UNDERSTANDING MEAL CULTURES – IMPROVING THE CONSUMPTION OF AFRICAN INDIGENOUS VEGETABLES: INSIGHTS FROM SOCIOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY OF FOOD

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Abstract

There is a burgeoning body of research on African indigenous vegetables (AIVs), analyzing their nutritive value and their contribution to overcoming hidden hunger and food insecurity in Kenya. Scholars emphasize the importance of increasing the consumption of micronutrient-rich AIVs. However, as some studies show, AIV consumption in, for instance, Kenya is rather low. The starting point of this article is the argument that local food practices and meal cultures need to be taken into account in order to identify facilitating and hindering factors for AIV consumption in Kenya. Referring to Polanyi's concept of "social embeddedness" and Teherani-Krönner's concept of "meal cultures" this article argues that consumption habits are inextricably linked to food practices and gendered social arrangements at local level. Thus, this article reviews the theoretical literature on the role of food practices and meal cultures and demonstrates the interrelationship between these practices, AIV consumption and food security.

Key words: meal cultures, consumption habits, theoretical food studies, food security

Introduction

> "What we eat, where we get it, how it is prepared, when we eat and with whom, what it means to us – all these depend on social arrangements."
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> (Devault, 1991)

There is an enormous diversity of indigenous vegetables in Africa: Approximately 1000 species are commonly consumed. In Kenya around 200 species are recorded and roughly 20 are consumed as key varieties (Opyio, 2014). In many communities, African indigenous vegetables (AIVs) are essential components of households' diets. AIVs are either collected from the wild, grown in home gardens or purchased commercially. However, consumption patterns do not reflect the diversity of AIVs; many species are still underutilized (Musotsi et al., 2005; Maundu et al., 2009). Due to the introduction of exotic vegetables by colonial rulers, food habits have changed (Raschke and Cheema, 2007) and traditional vegetables in Kenya have been replaced by exotic varieties such as cabbage (Abukutsa-Onyango, 2010). When using the term 'indigenous' we refer to a "crop whose natural home is known to be in a specified region" (Maundu, 1997). Consequently, the term 'exotic' refers to crops that do not originate in the specified region – in our case Africa - but were brought to it (Maundu, 1997; Maundu et al., 2009). Since almost two decades, scholars tirelessly emphasize that AIVs contain higher amounts of micronutrients and minerals than exotic vegetables. As a consequence, they argue for an increased production and consumption of AIVs for combating hidden hunger and malnutrition. Nevertheless, AIV consumption is still low compared to exotic vegetables. Therefore, our project "Meal Cultures in Market Trends and Consumption Habits"[1], in which context this literature review is written, aims to identify sociocultural determinants of meal habits in order to understand

consumption patterns and to broaden the debate about food security. [2]

The literature on AIV consumption basically discusses two reasons for the low levels of consumption – that is ethnic meal habits on the one hand and the negative connotation of AIVs as the "poor people's food" on the other hand (Pasquini and Young, 2009). However, what is rarely mentioned is the role of food preparation and the gender division of labor for understanding food and consumption habits. This suggests that it is pivotal to uncover the complexity of food decisions and to understand the role of *social norms* and *practices* as drivers for AIV consumption. Accordingly, this article argues that AIV consumption is socially embedded – that means, it is inseparably linked to context-specific practices and knowledge of food preparation, cooking and meal habits. For instance, food preparation methods like fermentation are part of an existing indigenous knowledge system, which is a substantial base for being food secure (see also Wane, 2014).

In order to carve out what exactly social embeddedness means, this article seeks to introduce theoretical approaches that deal with sociocultural aspects of food. It reviews relevant literature on the anthropology/sociology of consumption relating it to our research and first findings. It is structured as follows: The first section reviews classical sociological and anthropological writings about eating as a social practice. The second section introduces the concept of "meal culture" (Teherani-Krönner, 2014), which represents a suitable linkage between the aforementioned theories of eating on the one hand and issues of gendered food practices and food insecurity on the other hand. The concept of meal culture highlights the role of social dynamics in practices of food preparation, cooking and meal habits and emphasizes the importance to understand these dynamics in order to improve meal security. The final section

draws conclusions from these theoretical discussions on the analysis of market trends and consumption habits in regard to AIVs in Kenya.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks to understand Meal Cultures

