

Food Culture in Botswana: A Need for Documentation

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ABSTRACT

The subject of food is not the preserve of nutritionists. It is an important subject of attention in cultural anthropology because food can be a cultural code of communication apart from the purpose it serves in ensuring human and animal survival on planet Earth. The way food is prepared is capable of speaking volumes in each culture just as the manner in which it is served and eaten can pass on a lot of information. French cuisine is famous among Europeans, but not much is ever heard about food in many parts of Africa. This paper examines a few lacunae and possible palliative measures in the subject of food culture in Botswana.

Keywords: Botswana; food; culture; acculturation; French cuisine.

Introduction

Outsiders who are not familiar with Botswana assume that the country is monocultural because they tend to equate the name of the country with the main ethnic group, namely, Batswana (Batibo 2020). This misconception is a legacy of the colonial administration that aimed at promoting only the culture and cultural interests of the Setswana-speaking tribes (Lubinda 2010). The idea of a monocultural society was adopted to spread a sense of cultural unity throughout the nation. Despite this superficial impression that a casual observer may have, Botswana is in fact home to more than 30 *merafe* (ethnic groups) with diverse cultures (Lubinda 2010). As a result of this misconception, Botswana's cultural reality, both locally and internationally, has been eclipsed (Batibo 2020). In recent years, however, the country has begun to embrace the reality of diversity and multiculturalism, as is observable in the growing number of festivals and social events that celebrate cultural diversity. Cultural festivals play a vital role in promoting culture, ensuring culture preservation, showcasing the cultural arts, and unearthing talent. Cultural festivals held in Botswana include the *Kuru* Dance Festivals, Dithubaruba, Letlhafula, and Son of the soil, Mmakgodumo, Khawadune challenge and cultural festival, Kgalagadiwest cultural festival, Tsodilo, Maun, Gchwihaba, Maitisong, Gutjilenje, Mayeyi, Dombosha and Heart of the city carnival (Kekana and Khudu-Peterson 2018).

Food is one of the symbols of culture that is put forth during these cultural manifestations. It is perhaps food, more than the languages that we speak, embodies, and symbolizes the cultural reality of every sociocultural group. The culinary practices are intertwined with the culture of every society. This symbol of culture is not documented in Botswana. As a result, it is difficult to know what exactly the cultural role of food in the country is, and even less so what people mean when they consider food as a cultural identifier and how the food sources and dishes that are considered cultural markers attained that status. Therefore, the aim of this conceptual study is to synthesize literature review relating to the link between food and culture. Its purpose is to invite researchers to this untapped potential in the context of Botswana and to explore ways of advancing future work into this area in order to expand comprehension of the role of food in our society and how this role has evolved over time. Lack of research in this multidisciplinary area is a major obstacle to a more comprehensive understanding of the sociocultural groups of Botswana. Undocumented knowledge

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is being lost with potentially dire implications for long-term understanding of what we call cultural identity.

Definition of Culture

It is not uncommon to hear people talk about food as a cultural symbol. But what do they really mean? Before looking at the link between food and culture, it seems important to first define the notion of culture. The notion of culture is ubiquitous yet conceptually elusive. As Berger (2000) rightly points out, one of the problems we encounter in dealing with culture is that there are so many different meanings and definitions attached to the term. Anthropologically speaking, culture, according to Fairchild (1967:80) refers to:

a collective name for all behavior patterns socially acquired and transmitted by means of symbols; hence a name for all the distinctive achievements of human groups, including not only such items as language, tool-making, industry, art, science, law, government, morals and religion, but also the material instruments or artifacts in which cultural achievements are embodied and by which intellectual cultural features are given practical effect, such as buildings, tools, machines, communication devices, art objects, etc.

