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Research report

“The food represents”: Barbadian foodways in the diaspora ☆

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ABSTRACT

As migrants adjust to life in a new country, food practices often shift. The literature shows that many migrants alter their diets to more closely reflect those in the host nation, at least in public venues. Some adjust native dishes to accommodate available ingredients, but may view these changes as rendering foods less “traditional.” However, Barbadian transnational migrants in Atlanta experience these alterations differently. They consciously perform Barbadianness by electing to serve “traditional” foods when eating with each other, or sharing with an American audience. Yet, while numerous changes are made to these “traditional” dishes, this does not make them less authentic. These shifts do not alter the legitimacy of a dish, but rather this interaction between the available ingredients and the attempt to create a traditional food is actually a practice of authenticity. The dynamic change that food undergoes in the migrant experience echoes the changing nature of Barbadian foodways throughout Caribbean history.

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Introduction

On a 2004 dinner cruise in Barbados a floorshow announcer made an effort to get volunteers to come to the stage to attempt the limbo. He called for an English woman, an American woman, a Jamaican woman, and received one of each. However, when he called for a Barbadian woman, a Bajan woman, he was a bit more specific in his request. He asked for a “real” Bajan woman, not a “fast-food burger and fries Bajan woman,” but a “flying fish and coucou kind of Bajan woman.” A “pudding and souse on Saturdays” kind of “real Bajan woman.” He finally selected a woman that he felt met his criteria, and the contest proceeded. This distinction between types of Barbadians is intriguing. Food is a topic close to people’s hearts in Barbados, but it is also apparently a marker to define true Barbadian identity. I questioned whether food would similarly be used as a symbol among Barbadians overseas, and found that this use of food as an identifier, for both women and men, was repeatedly reinforced throughout the course of research with the immigrant Barbadian community in Atlanta, Georgia. Food is a crucial factor to convey identity among this population. Barbadian migrants in Atlanta use the tangible, portable medium of food to signify ethnic and national identity both in contexts where they wish to demonstrate solidarity with each other, and also when they wish to differentiate themselves from other Americans. Simultaneously, many of these “traditional” foods are reinvented because of limitations on ingredients or increasingly American lifestyles or dietary habits.

Adaptation and reinvention of “traditional” foods within restrictions such as the migrant experience are actually a perpetuation of long-standing cultural food practices in the Caribbean (Mintz & Price, 1976; Wilk, 2006). The revised dishes are not new and different foods, but rather, continue to expand and embody the canon of the traditional, and reinforce Barbadianness. Drawing on complex Caribbean food histories that have incorporated global products and adopted fluid notions of “authenticity” and “traditional” to accommodate the limitations of ingredients and the confines of the plantation system, this flexibility has persisted into the contemporary migrant community. This very act of adaptation and reinvention is as authentically Barbadian as eating pudding and souse on Saturdays. This paper explores the historical context of “traditional” foods in the Caribbean nation of Barbados, and discusses the meaning of authenticity among its citizens abroad. Ethnographic data illustrate the ways that food represents deeper issues of nationality and ethnicity, and connects Barbadians with what they perceive to be traditional and authentic practices in food.

Theory

“Traditional” and “authentic” in the global and Caribbean contexts

The topic of “authentic” or “traditional” foods is complicated and hotly debated. Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger figure largely into the study of tradition, positing in (Hobsbawm, 1983) that many seemingly timeless traditions were in fact invented at some point. This notion is echoed in Sidney Mintz’s identification of Caribbean food habits as creolized mixtures of African and British origin that emerged in the early plantation era.

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Food practices in the Caribbean have historically been restricted by the plantation economy, limited food production on the islands, and the global political economy. Mintz articulates a relevant theoretical framework with which to examine cultural elements that encompass these limitations, positing that daily life conditions of consumption have to do with inside and outside meanings. Inside (personal/collective) meaning is constructed within the confines of outside (larger/societal) meaning. Inside meaning arises when changes in outside meaning are already underway and “this interior embedding of significance in the activity of daily life, with its specific associations (including affective associations) for the actors, is what anthropologists often have particularly in mind, I think, when they talk about meaning in culture” (Mintz, 1996, pp. 20–21). Essentially, larger institutions set the terms against which meanings in culture are silhouetted.

Caribbean slaves who endowed food with meaning within the structure of the plantation, and contemporary migrant and ethnic groups who confer meaning on food within the confines of the host culture and available products are demonstrating both inside and outside meanings. They are using the portable signifier of food as a way to establish place and person, as a convenient medium because “food has a constant tendency to transform itself into situation” (Barthes, 1979, p. 171).

In studying food practices in the Caribbean, Mintz argues that the daily life conditions of consumption have to do with inside meaning, while economic, social and political conditions hold outside meaning. In Barbados, food practices were long constrained by the outside parameters of the slave society and limited import products. However, inside meaning arose around the foods created in this context; foods that are a mixture of British dishes and African tastes, restricted by the availability of local and imported goods. Food preferences of the planter class were interpreted and recreated by the enslaved people who actually performed the culinary duties. Translated differently by each individual, emerging in negotiation between the groups, the dishes that resulted in each household were similar, but unique – the products of adaptation and interpretation. Mintz refers to this shared, emergent cuisine as creole, and urges us not to assume that it was uniquely African or European in nature, but rather, the result of the “interchange of choices, shaped both by ancestral traditions and by the availability of foodstuffs” as well as “European preferences” (Mintz, 1996, p. 33).

