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Food and identity of the African Diaspora in the postcolonial literature

Introduction

Postcolonial topics involve the theme of re-appropriation of identity by formerly colonized people, and especially by women. A postcolonial perspective about food aims to the re-appropriation of one's identity by food choices.

Actually, migrants are the real subjects of any postcolonial literature. They face a double trauma about identity: they come from countries that have suffered the colonization and – moreover - they question again their identity by leaving their country and moving to a different culture. In the Western world, most of the times, they are often considered second class citizens, they do underpaid jobs, their languages, their food, their skin's colour are considered both exotically fascinating and ugly and repulsive. Using the postcolonial terminology, migrants need to find their own words – and their own foods - to structure their identity in the new setting they are living in.

Food choices are particularly important in migrants' lives, because these often recall identity choices. As an Italian proverb tells: "Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are". Eating is not only a basic necessity, but, especially for migrants, it becomes a way to express who they are, where they come from, how and if they merge their different cultural backgrounds with their daily living in a foreign country.

Food choices are not simply based on what one eats. Eating is the end of a process involving many other aspects linked to food, such as *cuisine*, the food elements used and rules for their combination and preparation; *etiquette and food rules*, the customs governing what, with whom, when and where one eats; *taboo* and *symbolism* linked to food (Counihan 19-20). Many of these aspects overlap each other, but they remind also of a specific identity choice.

In this paper, I present two literary case studies about the African diaspora in Europe and the food role in the re-appropriation of identity. The first one is the novel *Comment cuisiner son mari à l'africaine* (2000) by the French-Cameroonian Calixthe Beyala; the second one is the short story *Salsicce* (2005) by the Somali-Italian Igiaba Scego.[1] In the first case we see a young French Cameroonian woman starting to cook African recipes in order to find her identity as an African woman. In the other case, we can see a young Italian Somali woman eating foreign food to challenge her Muslim identity.

These cases do not concern the fusion cuisine, that testifies the merging of different cultural backgrounds. They rather show the dilemma of migrant people, often forces by the urging of daily living to choose one culture or another with no compromise.

Using these two literary cases, the aim of this paper is showing how food choices work as a daily praxis to shape bodies and minds of the African people of the diaspora towards Europe. Food choices become the new postcolonial strategy to reaffirm the identity of subaltern people by themselves.

***How to cook a husband*: the re-appropriation of a gender identity**

According to Hitchcott, one of the main critic of Beyala's work, *How to cook a husband à l'africaine* is a hybrid text, both novel and cookery book (Hitchcott 95). Beyala chooses to disconnect completely the recipes from the text, placing them on a separate page at the end of the chapter, and printing them like a traditional recipe that could be found in any cookbook or magazine article.

The novel tells how a young African woman, Aïssatou, living in a multiethnic quarter in Paris seduces, marries and keeps a handsome African neighbor by cooking for him delicious African recipes. Nevertheless, Calixthe Beyala's novel is also a sort of a *bildungsroman* where

[1] None of those has been translated in English yet. The following translations are mine.

Aïssatou negotiates her female identity within the multicultural context where she lives. At the beginning Aïssatou, that is also the narrating voice of the story, tells about herself:

> "I, who am telling this part of my life, have left the country where I was born to learn the world. Because there comes a time to lose herself and a time to find herself, a time to go away and a time to come back to the roots.
>
> I am black, the sun could tell you, but the exile has changed my birth marks." (Beyala 15).

And after, as in a mantra, Aïssatou repeats: "I don't know when I became white", telling all the beauty practices she uses according to the (Western) mainstreaming concept of beauty: straightening her hair, using bleaching cream for her skin, dieting obsessively. "I torture my body to make it minimalist: I have no breasts and my bottom is flat like the earth" (Beyala 15). These praxes are what makes her *look like* a white woman: "I don't know when I became white, because I am that since we have been living side by side, since days have grown and become so numerous to mix until being confused" (Beyala 16).