Geertz (1973:89) on the other hand, defines culture as “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men [and women – *our addition*] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life”. He goes on to add that “cultural acts, the construction, apprehension, and utilization of symbolic forms, are social events like any other; they are as public as marriage and as observable as agriculture” (Geertz 1973:91). The main takeaway of these two definitions is clear: culture is transmitted or embodied in symbols, that is, physical manifestations with signification or meaning within a given group. Culture is a set of ideas, norms and practices that distinguishes societies from others around the world, or conversely it is what brings people closer to each other. Different cultural groups may use symbols which are similar in appearance but with drastically different significations, or symbols which are different but are with practically the same significations. Furthermore, these symbols and the meanings applied to them are not fixed in time. The same symbol may mean different things in different epochs. In order to understand their meanings, these symbols therefore need to be described and interpreted through investigation, not in search of law but in pursuit of meaning (Geertz 1973).

Applied to food, culture, or what may be termed food culture, refers to the “practices, attitudes, and beliefs as well as the networks and institutions surrounding the production, distribution, and consumption of food” (Long 2015 cited by Bergflødt *et al.* 2012). It is “the sum of the knowledge and the experiences of a given group...and takes into account at the same time standards, values and representations of the food, as well as foods and real dishes” (Lien 1995:74, cited by Bergflødt *et al.* 2012). This is echoed by Amilien and Notaker (2018) who view food culture as tripartite structure made up of three fundamental and complementary perspectives which have meaning only in relation to one another. Firstly, food is perceived as “traditional recipes and know-how, passed from generation to generation, which form the core of a collective identity based on a historical and often nostalgic vision of food”. Secondly, people see food culture as “practices and consumption habits based on identity, protocol, and appropriation including both material and immaterial elements. Thirdly, food culture is regarded “as an integral part of culture”. Therefore, food cultures

“are continually evolving, members of a society are particularly aware of them, and they function as a platform for building their identities” (Amilien and Notaker 2018:5”. People can be deemed to be culturally competent if they know “which cultural forms can be used in which social situations” (Eriksen and Selberg 2006:18, cited by Bergflødt *et al.* 2012). Food cultures often vary regionally even within one country depending on the landscape, weather, and history that each region uniquely experienced. Food cultures, therefore, allows us to understand continually changing processes in a global way with an emphasis on adapting to meaning and sociability, including the materiality of the act of eating (Hegnes 2013:16-17).

Food as a Sociocultural Element

Food is the first necessity of man (Chinese proverb). All humans eat food, and it will not be an overstatement to say that food appears to be the only common denominator between different people across the globe. Britannica defines food as any “substance consisting essentially of protein, carbohydrate, fat, and other nutrients used in the body of an organism to sustain growth and vital processes and to furnish energy”.¹ All of the food that humans eat comes from plants and animals. Hunting and gathering, and the development of agriculture are the primary means by which humans feed themselves. Food has long been understood as a potent marker of cultural identity. There is a plethora of studies which explore the link between food and culture, more especially in the Western countries. The literature put forth that food and culture are interrelated and inseparable. This link between food, as a natural resource, and culture can be explained through the Theory of Biocultural Diversity (TBD), often framed in the context of natural resources management and conservation, which posits that biological and cultural diversities are not only linked but equally exhibit some form of interdependence, and that a loss or change in any of these indices will negatively affect the others (Maffi 2007:269). Biocultural diversity denotes diversity of life and includes human cultures and languages (Loh and Harmon, 2005).

Cultural identities including culinary practices are often closely tied to the physical environment in which people live. Traditionally, sociocultural groups will depend on the natural resources that their immediate physical environment offers them. As such, the food we eat is often closely tied to the physical environment in which we live. In that regard, people who live near water sources will not eat the same food as those who live in dry areas. People evolve together with the physical environment. The essence of this theory is that change observed in the food we produce and consume, including how we consume it, will necessarily affect the culture that we live by. Conversely, any change in our culture due to contact with other sociocultural groups or change in the environment, will have an effect on the way we produce and consume our food. Botswana, like any other people, eat and consider food to be part of their culture. But what do we really mean when we say that food is part of our culture? What cultural meaning is attached to eating sorghum or beef for instance?

