

Beyond the Columbian Exchange: Culinary Cultural Connections in the Black Atlantic

“*Now you’re eating slave food!*” last summer I heard this refrain from all types of people: white, black, brown, and elite to working class. They said it every time I was served *Feijoada*, the Brazilian national dish. Obviously the comment was pitched for my benefit, as the researcher and African American, yet telling nonetheless. *Feijoada* was served to celebrate the reopening of a farm, during dutiful obligations to African deities, for lunch in someone’s home, and as a key iconic meal on Assumption Day in my primary field research site of *A Festa da Boa Morte*, The Festival of the Good Death. Although its application is quite elastic, its cultural implication appears quite specific. What does it mean to ‘be eating slave food’—could I metaphorically ingest their consciousness?—commune over the centuries with some of my; our forbears? African people, who had been born, lived and likely died in struggle. If, these simple dishes function as the Eucharist of the African diaspora, who will consecrate these meals? Early race theorists, W.E.B. Dubois, Franz Fanon, anthropologists, Roger Bastide, Franz Boas & his disciples and revisionist historians, Eugene & Elizabeth Genovese, William Bascom researched the ‘African retentions’ handed down intergenerationally in the Americas. Dubois and a few others argued for a through cultural through-line. Those idiosyncratic practices that created numerous musical and dance forms such as: field hollers, ring shouts, blues, jazz, samba, mambo, rumba and rap. E. Franklin Frazier’s counter statements spoke of an irruption and the destruction of the culture upon arrival. Many of these creative expressions were seen as resistive or subversive; some quite literally such as the Brazilian slave dance cum martial art—Capoeira.

In her book, *Iron Pots and Wooden Spoons*, Jessica B. Harris located the nature and specifics of diaspora foodways as a sinuous virtual umbilicus connecting Benin with Bahia, Port au Prince and Havana to New York, New Orleans and Surinam, Veracruz and Miami, Cartagena and Congo, Fort de France and Surinam-and on and on. Evidence is on the plate and in the hands

of the cook¹. Bean fritters, Accra in Ghana or Senegal, become Acarajé in Bahia or Black-eyed pea fritters in the Carolina Low Country. Totemic dishes seen as emblematic of the ingenuity of slaves, Dirty Rice, Souse or Gumbo speak to more than desperate living and poor rations. How do we contextualize iconic African foods and dishes being served in the White House? Not only dishes served to Obama and the first family—but from the Antebellum through to the modern day. Teddy Roosevelt loved Hoppin’ John and more than once French chefs were given a pink slip in deference to nearly invisible African American cooks and chefs. Current scholarship identifies two African American chefs who served our first presidents, Hercules, chef to George Washington and James Hemmings, Sally’s brother who was French trained by Thomas Jefferson. The position of these men and others who lived as slaves yet supervised whites and blacks does not rationalize the inclusion of ‘Guinea’ squash or eggplant in Martha Washington’s personal receipt book, U.S. Grant and many Senator’s pension for having Possum for dinner in the home of the White House footman, dubbed “*Possum Jerry*.” Nor do citations to slave cooks and their recipes in plantation cookbooks. Yes it frames the nature of elite power, but these were personal housekeeping guides’ not public documents.

How did we arrive at table resplendent in creole cookery? Historical record shows that captive slaves were tasked with raising crops in Africa to feed the captain, crew and provide subsistence rations for themselves. Upon arrival, the rations which varied with the region and the season but typically included a peck of meal (corn), a rasher of pork, or streak o lean, a few dried or smoked fish, possibly a strip of salted beef was not enough to support field work or a family.

Many colonizers condoned slave gardens as a means to supplement the meager rations and relieve the master’s from the burden of providing substantive food for their slaves. In many nations imports and exports grew to provide for some of these ‘retained practices’ and augment the white diet with some exotics from the diaspora. Environmental historian Alfred Crosby’s theories and text published in 1972 as, *The Columbian Exchange*, specifically detailed these

¹ (Harris 1999: xi-xii)

transnational correspondences. Why does this matter-what is the essence of the exchange? –as a function of the Columbian exchange food and foodways were irrevocably changed on a global level.