Food is not relevant in this phase of Aïssatou's life: "I am a white negro[2] and food is a deadly poison for seduction" (Beyala 24), and for dinner she "enjoys" three grated carrots or "cooks" dried powder soups, and always takes tea without sugar.

Since the beginning of the novel, body is the main theme. Aïssatou's body is described as something unnatural: extremely cared for but not accepted for what it really is. Food is a basic need to fight against, her hair is never straight enough, her body is never slim enough, her skin is never white enough. Aïssatou's identity moves in the space between what she is and what she chooses to be. The confused identity of Aïssatou is shown into the indetermination of her skin colour, as said above: "I am black, but…" or in the oxymoron "I am a white negro".

Moreover, at the beginning of chapter 2, Aïssatou shows that the indetermination of her body reflects the indetermination of her identity as a migrant:

[2] *Négresse blanche* in the original French text.

> "I don't know anymore how helping a goat to deliver or in which direction burying dead people to make them coming back to life. My reference is such a mess that my eyes are wrong on how to look at the world." (Beyala 21)

Such as in every *bildungsroman*, a fact happens that changes that perspective: Aïssatou falls in love with her neighbor, an African man called Bolobolo. Despite her seductive efforts, it seems that he does not notice her. This moment of crisis comes to an end when Aïssatou –at first unconsciously- understands her need to come back at her origins. She decides to visit a *marabout* because "an African woman without a *marabout* is like a sailor without the compass, as the elders say" (Beyala 47). That is to say, Aïssatou chooses a peculiar African strategy to solve her love problems. And the solution comes from the *marabout*'s wife, a typical African *maman*, simply reminding her that she is too slim. That is to say, the solution is thinking according to another point of view about the body, such as according to an African perspective.

Since there, Aïssatou starts her coming back to her origins, reminding her mother's recipes, cooking and eating African food. She goes to an ethnic market where "I fill my bags with the same bulimia I used to leave my traditions" (Beyala 70). The new Aïssatou's body is shaped by the African food of the tradition:

> "my body has lost its slimness, like some trees have lost their leaves. It is as luxuriant as a baobab's power during the rainy season: cheeks have rounded and my breasts, as bougainvilleas, are more bloomed than springtime is" (Beyala 79).

Every chapter is introduced by an African recipe, but, at the beginning of the novel, recipes where simply reminded; now Aïssatou cooks and eats them. Aïssatou has find her time to come back at her origins and to find herself as an African woman. Food choices have been the strategy she has used to do it and to conquer the man she loves. The statement of Bolobolo reflect the importance of food: "the woman that cooked that groundnut chicken […] I will marry that woman in front of God and people" (Beyala 141).

More, as Skidmore states, "Aïssatou is speaking through her cooking, revealing her desires and fears, using food to express those things which she cannot explicitly state" (Skidmore 51): food becomes her language. Due to the link between food and body, the change is not only in her body, but mainly in her mind. Changing food choices has changed also her mind. She starts behaving like a typical African wife, always reminding her mother teachings like: "There comes a time when a woman must prefer her marriage to her husband" (121). In fact Aïssatou spent many years close to a man who cheats her; she knew it but she pretended not to know. She does not leave him even when his illegitimate daughter comes to their door. This could be a an attitude hardly understandable from a Western point of view, but this also reflects a different concept about marriage and love from the Western one. This is quite clear when she explains:

> "Bolobolo and I live in an counterclockwise sense, against the grain. (…). I cooked carefully to save my marriage, because he was cheating me with the most beautiful girls in the world. (…) During that period I cooked his favorite food: crabs with fresh pineapple or lobsters with coconut cream. Their smells were wrapping the house and lowered the bewitching perfumes that my rivals were sprinkled with." (Beyala 145)

Again, African food plays a central role as the main female strategy to keep a husband. Nevertheless, it eventually seems to be a winning strategy: Bolobolo stops to cheat his wife.