It is not uncommon to see a local adaptation of globally available goods, a process termed “glocalization” (Wilk, 2006, p. 7). While we may hold romantic notions of small, isolated traditional cultures that have been corrupted by global contact, these are not the norm, and in fact, consumption in the Caribbean has been “global” for several centuries (Wilk, 2006, p. 8; cf. Wolf, 1982). Caribbean societies were the creation of a point of contact, born of the interactions and interplay between peoples, historical circumstances and the global political economy. Caribbean food practices are the product of similar forces. Popular, “traditional” foods in Barbados are the product of colonialism and the plantation society. The triangular trade shaped the diet in Barbados, and staple ingredients have always been largely imported to the island; the salted codfish from Canada and the North American colonies, the breadfruit tree from Polynesia, and rice from India. For much of the island’s plantation history, slaves had access only to the least desirable cuts of meat, such as the pigs’ feet and tails, for their own consumption. These imported and disregarded foods developed into slave foods, or what Barbadian author Austin Clarke refers to as “privilege” (1999, p. 67) because these foods of the poor eventually became local delicacies and representative of Barbadian identity.

Clarke (1999) explains that the traditional Barbadian diet was based on the limited number of foods that could be grown on the island, or were regularly imported. He describes the food practices of his childhood in the early 20th century, tracing their roots

to the ingredients that had been used since the days of plantation slavery. People ate staple starches such as rice, cornmeal coucou, and root vegetables (“ground provisions” or “ground foods,” accompanied by dried salted codfish, and fresh or canned meat and fish. Most people had gardens, growing a range of crops such as lettuce, carrots, beets, broccoli, sweet and hot peppers, tomatoes, and herbs such as thyme, basil, oregano and chives. Many had fruit trees and vines, and most people had an abundance of mangos, papayas, golden apples, Bajan (Barbadian) cherries, cashew fruits and ackees available to them. What one person did not grow, a neighbor would. Food was often gifted back and forth between those in the neighborhood and family in other areas.

Fresh meat was available, but levels of consumption depended on the financial security of the family. People relied on the local butcher or a neighbor to slaughter an animal regularly to supplement their diets. Refrigeration was not widespread and common until well into the 1960s.

Fish was central to the Barbadian diet, appearing on tables several times per week. People’s diets depended on what was available from the local fishermen, but included items such as the local flying fish, red snapper, shark, “dolphin” (mahi mahi), or a variety of small, unnamed “pot fish” caught near to shore and sold inexpensively. When in season, flying fish were especially plentiful, driving down the price charged by men and women who would haul the catch to the villages further from the fish markets. Clarke recalls sellers yelling “all-a-penny” (1999, p. 34) some evenings, indicating that people could purchase all the fish they were able to carry for that amount. Family members would pitch in to clean and bone the fish, then apply salt to some to save it for a few days, and fry up large batches of the rest.

People also relied heavily on salted, dried codfish – an imported dietary staple dating back to the days of plantation slavery. The dried fish was soaked in repeated washings of water to leach out much of the salt, then shredded by hand to achieve long strands of flesh. This was sometimes sautéed with tomatoes, onions, and seasonings to create “frizzled saltfish”, or incorporated into dishes such as fishcakes; small, round, fried, flour-based fritters enhanced by diced saltfish and specks of Scotch Bonnet pepper.

Rice and peas was a frequent dish. The legumes are cooked until they reach the correct stage of doneness before adding the rice to the pot to cook alongside the peas. The simmering pot is enhanced with the addition of a variety of spices, including a few sprigs of thyme, still on the stem. As the herb cooks, the thyme leaves will fall into the food, and the stems will be removed later. A salted pigtail is a common addition, and as Clarke explains, “my mother, like most Wessindian women, always say that you have to season the water you cook rice in with a piece o’ salt meat. ‘To put little goodness in the water, boy!’” (1999, p. 84).

Soup, or “split-pea soup,” as Clarke identifies it (1999, p. 164), is a hearty, multi-ingredient pot of many foods, cooked together over a long period of time. Starting with a base of a legume such as peas or lentils, cooks would add in meat for flavor and substance. Hamhocks, necks of lamb or beef, or salted pigtails added salty, umami flavor to the thick broth. To this simmering pot, a variety of root vegetables, or “ground foods” were gradually added in an order to allow them all to be similarly cooked through at the same finish time. A combination of eddoes, sweet potatoes, yams, cassava, and white “English” potatoes would be incorporated, along with other available tree crops that are often lumped with the root vegetables, such as green bananas and breadfruit. The final addition to the soup is dumplings; firm, dense, flour-based dumplings approximately the size and shape of elongated chicken eggs. The value of this soup cannot be overstated, as Clarke explains; “It will make you healthy and strong. It’s the kind o’ thing that does want you to lift weights. . .and more than that. It does make you perform good good good in bed” (1999, p. 165).

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