The Moral Meal: The Dietary Habits of West African Immigrants in the U.S.

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Abstract:
In this article I would like to describe how West African immigrants in Atlanta, GA maintain their African diets depending on the gendered, moral relationships they engage in. In West Africa, women usually cook food for their families while men perform other chores like farming or hunting. Women continue to cook for their families and friends when they move abroad. In the U.S., West African immigrants depend on mass-produced African foods sold at African markets nearest to them in their new homes. Using my ethnographic research in Atlanta, I will attempt to explain how men and women maintain their dietary habits by engaging in moral and gendered relationships with each other. I will also describe what I observed at local West African food markets in Atlanta and how men and women rely on these stores to replicate and transform aspects of their West African lives.

I. Introduction: An Anthropology of Food and Immigration

Cooperation and Food Production in Northwestern Ivory Coast

West African immigrants in the United States maintain dietary habits similar to those they practiced in their countries of origin. This essay examines why and how they do so. Based on pilot research among Ivorian immigrants in Atlanta, Georgia, I argue that Ivorian immigrants maintain their African diets insofar as they sustain the gendered and marital characteristics of their lives in Ivory Coast.[1] Marriage alliances in West Africa establish reciprocal, ethical rela-tionships between men and women. These relationships require spouses to cooperate and pro-duce food for their family compounds. In villages, communities produce most of their food local-ly. Daily tasks related to food production are divided in terms of gender. Men rely on women to cook for their families, and women rely on men to cultivate and provide grains and tubers, as well as meat from

1 The country's official name is Côte d'Ivoire in all languages. I omit the definite article that many still use when cit-ing the country: "the Ivory Coast."

hunting. While overseas, Ivorians reproduce these gendered and marital assumptions by using mass-produced African foods available in African and international food markets.

Ivorian immigrant men rely heavily on their relationships with women to eat African meals since many of these men have never learned to cook. When they marry African women, their wives usually cook African food; both married and unmarried Ivorian immigrant women usually cook African meals for themselves and their families. Immigrant men with non-West Af-rican[2] wives, or those who are single, however, have more difficulty maintaining African diets unless they know how to cook or can find an African restaurant at which to eat. Those men and women who sustain their Ivorian diets use nonlocal, mass-produced foods from their host coun-try to reflect the local food production practices they left behind in the Ivory Coast.

In this essay, I describe how Africans maintain their dietary habits in the United States by recounting my visit to a hair braiding salon run by West African women. I situate this story in the broader context of my research and my attempt to explain how Africans flourish both physi-cally and culturally despite being in a new environment surrounded by abundant food choices. They are physically able to do this because food is fundamental to biological survival, and cul-turally because food preferences correspond to the geographical and historical background in which they lived. As anthropologist Sidney Mintz (1996: 33-50) suggests, reproducing diets and cuisines in a new country can empower groups and individuals, giving them more control over their new situation, especially when and where they may feel powerless.

An Ethnographic Inquiry

My fieldwork took place in Georgia just outside of Atlanta in the suburb of Decatur. I traveled to Atlanta at three separate times, from July 17, 2013 to July 20, 2013, from August 30, 2013 to September 1, 2013, and from February 14, 2014 to February 16, 2014. In Atlanta, I met Drissa Koné, who lived in the village of Niamasso in northwestern Ivory Coast before coming to the United States in 2003, when he moved to Chicago to join his American wife who he met while she was a Peace Corps volunteer in Ivory Coast. They subsequently moved to Atlanta. Through Drissa, I met other Decatur residents from Ivory Coast, Guinea, and Mali with whom I had the

2 By "non-West African women" I refer to women I met during my time in Atlanta who were born and raised in the U.S. and who were of non-African descent.

opportunity to conduct ten interviews in English about their eating habits in the United States. From these interviews, I learned where West Africans ate and purchased food items, what kinds of meals they were eating, and how often they ate them. Interviews took place either in homes, food markets, coffee shops, or in vehicles while traveling. I visited two West African markets: Ivory Music and Adja's Africa Mart. [3] Here I observed the kinds of foods sold at these stores. Drissa also drove me to the hair salon where I interviewed three women and where I most intensely experienced the difficult and complex role of the ethnographer interested in food.