This peculiar vision of love and life recalls also the peculiar identity of that kind of migrants that live their lives according to the values of their countries of origins into a different culture, with all the contradictions that this situation brings. This peculiar way of living is also reflected into the ingredients named for the African recipes in the novel. Some peculiar ingredients, like wood green turtle, or boa, or banana leaves, need to find Western alternative food like, for example, using the sea-toad, the moray or aluminium sheets. Despite "many of the recipes are those identified as "authentically" African in cookery books published in print and in electronic form", as stated by Hitchcott (Hitchcott 95), African food cooked by Aïssatou will never be the same as food cooked in Africa. Even if Skidmore states: "she effectuates a reverse migration, and food and cooking are the

vehicle that she uses to bring herself back to her roots", we can see the migration could not be completely done (Skidmore 51). Aïssatou learns to remind her origins and not to hide them, but she cannot reach them entirely. In fact she never comes back to Cameroon but she keeps living in Paris. The negotiation between African and Western ingredients is both a social strategy and a literary metaphor for the negotiation of identity that migrants should do by describing their identity and their bodies on their own.

***Sausages*: choosing one identity**

I have chosen Scego's short story because it tells an opposite case respect to Beyala's novel. While the novel tells the re-appropriation of a gender identity through birthplace food, Scego tells about the choice to eat Western food to become definitively part of the hosting community. According to the perspective of the anonymous female main character and speaking voice of the story, a young Somali Muslim woman living in Rome, the food of the "others" *par excellence* is pork sausages.

The novel is the stream of consciousness of a Muslim woman buying, cooking and eating pork sausages. This fact is described by the same narrating voice as something "weird", as stated at the beginning of the story: "Today, Wednesday 14th August, 9:30 AM, something weird has happened to me" (Scego 23). Immediately she points out that "naturally the weird thing is not buying sausages" (Scego 23). What breaks the normality of the day "naturally it has been me!" (Scego 24). That is to say, it is not the action but the *subjec*t that does the "weird" action.

The beginning of the story tells about a subversive act (buying and eating sausages) that reflects a deep identity crisis of the character, a character with an hybrid identity: Somali and Italian. The crisis has burst out by a specific request of the actual Italian migration law, the so called Bossi-Fini law[3]: the preventive request of footprints for all migrants. This has defined as

[3] Bossi-Fini migration law, so called by the surnames of the promoters, was adopted in 2002. It has been harshly criticized by Amnesty International because of the accessibility of the asylum procedures, because of the detention of the asylum petitioners and because of the violation of the non-refoulement international issue.

humiliating and trouble-giver for "people unsure about their identity" (Scego 26), as is the very case of the narrator: a young Muslim woman with Italian citizenship and black skin.

All the story is marked by the tentative to collect these framed identities into one. This is not a personal need of the narrator; rather, she feels forced to do it by the surrounding society as well as by the Italian migration law. She feels forced to choose one – and only one - identity. For this reason, the narrator-writer uses a literary strategy by a mathematical metaphor: fractions to clarify "how much" she is Somali and "how much" she is Italian.

> 'Am I more Somali? Or Italian? Maybe ¾ Somali and ¼ Italian? Or vice-versa?
>
> I cannot answer! I have never fractionated myself before (…)
>
> I think I am a woman with no identity.
>
> Or rather with many identities. (…).' (Scego 28)

Scego has never clearly told that, but the fractioning of identity sadly reminds of the racial laws adopted in the Nazi Germany and in the Fascist Italy in the Thirties.[4] The attempt to mathematically fractioning one's identity - framed in that historical background- is the literary strategy that Scego uses to accuse sharply the actual Italian migration law.

Considering that the mathematical metaphor of fractions does not seem to work, the narrator decides to go on with the mathematical language doing a list about *what* she does when she feels Somali or Italian, counting how many things she does as Italian and how many as Somali. The list should work as a sort of official quantitative statement about how she feels and is, in so doing, mocking at the bureaucratic measures to determinate the citizenship where everything must be clearly determined. Obvious to say, in both lists food has a peculiar place in defining identity. At the first place of the Somali part of the list we find "1) drinking tea with spices" and "6) eating bananas with rice, in the same dish, I mean" (Scego 29). In the same way, in the Italian part of the list, Scego places at #1 "having sweet breakfast" and at #5 "eating a 1.80 euro stracciatella, pistachios and coconut ice-cream without whipped cream" (Scego 29).