Drawing on Karl Polanyi's (2001) concept of embeddedness, we argue that the economy and economic activities, such as consumption behavior, have to regarded as "immersed in social relations" (Machado, 2011). Polanyi criticized the formalistic meaning of the economy, which puts rational behavior – that means cost-minimizing or utility maximizing behavior – at the center of the analysis. Applying a formalistic approach means to analyze consumption as a price-driven exercise. In contrast, a substantive meaning of the economy takes account of social relations that shape economic activities such as consumption. Taking a substantive meaning of the economy as a starting point means, to analyze food consumption and eating as a social practice – as a practice that is inseparably connected to routines of food preparation, cooking and meal habits.

This section attempts to provide an overview of classical writings on eating as a social practice in the fields of sociology, anthropology and cultural studies. We argue that it is important to recall these writings as they unfold what exactly eating as social practice means and, thus, offer entry points for analyzing facilitating and impeding factors for AIV consumption.

In 1910 Georg Simmel published the essay "The Sociology of the Meal", which was one of the first sociological works on meal cultures and is still one of the basic readings in sociology of food. According to Simmel (1910), eating and drinking is on the one hand the most communal thing, which humans share and on the other hand it is the most egotistic human act, because what an individual eats can under no circumstances be eaten by another person. His essay discusses

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[2] Data will be conducted in urban (Nairobi), peri-urban (Nakuru) and rural (Kakamega) settings using

qualitative methods (participant observation, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions).

the commensality of eating and its huge "socializing strength" as well as the organization (e.g. by plates and cutlery) of a meal, which became, in his opinion, more socialized and aesthetically stylized over time (Simmel, 1910). "When eating becomes a 'sociological' occasion, it is transformed into something that is both more regulated and more 'over individual" (Gronow, 1997). Simmel emphasizes - similarly to Lévi-Strauss, as will be seen later in this article - the sociocultural transformation of eating in a collective. Sharing a meal with other persons is the "first step for overcoming the naturalism of food" (Simmel, 1910; transl. by the author). His analyses of estate-based societies from the early twentieth century reveals that in lower classes, the meal is more centered to the food as the substance and the "eating gestures" are not regulated, while the higher ones apply a specific codex of rules and behaviors, for instance how to hold the knife and fork (Simmel, 1910). With this example he tellingly demonstrates the distinctive character of food consumption and that consumption can reflect one's social status.

Likewise, Norbert Elias emphasizes that individuals' food practices and gestures, are directly connected to prevailing societal codes and value systems. In his book "The Civilizing Process" (1978) Elias delineates the continuous refinement of eating gestures and tables manners between the middle ages and the eighteens century in Western Europe. Elias explains this with the increasing disciplining of society in the course of changing social structures; this disciplining is characterized by a higher degree of affect control and self-regulation. "As a result, 'correct' behavior is increasingly produced by the individual person, on his or her own accord. Elias labels this shift as: from *Fremdzwänge* (external constraints) to *Selbstzwänge* (self-restraints)" (Soeters and Van Iterson, 2002). As a consequence, eating can be regarded as an internalized form of social discipline.
The interconnection between eating, discipline and distinction also plays a somewhat important role in the writings of French structural anthropologist Lévi-Strauss. A key question in his work is the transformation from raw food to cooked, from nature to culture, which is clearly linked to processes of disciplining. Lévi-Strauss depicts this culinary process of transformation in the so-called "culinary triangle"-model. (see *Figure 1*.). The inner triangle illustrates the opposing pairs of nature vs. culture and unelaborated vs. elaborated. Further he includes different states of food, the degree of elaboration: cooked, raw, rotten.

Lévi-Strauss draws our attention to the structural side of food and a key element in his work is the question how food can be read as a text or in codes. As Anderson (2005) points out:

> "[He] attempted to analyze foodways in terms of grammar. This was a major part of his life project: finding the deep structures of all cultural activities. He held that foodways would have such structures, just as grammar does, and that one could isolate rules just as one can state rules for changing an English verb into past, future, or perfect tense forms."