II. Gifting Women, Gifting Food

The Hair Salon

The summer of 2013 in Atlanta was hot, but I was accustomed to southern climes and sultry weather having grown up in Florida. Just outside of Atlanta, Decatur felt like a normal southern suburb where a neighborly familiarity pervaded the streets, while cultural and social diversity kept the town vibrant. It reminded me a lot of the suburban town where I grew up in South Florida. My host, Drissa Koné, accompanied by his friend, Ibrahim Sangaré, and Drissa's three young children, drove me to an African hair braiding salon, F. Z. African Braiding,[4] where I expected to conduct some interviews with African women about their eating habits. As the only non-West African in the salon, I felt the curiosity of the four women working there. Drissa and Ibrahim exchanged greetings with the women, and Ibrahim began speaking with a stern-looking woman seated at the back of the store. Her name was Hawa.[5] They spoke together in Jula, the Mande language spoken in northwestern Ivory Coast. They looked at me periodically as I stood near the front door smiling shyly, tightly clutching my notebook.

Ibrahim beckoned me over.

Hawa asked, "What do you want to know?"

I became nervous. Apparently, Ibrahim had explained to her that I was doing research on food. I had the feeling Hawa thought it was strange for me to inquire about what she eats. Before I said anything, she began looking down at an electronic tablet, flipping through photographs. She seemed impatient.

3 Both store names are pseudonyms.
4 Pseudonym
5 Pseudonym

I asked if she could tell me about some of the African foods she ate. When Hawa began to dictate recipes of various West African dishes, I tried to scribble into my notebook everything she said. She told me to buy okra, tomatoes, onions, peppers, and different kinds of meat. Then she told me how I should cook these ingredients to make soups and sauces.

When I tried to ask her about her eating habits in the United States, however, Hawa gave me a quizzical look. Then she continued to list recipes for various meals and told me where I could find the ingredients she mentioned and how I could use them to prepare certain dishes. She told me that she has no trouble finding ingredients because she shops at African markets and other grocery stores. Perhaps this was why she found my question about her eating habits strange: nothing had changed about her habits in the United States. Only later did it occur to me that the foods available to her in Atlanta might be relatively identical to the ingredients she used in Afri-ca. Upon further investigation, I discovered that this was the case, as I explain below. I later learned that Hawa is from Odienné, the same region of Ivory Coast where Drissa and Ibrahim grew up.

My interview with Hawa showed me how challenging fieldwork can be. As Hawa spoke, children climbed on the couch where she sat. One held an aerosol can of Raid® roach killer, and she haphazardly (and dangerously) sprayed it into the air. I worried for the child's health and for others around her (including myself) and felt uncomfortable because I was not sure what to do in response. Not only was my presence causing evident discomfort in the salon, but children were playing with lethal chemicals, and I felt I could do nothing about it[6]. I was an outsider with little control over my situation. I gathered up the strength to concentrate. I had to try to speak with the other women.

Considering the other women's equally strange glances, I knew I needed to close my notebook if I wanted them to speak with me. I was already a stranger and all the more so because I was holding a notebook like a rookie journalist. I attempted, politely, to make conversation with other women in the salon. Those who agreed to talk with me said that they purchase ingredients from African stores. Others, however, would not talk and turned

6 Because of my interest in and knowledge of food, I am also attentive to the chemicals to which we expose our-selves. I was therefore concerned for the child's safety and wished I could have found a way to explain to Hawa why the child should not play with insecticide; but I felt it would have been rude and presumptuous to do so, especially since the child only sprayed the insecticide slightly into the air and was not ingesting it or coming into close physical contact with it.

away. I looked to Drissa and Ibrahim for assistance, but they were laughing and conversing with employees at the front of the store. Another woman with whom I spoke asked if I was married. After I told her I wasn't, she suggested that I marry her. I smiled and said, "My girlfriend won't be very happy about that."