According to Warde (1997) we eat or witness others eating without assigning any social significance to this act. Nonetheless, food practices including production, preparation, and consumption, are carried out in an organized structural way that defines our societies. While the benefits and value of food practices might not be fully understood and synthesized in some countries such as Botswana due to lack of research in this area, in other countries like France, the rituals related to food practices are well-documented. This can be witnessed by the inscription of France’s

¹ *Encyclopedia Britannica* 24 March 2020. “Food”. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/food>, accessed 3 January 2021.

traditional gastronomic meal, in which “ritual is as important as the food itself”, on the world’s intangible heritage list of the UNESCO in 2010. The French cuisine was the first-ever listing for gastronomy on the world’s intangible heritage. The UNESCO experts singled out French gastronomy as a “social custom aimed at celebrating the most important moments in the lives of individuals and groups” (UNESCO 2010a). Nevertheless, it should be noted that the listing does not attribute or recognize any standard of excellence or exclusivity, but simply shows that France has successfully incorporated gastronomy into their cultural symbols. Most importantly, the listing highlights that food, while it nourishes us, also plays an important sociocultural role in all societies. Food, like other sociocultural elements that are not tangible but are instead expressed through knowledge, skill, or rituals, is equally important in shaping cultures. Practices related to food, therefore, carry important sociocultural significance and understanding culinary practices of a given sociocultural group can help understand the group itself.

Sociocultural significance is the most telling factor of the traditional cuisines or dishes that have been listed on the UNESCO’s intangible heritage list as highlighted in the listing of the Traditional Mexican Cuisine in 2010, the Japanese *Washoku* in 2013, the Culinary Tradition of Malawi in 2017 and the production and consumption of couscous in Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania in 2020, to mention just a few examples. The Traditional Mexican cuisine, according to the listing, is a “comprehensive cultural model comprising farming, ritual practices, age-old skills, culinary techniques and ancestral community customs and manners” (UNESCO 2010b), and calls for “collective participation in the entire traditional food chain: from planting and harvesting to cooking and eating” (UNESCO 2010b). It expresses community identity, reinforces social bonds, and builds stronger local, regional, and national identities. The Japanese *Washoku* is a social practice based on a set of “skills, knowledge, practice, and traditions related to the production, processing, preparation, and consumption of food” (UNESCO, 2013) and is closely associated with an “essential spirit of respect for nature and the sustainable use of natural resources, and utilizes various natural, locally sourced ingredients”. The Culinary Tradition of Malawi, *Nsima*, is represented by a dish carrying the same name in a form of thick porridge prepared with maize flour. The listing highlights the fact that *Nsima* is prepared through an elaborate process requiring specific knowledge, from pounding the maize into flour to selecting the accompanying food and then preparing and serving it. The process of growing, storing, processing, and preparing the maize from which *Nsima* is made is bound up with Malawians’ way of life, and eating *Nsima* is a communal tradition in families and an opportunity to strengthen bonds. The listing of the couscous dish was hailed as an example of international cooperation in that, for the first time in the history of mankind, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania unified their forces together to make a joint nomination that acknowledges the “knowledge, know-how and practices pertaining to the production and consumption of couscous” (UNESCO 2020) and intends to preserve the related symbolic value systems, including “techniques, songs, gestures, characteristic oral expressions and ritual organization” (UNESCO 2020) that are passed from one generation to another. As of December 2020, UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity has listed twenty-four food-related rituals.

Food and Culture

In his works, Levi-Strauss stresses that food has a meaning and a symbolic value. He goes further to add that the meaning of food and its symbolic value are not attached to food items in isolation but depend on the social context and the actual use of food by people at a specific moment. Food, as a natural resource, only ceases to be “nature” and becomes “culture” through the transformation

process that readies it for consumption (Lévi-Strauss 1962). Before people eat food, they think of how best to prepare it, they culture it. This is so, because for “Homo Sapiens food not only nourishes but also signifies” (Fischler 1988:276). As such, the way societies prepare their food and how they eat it distinguish them from other cultural groups. Food preparation, more than food itself, is essential for understanding how food and culture define each other. Everyday material practices of cooking and eating are the most significant, perhaps the only, concrete, and symbolic manifestations of a cultural identity (D’Sylva and Beagan 2011). The way we prepare and eat food reproduces, challenges, and reinvents cultural norms and food choice is heavily influenced by many aspects of socio-cultural contexts (Roudsari *et al.* 2017). Different cultural groups might eat the same food, but the way they prepare and eat their food differs.