Another anthropologist who follows this approach and who significantly influenced food studies is Mary Douglas. She states that "[e]ating, like talking, is patterned activity, and the daily menu may be made to yield an analogy with linguistic form" (Douglas, 1972). She argues that food can be divided in two main categories: meals and drinks. She relates these two categories to the commensality, the "social universe" (Douglas, 1972) of food: "Drinks are for strangers, acquaintances, workmen, and family. Meals are for family, close friends, honored guests" (Douglas, 1972). In this system of sharing food or drinks it is assumed that the relationship to those we meet for drinks is less intimate and more distanced in comparison to those we share a meal with. Thus, sharing meals is an expression of social relationships and a practice of in- and exclusion.
The question of in- and exclusion and social distinction through food practices and

consumption habits is further elaborated by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu offers a detailed explanation in which way dispositions, preferences and tastes influence our consumption and how those are related to social status in his book "Distinction - A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste" (1984). These dispositions towards food are the result of our habitus; they are influenced by our social position and the social context within which we experience everyday life. The term habitus refers to particular norms and values, predispositions and preferences as well as lifestyles, which are embodied by socialization, daily practices and experiences. In this context it becomes clear why Bourdieu translates this concept to food consumption: Distinctive food preferences differ because of different socializations, e.g. by a cluster of different social structures and mechanism for example class, status, gender or place food tastes are shaped.[3]   Simultaneously, distinctive food preferences and consumption habits are also an expression of belonging to a group. As Claude Fischler – an influential sociologist in current food studies – emphasizes, consumption habits shape an individual's identity, especially by separation and disassociation from other parts of society. He states: "Human beings mark their membership of a culture or a group by asserting the specificity of what they eat, or more precisely - but it amounts to the same thing - by defining the otherness, the difference of others" (Fischler, 1988). Thus, food consumption can be understood as a way to perform identity and embody social codes of behavior of a specific group.

Another theoretical strand of consumer sociology emerged as a response to the dominance of post-modern debates in the late 1990, which were focusing on the concept of identity, symbolism and meaning of social practices (Halkier, 2009). Scholars (e.g. Schatzki et al., 2001, Reckwitz, 2002) initiated a 'practice turn' introducing an alternative conceptualization: the practice theory (see also Warde, 2005; Evans et al., 2012; Shove et al., 2012). Understanding practices with that subtype of cultural theory allows unpacking social action and translate it to our empirical study. To conceptualize practice Reckwitz centers on different focal points that constitute it (Reckwitz, 2002): The *body* plays an important role because all activities are bodily routinized; the *mind* is not less significant described as the element that is closely connected to body - its performances depend on a specific know-how, on the ability to interpret and to set goals as well as to process emotions. *Things* are key components as in most practices objects are involved. *Knowledge* – that means first the existence of an understanding of the situation, second the know-how to interpret and to act in it and third, in this sense, a wanting or desire to do or not to do - substantially constitutes practices. Further, every practice consists of *discursive* elements "in which the world is meaningfully constructed in language or in other sign-systems" (Reckwitz, 2002). Due to its routinized nature and its continuous repetition a practice also creates a social *structure*. Thus, Reckwitz argues, that social and institutional spheres are structured by its embeddedness in daily routine and repetition. Therefore, in case one wants to change a structure a "'breaking' and 'shifting' of structures must take place in everyday crisis of routines" (Reckwitz, 2002). Finally, a social practice is carried by an *agent* – by his or her *mind* and *body*. The benefit of using social practice theory is that it dismantles various elements of a practice by scrutinizing the interplay of these. It provides a way to theorize practice, to understand the organization of humans' actions and daily routines. Referring to our purpose practices can be regarded as "the bedrock of consumption" (Warde, 2005).