She glared at me and shouted, "I wasn't asking about your girlfriend! I said, 'Are you married?'"

To this day, I don't know if Drissa understood what I was going through or if he knew and let it all happen, but I'm glad I had to struggle. I realized rather acutely the social complexity of ethnographic research and how aware I became of my actions during the experience.

My ostensibly unsuccessful attempt to ask women about their cooking habits was worth-while. All the women with whom I spoke affirmed the same thing: West African ingredients were relatively easy to find in the United States. Various women in the salon dictated even more recipes for meals, how to make them, and where to buy ingredients. Their ability to give detailed recipes for preparing African meals and indicate where to buy the necessary ingredients implied that they sustained their African diets in the United States. Thanks to the supermarkets and specialty stores that sell mass-produced West African foods, these women could maintain a West African diet relatively unaltered; but they were not maintaining their diets merely because they had access to African food. They did so because of their reciprocally gendered relationships.

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Spheres of Moral Exchange

In West Africa, marriage alliances often reflect the logic of reciprocal exchange. I say "alliances" because marriage in West Africa often represents a compact between families as much as between the two partners involved. In rural, northwestern Ivory Coast, for example, marriage between a husband and wife establishes a reciprocal moral relationship between them and their families that regulates the ways in which men and women fulfill their familial roles. For instance, men most often labor in the fields and hunt game meat whereas women cook at home, tend their gardens, and run food markets (Hellweg 2011: 62). Marriage alliances also situate women at the center of a highly valued system of moral exchange.

In the middle of the twentieth century, anthropologist Paul Bohannan observed a three-tiered system of exchange during his fieldwork among the Tiv in Nigeria. He argued that there existed three spheres of exchange among the Tiv, categorized in terms of their contents, respectively, from least to most highly valued: subsistence products, highly valued items, and the women exchanged between families through marriage (Bohannan 1955: 60-65). Items or persons exchanged within the same sphere were considered morally neutral exchanges (Bohannan 1955: 65). In contrast, items or persons exchanged between spheres were considered moral exchanges. Moral exchanges occurred in an upward direction. For instance, food items traded for prestige items or prestige items exchanged for women had a highly moral valence. Marriage exchanges between families occupied the most valued tier of all because of the lasting alliances they created. This economic representation is not meant to objectify woman as mere things, but emphasizes the crucial and valued role of women in African society. The loss of a daughter or sister in marriage requires compensation through bride-wealth for all the labor she previously performed for her family. This is what I mean by "exchange." The long-lasting, reciprocal obligations between families resulting from this exchange make it a "moral" one.

More recently, Charles Piot (1999) has re-conceptualized Bohannan's model to organize his insights into Kabre exchange in Togo. Bohannan's model coincides with Piot's observations that Kabre women also occupy the most favorable sphere. In both contexts, marriage alliances between families create the most valuable and desired form of exchange because it solidifies relations between two families that last into future generations. Such exchanges place women in the most valued sphere of exchange and perpetuate the complementary gender roles that many men and women assume in northwestern Ivory Coast. One must be careful not to assume, however, that these exchange spheres operate as mechanistically as I have described them. This kind of moral exchange is fluid and variable, taking place in response to the complexity of daily life.

In many West African societies, food production and preparation tasks fall between men who produce food primarily in the fields and women who prepare food primarily in their homes (Hellweg 2011: 62; Piot 1999: 88-9, 95; Riesman 1977: 63-8). It is also normal for women to help with planting or tending agricultural fields, or to manage domestic and/or market gardens. Regardless, according to Paul Riesman (1977: 65), "everything women produce emphasizes the interdependence of men and women as members of two complementary halves of society." The same is true for what men

produce.