Specifically the Columbian exchange involves the movement of food, livestock, disease and ideas between Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas. Products such as sugarcane-apples-pears-wheat, rye, barley, olives, grapes, lettuce, watermelon, cattle, sheep, pigs and horses came from the old world. While pineapple, vanilla, peppers, tobacco, sweet and white potatoes, tomatoes, turkeys, manioc, peanuts and corn came from the New World Unfortunately we need to include smallpox, influenza, typhus, measles, malaria, whooping cough and diphtheria. Subtly liberty/self-determination, corporate structure and ecology are also on this roster. Thus corn and peanuts take root in Africa and seem native born. Sugar, tobacco, rum, coffee and draft animals become essential tools to foster and spread colonialism. But as you may have noticed on the map, there is little delineation for the precise specifics that identify each culture, particularly those of Africa and Asia. Although the particulars can be named at that time the specificity of African cookery and culture was seen as irrelevant.

It was known that the blacks could cook. That was that. Thus stereotypic images, the Black Mammy: Prissy & Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*, Aunt Jemima, Rastus, Uncle Ben, Bimbo in Mexico and other pejorative images of blacks as idiot savants were born. Two salient aspects of these images need to be focused on: Uncle Ben and his identification with Carolina Rice actually frame a key historical fact. Colonizers realized that Africans had skill, intelligence and artisanship. Europeans searched the Sene-Gambian or Rice Coast for rice farmers to build an industry in the U.S. Later Brazilians invited Confederate farmers to resettle there after they lost the Civil War. These black farmers not only knew how to grow prize worthy rice, they rotated the dry land rice fields with cattle that restored the land. Ranching and cowboy culture owes a debt to African slaves. Analyzing the slave cabin tables, big house larders and the groaning boards would show specific African tropes: Soupy Stews generally served over impounded grains or

‘mush’, Braised greens fortified with a little protein from smoked fish or pork, okra, black-eyed peas, frying in deep fat, boiling, roasting, spit-roasting, cooking in the ashes, spicy condiments, salting and smoking of meats and wrapping foods in edible or aromatic leaves to add flavor and moistness were markers of African culinary practice. The Colombian Exchange does not dig deeply into African cuisine or culture. Palm oil, okra and many other emblematic foods in African cookery are not mentioned.

While this speaks to good cooking, what is neglected is that much of these foods were used for their ceremonial significance; and continue to be so. If noticed in commentary foodways are usually disdained as another sign of mere folk naiveté with no impact on doctrine, prayer, or high worship. Although much attention has been given to questions concerning the efficacy of prayer, there remains a great deal to be discovered about its sources, varieties and relationships to other important aspects of modern society and culture. Activities that are commonly described as prayer vary widely, from the vocal and contemplative process of praying, to the culturally specific agentive bodily practices meant to enhance the successful manifestation of the sacred.

The embedded practice commonly associated with prayer includes chanting, singing, dance, and trance. Yet food practice, animal sacrifice, and the virtual ‘feeding of the gods’ are common aspect of prayer throughout Africa particularly associated with the Yoruba in West Africa as well as many other ethnic groups. The embodied knowledge traveling with Africans in the Middle Passage to the colonial Americas brought a diverse set of customs and behaviors to this continent. These cultural expressions are often grounded as praise rituals, prayer and religious systems honoring elders, ancestors and the divine. Therefore not only are these foods and the meals made from them able to be identified as African, but they are also able to mediate cultural practices, religious and spiritual beliefs and ground identity formation intergenerationally over centuries of anonymity, relative to the inclusion of Africans in the larger society. Food and foodways have the power to be just as resistive as the plastic arts and the power inherent in the

ingestion of someone's culture at table, in conversation and over a meal should never be taken lightly.

Thank you.

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