For Pollock (2011:236) “food can have many meanings, whether in the raw ingredients that contribute to a particular dish, in the mode in which those ingredients are assembled, prepared, and cooked, or in the occasions at which it is served”. The multiple ways of combining and processing ingredients give social and cultural meanings to food and these meanings are socially and culturally oriented and performative (Gell 1986). Pollock (2011) emphasizes on the different significations of food that are collectively acknowledged rather than those associated simply with individual taste. Food preparations and the tastes associated to these preparations are culturally learned. Cooking and eating practices are often not only symbolic but also tangible and concrete ways that preserve our cultural identities (D’Sylva and Beagan 2011). Douglas (1972) argues that meals find their significance in the ordered patterns through the omission or the addition of different food items. Therefore, this distinction is not only important at culinary level but equally at ethnographic level. Indeed, each dish defines the cultural group that developed it. The ingredients of each dish and their names, the way they are cut and the order in which they are incorporated into the cooking pot provide a range of insightful information on each cultural group. The different food dishes make it possible to identify, explore and link social phenomena which, on the surface, might have little connection with each other: food and culture.

Culture has influence on what society considers acceptable for consumption (Olum *et al.* 2017). Food preferences, taboos, and habits not only express our identity but can also impede or promote our eating habits. What we eat, in turn, influences what we produce or import and, consequently, affects food availability, access and choice, utilization (Alonso *et al.* 2017), and sustainability. Understanding how communities satisfy their particular gastronomic preferences for certain flavors, and reject others, is integral to understanding food concepts, and how food meets cultural criteria. People only produce and eat food that does not deviate from their systems of values, beliefs, and traditions.

Food and Acculturation

Food and related practices travel across cultures and, as a result, food plays a fundamental role in the process of acculturation, defined by Delgado-Romero *et al.* (2004:212) as “a process of attitudinal and behavioral change experienced by individuals who live in multicultural societies or who have come in contact with a different culture due to colonization, invasion, political change, globalization, and the increased mobility of society due to technological advances”. Note that it is here a question of individuals and not social groups. It is “the process by which an ethnic group, usually a minority, adopts the cultural patterns [...] of a dominant group” (Satia-Abouta *et al.* 2002), a “phenomenon which results when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups” (Redfield

et al. 1936:149-150). Redfield *et al.* distinguish acculturation from assimilation, one of the results of acculturation, defined as “the complete loss of original ethnic identity in an individual or group of individuals leading to absorption into the dominant culture” (Redfield *et al.* 1936:149-150). Nonetheless, it is generally accepted that acculturation involves mingling of both cultures as they interact and change one another to a certain degree. Acculturation is multidimensional, dynamic, and complex, and does not appear to be a linear process. Instead of moving predictably from traditional to acculturated, people may “retain and find new ways to use traditional foods, exclude others, and/or consume new foods” Redfield *et al.* 1936:32). It is a more reciprocal process, as the host group may adopt some of the foods and dietary practices of the minority group(s). Acculturation may depend not only on the availability of ingredients, but also on the rules associated with meal structure as Leach (1993, p.4) and Jamal (1996, p.24) discuss in their research.