But one question is still a pressing one: How to change, to deroutinize a practice that means shifting from colonized to indigenous foods? Halkier (2009) stresses the intersection

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[3] Of course this shaping process is not static; rather it is an active process of internalizing structures and conditions. Thus, our preferences do not remain constant (Ashley et al., 2004: 73) instead they can change through time and space.

between routinization and reflexivity and points to the dynamic character of practices. Consumers have agency but it is always embedded in national and global institutional preconditions (see also Boström and Klintman, 2009). Based on a study on environmental sustainability and food practices Halkier indicates that practices can be challenged by environmental consequences: "a potential conflict in the food consumption practices [arises], because the bodily/mental procedures of shopping, cooking and eating are experienced as becoming disturbed" (Halkier, 2009). From this angle one of our empirical findings on AIV consumption - that consumers in Kenya are increasingly concerned about food safety and attempt to adjust their behavior in the everyday context according to that concern – indicates that moments of conflict can cause changes in consumption. Further the increasing awareness of the health benefits of AIVs stated by participants of our study could lead to a higher consumption of AIVs.

This brief summary of sociological and anthropological writings on food practices shows that consumption patterns – and AIV consumption in particular – cannot be understood and analyzed without taking account of practices of food preparation, cooking and meal habits which are deeply embedded in social relations. For the case of AIV consumption the discussed literature illustrates important aspects: Theoretical insights from Bourdieu and Simmel show that socio-economic factors (like education or income level) influence the choice to consume AIVs. Elias' and Fischler's work underscores that consumption is embedded in existing value systems as well as in societal

norms and codes – an important determining factor we have to consider in order to understand AIV consumption habits in different regional settings and in different ethnic contexts. Lévi-Strauss' and Douglas' approaches offer a significant framework for evaluating the diversity and complexity of AIV consumption by interpreting eating as a structured and patterned activity. The practice-based approach offers the opportunity to re-think consumption and to link it to changing consumption pattern. Moreover, the introduced approaches demonstrate the commensality of eating and address it as an important social issue. Likewise, it is shown that material as well as immaterial aspects of eating must be considered if consumption habits want to be explained in depth.[4]

The Meal Culture Concept
The term meal culture represents an innovative concept which has essentially been developed by Teherani-Krönner (2014). It reveals the complexity of consumption by placing cultural logics, socioecological systems as well as gendered practices in the center of analysis. The concept takes into account all steps that are needed in order to eat a meal and scrutinizes how those different steps influence our consumption habits.

The initial question of the concept is whether the debate about *food security*[5] is conceptually done in the right way? Is it not more appropriate to talk of *meal security*[6]? Teherani-Krönner (2014) argues, that it is too short-sighted to put food itself at the center, meaning the products we find in the stores. To understand problems of food insecurity it is necessary to discuss the steps that happen

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[4] Among the work of the scholars we mentioned, many other scientists have done key works in food studies, some we want to mention briefly: Murcott (1988), Counihan and Van Esterik (1997), Pottier (1999) and Mintz and Bois (2002).

[5] In 1996 The World Food Summit defined food security as existing "when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life" (WHO, 2014).

[6] The notion of meal security builds on approaches that critically reflect the concept of food security, as for

instance that of Simon Maxwell (1996) and Johan Pottier (1999). Maxwell is concerned with shifts in the debate about food security and identifies three main changes: "From the global and the national to the household and the individual; from a food first perspective to a livelihood perspective; and from objective indicators to subjective perception" (Maxwell, 1996). Pottier stresses, among others, assessing the "'lived' realities of people who experience food stress" (Pottier, 1999).

before and during the process of transforming food into a *meal*. This is due to the fact that humans mainly eat prepared dishes instead of raw products (Teherani-Krönner, 2014). Arguing that way opens the "black box" of the household taking account of individuals' social, cultural and environmental background and situatedness. As a consequence, the *care economy* (Teherani-Krönner, 2014), the sphere of unpaid housework – including planning a meal, procuring the ingredients, preparing and cooking food – receives special attention and is reevaluated.

The concept suggests focusing on a semantic distinction: to use the term *meal* instead the term of *food* or *diet*. This term is developed to integrate complex elements, which are briefly described in the following list:

