

Times of Food

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Peasants in rural Malawi think of food differently than do academics and other people of the industrialized world, and for two related reasons. First, academics bring to their studies of African food systems a baggage of scientific, pseudo-scientific, and cultural ideas that impede (contaminate) their appreciation of Africans' relationships to food. Were it possible for these scholars to operate without their cultural and social lenses, they would discover that in rural Africa food still acts as an engine of social relationships. When villagers speak of food, they are not only concerned about its availability, but also about its role in connecting people. But, precisely this function of sustaining social relationships has, for all practical purposes, disappeared in people's daily encounters with food in much of the capitalist world. There people typically relate to food merely as a source of physical nourishment.

The second closely interconnected reason for the difference in perspective relates to time. In the developed economies, where most people buy their food in the market and where industry has taken over most activities related to food processing, there is only one significant food moment: eating. By contrast, villagers meet food in many other guises before it reaches the table. They select the seeds, plant them, weed the young plants and protect them from marauding animals and birds, harvest their crops, and store them; and women pound the grain before turning it into a meal, which can also feed the spirits in a ritual meal. Food acquires varying social identities on its journey from the field to the table, and at each point it connects members of the community in different ways. In the African countryside, food has a social biography.

This social biography is both cyclical and linear. It is linear since a planted seed goes through increasing degrees of maturity before reaching a digestible state. But, the same movement is also cyclical from the viewpoint of the farmer. At each stage of the plant's life, a peasant engages in orderly practices that one has learned and practiced many times before as a member of the community. Thus, although villagers are fully aware of the linear movement of the crop, in their debates about food they privilege the cyclical. Peasants' daily encounters with food endow them with a perspective that is, as we shall see, radically different from that of their academic interpreters.

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