Perhaps the quizzical look I received from Hawa in the hair salon resulted from my overlooking this interdependence. I expected her to fulfill my own idea of food taxonomy—dishes with distinct names under specific categories overshadowing the relationships between ingredients. There is a dynamic and relational aspect of individual ingredients that are primarily women's domain. Ivorian families come together to produce and to cook food much like ingredients must be brought together in order to create a meal. Food reflects the social realities of West African life.

A moral reciprocity characterizes relationships between husbands and wives, one on which their families depend. The African women at the hair salon in Atlanta continue to cook for their family and practice their cooking skills—originally learned in West Africa—while purchasing food from West African markets in the United States. When West Africans move overseas, these relations of reciprocity continue to function but in a considerably altered form.

III. Home Cooked Meals Away From Home

West African Markets in Atlanta, Georgia

In "Mass Producing Food Traditions for West Africans Abroad," anthropologist Elisha Renne examines the emergence of West African grocery stores in the U.S. and the mass-produced African foods sold in these stores. During the 1980s and early 1990s, an increase in African-run markets in the U.S. contributed to the sale of mass-produced African foods. Now, there are over fifty West African grocery stores in U.S., cities such as Chicago, Seattle, Florissant (near St. Louis), New York City, Greensboro, Kansas City, Roxbury, and Laguna Beach, to name a few (Renne 2009, 616-618). The increase in the number of African markets in the U.S. has made it easier for West African immigrants to maintain their dietary habits abroad. Inside these stores, one will find West African staples like cassava, yams, plantains, attiéké (pounded cassava couscous), frozen okra, smoked fish, potato leaves, fonio (a kind of millet), spices, palm oil, peanut butter, homemade beverages, condensed milk, bouillon cubes, and a variety of other items. These ingredients can be used to make staple meals, like peanut sauce or fish sauce over a starch like rice or attieké. I found most of the ingredients for these meals inside the stores I visited in Atlanta.

The West African stores I visited provided more than just food, however.

They also sold cosmetics and personal hygiene products. I was unfamiliar with some products, like black soap, teeth-cleaning sticks, and a plastic, kettle-shaped water container for ablutions and post-bathroom cleansing. One store even sold, behind the counter, CDs and DVDs featuring West African artists. Seeing these items and hearing customers speak in Jula and French about them made me feel as if I was no longer in the U.S. These stores were microcosms of West African life. By transcending national boundaries—that is, by selling the familiar food products West Africans eat—these stores sustain the diets of West African immigrants in their new home. West Africans can purchase the foods they grew up eating in mass-produced, pre-packaged forms.

Married and Single Men

Men who grew up in West African villages—or even cities—do not usually learn to cook with great skill. Some, like Drissa, do learn to cook if given the opportunity; but even Drissa emphasized that his mother and sisters-in-law were reluctant to let him do anything near their cooking pots. Those men who cannot cook have difficulty maintaining their African diets abroad if they do not have female friends or a partner to cook for them. On a separate occasion, I found an opportunity to speak with Ibrahim, who confirmed my hunch. He told me, "I mainly eat African food . . . because my wife cooks for me . . . Everything that I ate in Africa [is] everything I eat here, now." Ibrahim's wife purchases the ingredients and cooks the meals he eats, not because he does not want to cook, but because he cannot. He and his family have to rely on his wife, Mme. Doumbia,[7] if they want to eat African foods. Like the other women I described above, Mme. Doumbia duplicates West African food practices in the United States. Her cooking makes it possible for her husband and family to maintain their eating habits largely unaltered.