[4] By imitation of the 1935 Nuremberg laws, Italy promoted racial laws in 1938. These racial laws defined who was Jewish according to how many Jewish grandparents one had.

Even if food has a prominent place in defining identity in both lists, it is the concept itself of making a list that does not work to define identity. Eventually, she cannot finish any of the lists. There are infinite occasions and reasons why she feels to be Italian as many as there are infinite ones on why she feels to be Somali. Counting how many times one feels in a way or in another does not work as much as fractioning one's identity.

At the end of this anxious reflection about her identity, she is still with no answers. At this point, the narrating voice tries to find a solution by changing the language she is using to determine her identity: she gives up mathematical and quantitative language for a more qualitative and emotional one: eating forbidden food, i.e., pork sausages. This act seems to work better than a statement to determine one's belongings. Introducing a forbidden food into her body, the narrator wants to show how her own flesh, her own body comes into question about the matter of identity. By eating pork sausages, her own body will be made of the very substances that the "other" bodies use to build themselves.

By considering the context that has brought to the revolutionary act of eating pork sausages, this should not be dealt with as a refusal of her culture of origin but rather as an extreme attempt to demonstrate she is a part of the surrounding culture. She does what she has perceived it is requested to her. Into the context of segregation of migrant people raised by the Bossi-Fini law –well explained at the beginning of the story- people like the narrator are perceived as "half" Italian and should "prove" their Italianity. Eating sausages is a sort of test - an identity test- and Scego takes it as a literary *topos* according to what has been testified in the Spanish texts of the Reconquista period, ended in 1492 (Mauceri 2004). [5] During that age, Jewish and Muslim people were chased away from Spain by the Catholic Kings. Only the ones that could prove their conversion –and eating pork was one of the main proofs- could stay. By the sausage test, again the incorporation of food is shown as the best strategy to declare one's identity, even working more functionally than having the red passport.

[55] Scego is a great lover of Spanish and Portuguese Literature and her M.A thesis was about Arab characters in Castilian literature. (Mauceri 2004)

Finally, the request made to one's body to answer about its identity obtains its answer: she throws up even before eating pork sausages. Scego explains: "puke represents a way to get back one's own identity" (Mauceri 2004). So, puke should not be considered as a symbolic refuse of a Western (Italian) identity: in fact, technically, the narrator does not even eat the "others" food and finally she does not throw up the food. Rather puke is the symbolic refuse to choose a single identity. A body has been forced to do something it feels wrong for it and simply refuses to do it.

The end of this story remarks the double identity of the character: she was cleaning up the puke symbolizing the failing of choosing one identity, while she received a phone call from a friend telling her she got a public job place, confirming her as an Italian citizen. Bu at the end, she still remains confirming her double identity: Muslim, not eating pork, and Italian, getting a public job. The food-body link has been the best strategy to determinate one's belongings.

Food, body and identity

Both texts enlighten the strict connection among food, body and identity. Choices for identity pass through one's body by food. Counihan points out the importance of introjections, defining eating as "a passage across body boundaries of external substances that are then incorporated into the body" (Counihan 9). From a psychoanalytic point of view, the trespassing of body boundaries is a fundamental part of the construction of the Self: the experiences of hunger and later of the introjections of milk help newborns to feel separated from their mothers' body and to realize they their own body. Quoting Counihan: "As Freud noted, the recognition of boundaries between child and mother is the first step in self-differentiation and maturation of the infant". (Counihan 62). That is to say that bodily experiences linked to food shape our minds in the early days of our life.