1. *production and processing of food:* this aspect focuses at the embeddedness of production and food processing in social, cultural and local practices
2. *preparation of a meal:* the activities which are done before a meal is ready to be eaten, e.g. cooking, fermentation or drying
3. *needed items as infrastructure facilities:* e.g. electricity, kitchen equipment or general technology which is essential to prepare a meal
4. *serving and eating a meal:* this aspect gives special attention to the ways how meals are served, shared and eaten (i.e. with bare hands or with cutlery)
5. *local knowledge*: local knowledge – which is distinct in different cultural settings – acquired by socialization and daily experiences, shapes food habits and can be found for example in recipes, which are typical for a place or region
6. *consequences for environment*: this aspect takes account of the ecological consequences which could arise through food production, processing and transporting
7. *division of labour*: refers to the organization of labour relating to production, processing and reproductive labour. This can include questions such as: Who is responsible for the main tasks in preparing a meal and how are the power relations in this organizing process?
8. *gender dimensions:* responsibility and competence of planning, procuring, preparing and cooking food in regard to gender must be taken into consideration
9. *meals in rituals and festivities:* This part of the concept focuses on the rituals around food: rituals we do before or during eating, (e.g. the Christian ritual in saying grace before a meal) and on the relation between food and festivities. Some festivities or ceremonies are directly connected to special food and it is unimaginable to celebrate those without particular meals. An example is that, in the western world, birthdays are celebrated with a "birthday cake".
10. *symbolic order:* This point is closely linked to the last point. The birthday cake as an example that shows how food has a specific symbolic meaning. Food is intertwined with diverse associations and has a strong symbolic value. If a person is for example vegetarian and does not eat any kind of meat it is a way of showing certain ethical values and norms in dispensing with animal produce.

Once again, the concept of meal cultures brings in the sociocultural, place-based and gendered contexts of eating. In order to understand consumption patterns and reasons for i.e. the low levels of AIV consumption, it is necessary to pay attention to those factors in the analysis.

Concluding Remarks
This brief overview of approaches can show how diverse the subject area of food studies is. Although it might seem paradoxical that the paper is mainly referring to approaches by Western sociologist and anthropologists for understanding AIV consumption in Kenya, they provide a useful framework by placing people into focus, the differences among them

and their daily practices which constitute meal habits. By applying these theoretical findings, they need to be translated for the Kenyan setting in a context-specific manner. It can be concluded that the meal culture concept is closely linked to earlier and current concepts because the objective is also to reveal meal patterns, to understand social processes of food choice and to describe in which social, cultural and institutional frames eating happens. The concept provides a holistic approach instead of focusing on one dimension of food and it opens up the black box of daily eating practices which is important for understanding consumption patterns of AIVs.

Further the introduced theoretical approaches can greatly contribute to a broader debate about food security by framing humans' practices and its socio-cultural and institutional context. The potential in such an approach is to demonstrate that food security means not only to secure the availability of food, it means also to embedded the problem in a larger picture, to link it to routinized daily practices of buying, cooking and sharing as well as to discussions on material (water, energy, land, seeds) and immaterial (knowledge, social norms, cultural values) dimensions. The same applies to the persistence in not eating indigenous food: Daily routines, knowledge, perceptions and other internalized factors that are materialized in the consumption of exotic vegetables can hinder a change in multiple ways. The given approaches enable us as researchers to investigate consumption orders and to suggest ways how to restructure them.
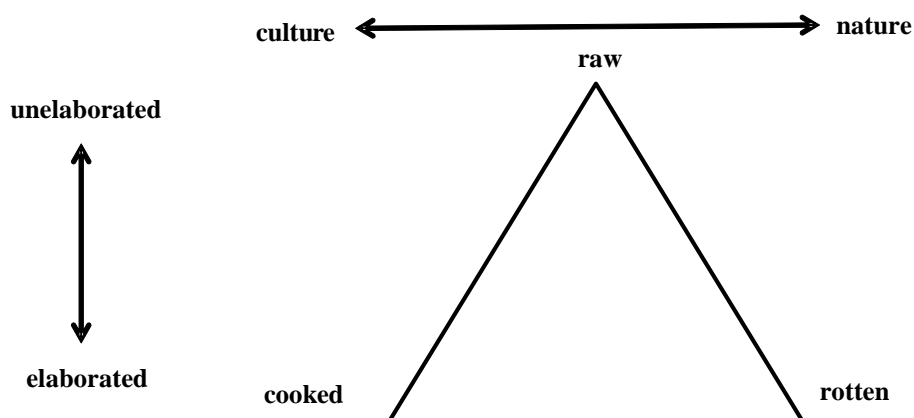

Figure 1. Culinary transformation (Ashley *et al*., 2004)

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