Without Ivorian women, Ivorian men in the United States may go without Ivorian food. One evening, for example, when Ibrahim's wife was out of town, Ibrahima came to Drissa's house for dinner while I was visiting. Drissa's American wife cooked tacos and had to show Ibrahim how to assemble one because he had never before eaten tacos. In such cases, Ivorian immigrants—in this case a married Ivorian man—find themselves in unfamiliar situations because they have had little experience with other foods. In Ibrahim's situation, his lack of experience stemmed from keeping to his Ivorian diet because of his relationship with his wife. His confusion with tacos illustrates his dependence on his wife with respect to his eating

7 Pseudonym.

habits. When she is absent, he must resort to other foods, but when she is away, Ibrahim is, in a sense, displaced. Their relationship parallels the moral, reciprocal relations in which men and women in the Ivory Coast engage.

Ivorian immigrant women's control over food production amounts to a form of agency through which they create relations of dependence with others (cf.Weiss 1996: 141). Paradoxically, women expand their agency compared to men in their immigrant setting since commercialized foods are easy to obtain. Drissa told me that Ibrahim "doesn't even know how to buy his groceries!" During an interview, Drissa added, "Back home when you're married to woman, there's a women [sic] job in Africa and a men [sic] job. And the main job of women is to cook food."

Inside one African market in Atlanta, I met a young Ivorian man named Idrissa from Bouaké, Ivory Coast. In between helping customers and placing food items onto shelves, he told me about his experience with food in the United States. He said that the first food he ever ate in the U.S. was pizza and that he ate so much of it when he arrived that he now "cannot even eat more than two pieces" at a time. He had to resort to fast-foods because he could neither cook for himself nor identify an Ivorian woman willing to make him meals on a daily basis. He said that the vast majority of Ivorian immigrant men he knows do not know how to cook. In the United States, though, no one needs to cook to sustain himself as a single man because industrial food production meets the needs of single men, presuming they can afford to purchase the food (cf. Roberts 2008: 43-4).

"Lasagna. That was the second thing I ate a lot," he said. "But after that, sometimes McDonalds, sometimes KFC, sometimes Burger King. You know, student's life." Currently, Idrissa is a university student in Atlanta studying computer science. He told me he lacks the time to cook.

One may be unable to cook but still survive in the United States thanks to the myriad of fast-food choices. Like many college students who devote much of their time to studying and working, Idrissa has no choice but to resort to fast-foods because they are convenient, filling, and readily available. According to Idrissa, "I can't say that it's bad or it's good [fast-food]. I mean, if I eat, then I feel it's good for myself." Idrissa was content that he could feed himself in his host country as a student and single man.

"I just try to find a friend, a lady. She cooks for me sometimes. Or I just go to [a] restaurant," Idrissa said.

Idrissa explained that there was an African restaurant down the street from the market that prepared West African meals. We stood next to the counter inside of the store where Idrissa worked. Although I was in the store for a while I was still overwhelmed by the strong smell of dried fish and spices. When Idrissa wants to eat African food, though, he must find a female African friend or visit the African restaurant. In the United States, he relies on women for African food—whenever possible—just as he did in West Africa. In the United States, however, men's reliance on women for African meals becomes even more crucial as there are fewer African women present. Idrissa trusted his female friend to cook for him whenever she could. He relied on her to open her house to him and to share the food she made. However, the African restaurant in Decatur (a suburb of Atlanta) makes it easier to eat such meals regularly. Idrissa tries to visit the African restaurant when he can. Between his female friend and the restaurant, he tries to eat the African foods he wants when he has the time from school.

Unlike Ibrahim, Idrissa's inconsistent ties with West African women partially disconnect him from his community. Food contains cultural and communal importance, and when Idrissa's African cuisine is inconsistently available, he may feel isolated. Isolation, in this case, can only be alleviated when women are present to prepare African meals. Eating is a kind of sociality.