Acculturation can also be attested by the food lexicon. As cultures merge, new food items, food preparation and consumption systems are introduced into the receiving culture and new food terminologies enter its lexicon. The local names for food dishes or the ingredients used to produce that dish can reveal correspondences and divergencies between cultural groups. It is possible, through historical linguistics, to establish the origin of name given to a food dish and the moment in history when the name was domesticated. For example, as Perrier *et al.* (2011) attest, “a cultivated plant often migrates with its name, and when this plant is culturally innovative, its name is often retained in the receiving language. Successive dispersals accumulate terminological changes from the original forms that enable the historical path of successive transformations to be reconstructed” (Perrier *et al.* (2011:5). For Whitfield (2005), similar dishes may indicate cultural contact or common ancestry; such is the case with similar words or grammatical structures. Hence, borrowings of words denoting food items can be seen as proof of cultural contact (Anttila 1972). The evolution of food practices is thus likened to the evolution of languages. However, it is worth noting that eating patterns have been maintained in some cases even long after language acculturation has taken place (Valentine 1999:519). Food can survive language loss.

The Need for Documenting Food Culture: Brief Example of Biodiversity

The interplay between food and culture has huge global impact, particularly in regard to conservation and management of biodiversity. As we mentioned earlier, within the framework of the TBD, both human activities and biodiversity affect each other. Changes in food cultures, by adopting or abandoning certain food species, will lead to gain or loss in biodiversity, even though the scale tilts more towards loss than gain. As such, biodiversity impacts how people live, determines their food sources, and shapes their culture. We are all witnesses to how the agroindustry has drastically reduced plant and animal diversity, due to a limited number of plant and animal species selectively made available for production and due to deforestation of forests for the production of cash crops. Multinational agricultural, companies are practicing monocropping due to its economic advantages and have deforested huge forest surfaces to that effect. Monocropping impacts negatively on food cultures. The change in eating habits combined with the pursuit of profitable varieties led to the abandonment of local varieties and cultural degradation of specific products (Padilla *et al.* 2012). Moreover, only a few countries produce and export their farm produce, which not only affect food production but equally endangers non-producing countries’ food security.

Monocropping and the consequent reduction in genetic resources has undesired results on health, and “is affecting diets at local, national, and global levels” (Penafiel *et al.* 2019:1). Increased accessibility of inexpensive agricultural commodities and erosion of agrobiodiversity leads to nutrient

deficiencies and excess energy consumption (Johns and Eyzaguirre 2006). Indeed, healthy food practices and food security are associated with indigenous food sources that are readily available in the immediate physical environment and domesticated plants and animals that are produced within that environment. Biodiversity contributes to improved nutrition and a decline in the number of wild and domesticated food species endangers dietary diversity. Increasing the number of edible species in the food system is imperative for dietary diversity. AFROFOODS (2009) notes that the loss of food biodiversity affects both access to and the quality of the food leading to increase in poverty and malnutrition, and that returning to local crops and traditional food systems is a prerequisite for conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity for food and nutrition. Leaving agricultural production in the hands of multinational agricultural groups is not only a threat to biodiversity of plants and animals but equally to diversity of food cultures.

Conclusion

Food, like language, is a powerful communication tool and carries different meaning that can be interpreted in different ways. Food practices including production, preparation, and consumption reveal complex relationship between food and society. Food plays a central role in shaping human behavior and in building cultural identities. A more comprehensive understanding of food practices of any given society offers a wealth of experience that can inspire solutions to current and future global challenges. Therefore, the accumulated body of knowledge about food is a treasure that needs to be safeguarded. Understanding the evolution and the tendency of food practices of different sociocultural groups that make up the nation of Botswana can help in determining the intervention strategies to be put in place in face of local challenges that have global impact.

This growing interest in understanding food practices in Botswana is underlined amongst others by the challenges of food sustainability, climate change and health problems in the public discourse. These challenges cannot be fully tackled if the food cultures of different sociocultural groups are not factored into the equation. The potential value of food practices as a sociocultural marker in which we can tap in order to understand societies cannot be fully understood if they are not documented. It might be true that food practices are passed from one generation to another, orally or through observation, but it is equally true that some elements of these practices are lost along the way if they are not documented. Hence, this kind of study has become imperative because of the health implication of nutrition as opposed to malnutrition in the twenty-first century.

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