Nevertheless, the issue of incorporation of food brings also to the fact that our body is made by food, not only symbolically. The same concept is yet findable in Michel de Montaigne's Essays. Talking about how culture works, Montaigne uses a food metaphor: translating literally from the

French text, he says that it seems that culture has been sucked together with maternal milk since the infancy. Or, to say that in proper English, one imbibes culture in one's cradle. The original metaphor shows clearly the tight connection among culture, food and body. Montaigne points out that culture is so natural for everyone of us that it seems it is a part of our body, likewise maternal milk has made our body growing in so doing becoming a part of it. According to Montaigne, culture is rooted in our body *as* by food or, at least, human beings like thinking in such a way.[6]

Montaigne's talk about culture is as good as about identity, that is a crucial part of one's culture. Food is also a vector of symbols about one's identity. Since childhood, we eat food according to where we live, who we are, which social class our family belongs to. Food choices go building our body also in a cultural specific way, and our body is fully aware of them. That is to say, our body is physically and culturally built by food and shows us how identity is rooted into the body by food. This is recalled to us through body by feelings, sensations and even diseases. In fact in both of the literary texts that I have examined, bodies tell about one's identity even before that this is clearly rationalized by one's conscious mind. Aïssatou's body knew which food would make her feeling better; in the same way, Scego's body's character gives her the answer on identity that her mind could not find. Food choices seems to be taken more by our body than by our mind because they are rooted into a bodily and unconscious knowledge about the Self. That is why food choices touch in such a deep way our identity.

Food and new postcolonial perspectives

In the last twenty years the issue of body has taken great importance in social sciences. Feminist scholars, like Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti, have especially promoted the theory of the embodied knowledge as a different way to approach both reality and –in so doing- knowledge, questioning the long lasting Western (male) phallogocentric logic based on the Cartesian logos. While Western culture has promoted the Cartesian rational logic for centuries, other cultures have

[6] Montaigne's discourse is about how people think that social and cultural phenomena are natural. He suggest that people want them natural to not question them anymore.

developed a different form of knowledge based on the body. Women, kept away from any power discourse and the Cartesian logos, should be closer to the bodily knowledge, the so-called embodied knowledge. The theory of embodiment has spread in psychology, cultural anthropology, sociology and even philosophy and has been supported by feminist researchers as a more feminine way to the knowledge.

Surely the theory of embodiment has also influenced postcolonial studies. In fact, as the embodiment theory has risen as antithetic to the Western knowledge, it is deeply postcolonial *per se*. It represents a "different" way to reach knowledge, something other respect the Western way of thinking. Due to the strict link between food and body, food has become the new issue for postcolonial studies. In the last decade both in Anglophone and Francophone postcolonial literatures, we can see the growing importance of the issue of food. Even if hardly has food become the central point of the narration, nevertheless it is a theme frequently recalled within the narrations. By preferring the channel of food to describe identity, these women writers put themselves into the feminist critic against the Cartesian logos. To define identity by food and body is a more feminine way to define identity.

But, according to the embodiment theory, food is not simply a new issue. Food becomes a strategy to question the identity of postcolonial subjects. According to feminist postcolonial writers like Spivak and bell hooks, the worst consequence of colonialism for colonized people has been the long lasting skill to steal voices and words to people. Colonized people have stopped to think about their identity according to their own point of view, rather adopting the cultural categories of the Western dominant culture. What Bourdieu has called *symbolic violence* thus happened, that is to say, a violence that destroys the symbolic universe of subalterns in such a total way that subalterns start using the symbols of the ones that have destroyed their culture. That is to say, subalterns have been reduced as objects of a narration made with the words of the others. Subalterns have lost their identity and even the ways to define it, except than the Western point of view.

Feminist writers have shown the double effort that colonized women should do to re-define their identity. By quoting Spivak, the subalterns need to find their words to finally reach the freedom to tell themselves and their identities. Colonized women have been marginalized twice: by their colour and their gender, both by the male chauvinist Western dominant culture and by their own. Writing has been the best strategy to structure a new identity free from any Western point of view. By writing and choosing their own words to describe themselves, colonized people become again subjects of their own stories and not simply objects of a narration done by others.