III. Conclusions: Cooking in Immigrant Contexts

An Ethnographer in a New World

I may not have had my hair braided at the salon, but I did find food for thought. My encounter with Hawa revealed my conceptual failings. I entered the salon with my own understanding of food, expecting the women to share it. When I asked Hawa, "Can you tell me about the foods you eat?" I expected her to list the names of typical West African dishes. I began with this question to transition to a discussion of her eating habits in the United States. She redirected me, dictating various recipes and telling me how to prepare certain foods. I saw food as a thing; she may have seen it as a relation. Instead of taking her answer for the gift it was, I felt confused and frustrated because it violated my expectations. In the few pages I have left, I want to discuss our conceptual impasse and what I learned from it.

Admittedly, I made a mistake: I did not set aside my own tacit notions about food. A selfaware, deliberate suspension of one's worldview is, I believe, something ethnographers should strive for in order to see the world

as their hosts do. But, it is sometimes difficult to be aware of your own worldview. Although I had asked an ostensibly neutral question, I was far from neutral in doing so. I could sense it was odd for Hawa to hear my question. Before my fieldwork, I was apprehensive to use a predetermined set of questions because I feared it would put a wedge between me and my interviewees. When Hawa answered, I thought she misunderstood me. Only later did I realize that it was I who misunderstood.

Hawa dictated recipes and listed various ingredients because she was teaching me about the process of food preparation. I originally expected her to list final products of food preparation—the names of already cooked African meals. I expected this because, at the time, I wondered what West Africans ate in Africa and who cooked their meals. I ignored what went into the process of cooking. Understanding West African diets, however, involves knowing the process of cooking as much as it involves knowing cooked meals and who eats them. West African women must understand the relationships between ingredients in order to prepare these meals.

In the United States, where "eating out" has become the norm, we confront advertisements or visit restaurants that emphasize what the consumer will purchase while obscuring the background work. In restaurants, for instance, the dining room is usually separate from the kitchen. Hawa detailed the work involved in preparing African meals because she has mastered the processes, one that I do not know. She demonstrated that she exerts control over her African diet in the United States—and her relationships with others—by cooking African meals with ingredients from supermarkets and small West African stores. I was too shortsighted to see this.

Ethnographers are faced with the almost impossible task of setting aside their own presuppositions about the world in order to learn about another way of life. This task asks us to suspend our most tacit assumptions, which are difficult to pinpoint in the first place. We do the best we can. I cannot say why I never questioned my own most fundamental ideas about food before doing my ethnographic research even when it seems now like the obvious thing to have done. It was not until realizing Hawa's confusion (along with my own) that I knew we had very different understandings of food. The encounter taught me, as Paul Riesman (n.d.) so eloquently explained, that when doing fieldwork, the ethnographer is like a child who needs proper instruction. I felt lost, helpless, and relied on my hosts for answers, asking the naïve questions a child would to learn about the world—the world from the eyes of West African immigrants in the United States. Such is the

ethnographic process.

Concluding Remarks

In this essay, I have tried to convey the social significance of food for West African immigrants. West Africans living in the U.S. maintain their diets abroad by engaging in the social and gendered relationships common to life in their home countries. Food is not merely nutritive; it structures the social relationships on which immigrants rely in everyday life and vice versa. As Audrey Richards writes in (the pejoratively titled) Hunger and Work in a Savage Tribe (1932):

Nutrition as a biological process is more fundamental than sex. In the life of the individual organism it is the more primary and recurrent physical want, while in the wider sphere of human society it determines, more largely than any other physiological function, the nature of social groupings, and the form their activities take.

If Richard's statement is correct, then the consumption of food influences the complex characteristics of the social world for us all.

I illustrated how food plays a significant role in the social lives of West African immigrants. In West Africa, women use their cooking expertise to cook for their families. In the United States, these same women can sustain their diets and those of African immigrant men in ways that enhance their agency as immigrants, earning an income for themselves and creating relations of dependence with others. I have explained how gendered relations of moral reciprocity may determine the extent of access these men have to African foods. My hope is that I will spark more interest in the anthropology of food and eating through my work. Ultimately, I aim to understand how the moral and social aspects of food production can inform increasingly popular and urgent areas of public concern, like the ethics of mass-food production and food justice.

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