

Journal of African Cultural Studies Special Issue Title: **Re-reading “Africa” Through Food**

Guest Edited by Desiree Lewis



critical food studies
Transdisciplinary humanities approaches

Background/Rationale of the Issue

African social and cultural processes and struggles have been extensively explored in music, performance, the visual arts and oral and print literature. More recent attention in humanities and social science writing has focused on popular cultural practices that range from dress to digital media. Humanities-inflected attention to food, however, remains relatively neglected. Studies that focus on food offer distinctive insights into:

Histories of slavery, travel and labour migration prompted by the slave trade and colonialism;

Legacies of travel and exploration that were *not* driven by imperial or colonial agency;

Hybridised cultural processes that shaped distinct tastes and aesthetics on the continent;

Resilient, creative and agential responses to the colonial, neo-liberal and anthropocentric instrumentalising of Africa's resources, economic activities and epistemological and cultural legacies.

Food therefore offers a lens for uncovering many hidden, layered and textured political, economic and cultural processes.

As is the case elsewhere in the global south, the subject of food has been embedded in positivist theorising that projects a general sense of “lack” onto Africa, often defined as a continent in urgent need of the “green revolution” and “food security”. Another strand in scholarship and research condemns the limits of “food security” by focusing on food sovereignty and justice. Other bodies of work on food focus on labour and consumer exploitation, defining food only or primarily as a means of survival and dominant groups' profit-making impulses.

It is certainly true that colonial capitalism and neo-liberalism have generated food crises and exploitative relations around food access and production for many Africans. But the brittle paradigm of “development”, or rigidly materialist analysis of food struggles for bodily survival within reigning social science and development models provide limited insights.

This issue covers explorations of Africa's pasts, presents and futures through the lens of Africans' relationships to food. We invite abstracts on topics related to but not limited to the following:

- **global (especially south-south) and regional flows of food items, recipes, cuisines and cooking.** A fascinating example is the so-called Jollof wars, involving several West African countries vying for the recognition of having initiated the dish, or created the best version of jollof rice. These controversies, - which have recently become prominent on social media - reveal much about the imagining of African national collectives and identifications. They also testify to resilient localised food cultures when they confront global foodways, which became increasingly hegemonic since 19th century colonialism. Another, South African example is the flood of early 20th century recipe books credited to colonial and Afrikaner women. While these women may have owned the kitchens in which black cooks worked, rarely is the origin of the elaborate dishes prepared in them attributed to the inventive and hard labour of slave and indentured women in colonial kitchens. Such women would have hailed from other African countries, Indonesia, Malaysia, India the Middle and far East, with this rich fusion testifying to the layers of migration and cultural conflict, exchange and assemblage that shaped and continues to shape both food and cultural dynamics in South Africa.

- **regional trajectories of cooking, presenting and eating food.** Since the massive and intense migration throughout Africa from the 19th century, (newly) national, ethnic, linguistic and other groups - especially those that battle to preserve, reinvent or construct cuisine, food rituals and culinary legacies in the face of social and cultural erasure - focus strongly on food items, the preparation of meals, food events, and social dynamics related to distinct food cultures. One such example is the small tightly-knit Somali community in Cape Town South Africa, which defines its food and food rituals differently from the larger groups of Ethiopian immigrants in Cape Town while also fiercely resisting global corporate food buying and selling, as well as a neoliberal public eateries in their own versions of public eating places.

- **food struggles connected to colonial, neo-colonial and/or neo-liberal political and economic contexts.** Globally, researchers from several disciplines that include geography, anthropology, history, philosophy, cultural studies and literary studies have been unraveling how and why individuals and groups struggle to gain access to basic food resources and resist the extractivist plunder of the earth and oceans. This ranges from small-scale gardening to fishing in ways that their ancestors did. The context of this is the growing corporate food industry, which ruthlessly regulates independent food production and seeks to lock us all into the dominant food system as disempowered buyers. However, many histories of defiance, subversion, success and resistance thrive throughout the continent - whether driven by collectives, by radical organizations with philanthropic support or by community-based organizations.

- **gendered, classed and /or racialized forms of food production, cooking and/or eating among different groups and in different parts of the continent.** Far from members of communities experiencing food procuring and eating homogeneously, societies develop, intensify or modify stratifications in which age, social status, gender and other identifications matter when it comes to labour, eating, food rituals and food taboos. What are these and why are they worth exploring?

- **the representation or performance of ethnicised, national or regional identities and struggles within foodways, foodscapes and food events.** Literary, poetic and performative texts represent complex relationships between people and food. How may these creative

ways of representing food expand on the knowledge we glean from scholarship and non-fiction? Moreover, how might these modes of knowing grapple with some of the deeper questions related to human relations to food- such as anthropocentric assumption about human rights to dominant animal and plant life?

For further ideas about topics or theoretical scaffolding, visit

<https://www.criticalfoodstudies.co.za>

OR

<https://criticalfoodstudiesconference.co.za>

Please send a 200 word abstract to criticalfoodstudies@uwc.ac.za and africa-jacs@gmail.com by 30 May 2022. We shall provide feedback and will then invite selected authors to submit completed articles by no later than February 2023. Authors are required to submit drafts or detailed outlines by October 2022, which may form the basis of a virtual workshop for emerging scholars and writers contributing to this issue.