In the last ten years we have seen a new strategy to redefine the identity of marginalized people: food choices. While writing seems to be a very intellectual strategy to described the new identity of subaltern people –good for scholars but rather far away from daily lives of people-, food choices are definitely a more common action independently from one's status. As Mary Douglas has shown, food is a system of communication, the most immediate language that one speaks, a language accessible to all. These women writers chose food as the more common language to express the symbolic questioning about identity. Not by chance, Beyala and Scego are very "popular" authors, meaning that they are common faces for people and, at the same time, they have a special link with common people and daily life. Both of them are not the typical intellectuals secluded from the world. Especially Calixthe Beyala is a real pop icon in France and, more, she is trying to promote herself as a icon for African migrant women in France, as the monograph about her by Hitchcott has shown recently. As Hitchcott points out "Beyala is undoubtedly the most famous woman writer of francophone sub-Saharan Africa. (…). Beyala is then an extremely controversial figure in France and in Africa. On the one hand, she is something of a postcolonial celebrity: a prolific and successful author that is regularly invited to contribute to television talk shows. On the other, she is revealed as a literary fraud who lacks a sense of property[7]" (Hitchcott 1). Those contradictions wisely performed by the same Bayala makes her a an amazing performer of the plurality of identities and, of course, someone to talk about.

[7] In the same year she won the Grand Prix du Roman de l'Académie Française, in 1996, she was also convicted for plagiarism in the High Court in Paris.

Igiaba Scego has a more defiled profile, maybe because Italian postcolonial literature is still quite a recent phenomenon in comparison to the French one. So Scego has not still the huge popularity that Beyala enjoys in France. Nevertheless, she share this pop mood with Beyala, because she is a journalist and writes also for several newspapers and websites. This makes her very sensitive to everyday's lives of people, by posting comments on everyday daily news on her Facebook page many times in a day, working in the national radio both as special guest and as anchorwoman. She even wrote a letter to the President of the Italian Republic about the youth condition in April 2010, later published on the national press.[8]

The "popular" attitude of both of these authors explains why they choose food as a main issue for their writings. They have understood that the best way to approach their readers about the identity theme is telling about the most common experience their audience can have: eating. While, as authors, surely they share the postcolonial discourse about writing, they also share the same discourse with common people by the food experiences of their characters. For this reason, my thesis is that the new trend for postcolonial subjects is that the reaffirmation of one's identity passes more through food than through writing. While into the debate about postcolonial literature, writing is the winning strategy for authors to find their own words to describe their identity, for people far from literary debates, food choices are the daily praxis that structure one's strategy to define identity.

Conclusion

According to Spivak and bell hooks, writing is the way through which colonized people have the opportunity to become again subjects of their own lives and identities. Through the re-appropriation of a language, colonized people tell their own stories, insofar focusing on their point of views about themselves.

[8] This fact have given her a national visibility, as she was invited in several national networks.

Using the same postcolonial perspective, not only does writing about food and cooking choices show the re-appropriation of identity through the use of the language, but also through one's own body. As I pointed out, food and body are strictly connected. Bodies and minds are shaped by the choice of what one eats. If we look at these authors' work, we can see they work for the re-appropriation of their identity in a double way: through food and by writing. Writing about food is a double praxis to reach the goal: finding new languages to re-define a new identity.

Food - and values and symbols linked to it - works like a language. Food seem to be the new language that postcolonial writers talk and write to support the re-appropriation of identity done by the contemporary colonized people, the migrants. The identity of migrants is something new, that requires a special language to talk about it. It is highly hybrid and their food choices recall that. Using home-made food does not seem to work, as the case of Aïssatou has shown. In the same way, adopting the food of the others does not work anyway, as Scego's story has shown. Language as much as food need to be modified to describe these new hybrid identities. And these new identities –the nomadic subjects, as Rosi Braidotti call them- have been told by a new channel of knowledge, far from the masculine logos: the body and its emotions.

The African identity of diasporic people is like the food they eat: almost originally African but also mixed up with Western food and cuisine. Even when forced to choose one identity or even when desperately try to come back to their roots, they cannot help to mix it up. Whether you like it or not, food reflects these in-between identities.

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