enormous importance of his discovery to the rest of the earth.
- 6 *Hibiscus esculentus* probably got the name “Jerusalem” from Italian *girasole*. The name *topinambour* for this plant is derived from the South American tribal name *Tupinamba*.
- 7 I found Dufoix’s (2008) *Diasporas*, newly translated from the French, a particularly useful overview of this subject. Cohen’s thoughtful and humane *Global Diasporas* (1997) nicely lays out the term’s possible meanings, building upon Safran’s (1991) article in the first issue of *Diaspora*.
- 8 Higman’s outstanding new book on Jamaican food (2008) is replete with references to Africa. My own paper on the food of slaves, “Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom,” was republished in Mintz 1996.

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