



International
Institute of
Social Studies

Ezafun



EL FUTURO DE LA ALIMENTACIÓN Y RETOS DE LA AGRICULTURA PARA EL SIGLO XXI:

Debates sobre quién, cómo y con qué implicaciones sociales, económicas y ecológicas alimentará el mundo.

THE FUTURE OF FOOD AND CHALLENGES FOR AGRICULTURE IN THE 21st CENTURY:

Debates about who, how and with what social, economic and ecological implications we will feed the world.

ELIKADURAREN ETORKIZUNA ETA NEKAZARITZAREN ERRONKAK XXI. MENDERAKO:

Mundua nork, nola eta zer-nolako inplikazio sozial, ekonomiko eta ekologikorekin elikatuko duen izango da eztabaidagaia

Meal Sovereignty: Empirical Insights on an Innovative Perspective

Meike Brückner and Suse Brettin

Paper # 76

Apirila – Abril – April
24, 25, 26
2017


elikadura²¹

NAZIOARTEKO HIZKETALDIA
COLOQUIO INTERNACIONAL
INTERNATIONAL COLLOQUIUM

www.elikadura21.eu

Meal Sovereignty: Empirical Insights on an Innovative Perspective

Meike Brückner and Suse Brettin

Abstract

Given the ongoing socioecological injustice of the current agrifood system it is necessary to enhance approaches on how to study and operationalize food sovereignty. While there have been concerted efforts to study food sovereignty from the production side, there has been less impetus to examine food consumption and thus, consumer's autonomy and sovereignty. The paper aims first, to introduce the idea of 'Meal Sovereignty' in order to operationalize and study consumption. Meal Sovereignty is inspired by the approach of 'Meal Cultures' by Parto Teherani-Krönner and offers a useful lens to analyze everyday meal practices, indigenous knowledge systems and gendered relations. After framing the concept, we then present empirical findings of a qualitative study in Kenya, addressing consumer's practices and preferences on African Indigenous Vegetables, a traditional but underutilized food which gains increasingly importance due to its medicinal, nutritional and income generating value. One of the main conclusions of this paper is that current discussions on food sovereignty don't go far enough: It is necessary to center consumers within the discussion on food sovereignty, and more concretely, to study their meal practices in connection with the necessary material and immaterial resources. This can be done by taking a feminist approach and focusing on the daily practices and challenges to put a meal on the table as well as the knowledge, agency, resistance and resilience on a household and community level. Therefore, the paper may help to move the food sovereignty debate on consumption in a more fruitful direction.

Introduction

Debates about food sovereignty as a key concept for critical thinking about the contemporary food regime and its unjust practices and policies have recently intensified. Although food sovereignty has been studied in different contexts it is necessary to enhance approaches on how to operationalize food sovereignty. What does food sovereignty mean in academic and empirical terms? How can it be applied in local settings and which research methods and techniques are to be utilized? The focus of the food sovereignty debate are three key areas: production, distribution and consumption. As La Via Campesina states in the "Nyéléni" Declaration: "Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts those who *produce, distribute* and *consume* food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations" (2007). Even though all areas of the food value chain are highly relevant and interrelated issues, a body of studies and theoretical approaches on producer sovereignty gained increasing

interest while there are nonequivalent efforts to study and operationalize consumer sovereignty. To put it differently, while there have been concerted efforts to study food sovereignty from the production and distribution side, there has been less impetus to examine food consumption and thus, consumer's autonomy and sovereignty. This is not to say that it is simply necessary to conduct more research on consumer sovereignty in quantitative terms. Rather, the goal is to look at a broader level to reveal the connection between consumers and producers given the fact, that both constitute another.

Therefore, the paper aims to introduce the idea of 'Meal Sovereignty' in order to operationalize and study consumption. Meal Sovereignty is inspired by the approach of 'Meal Cultures' by Parto Teherani-Krönner (2014) offering a useful lens to analyze everyday meal practices, experiences and knowledge as well as including indigenous knowledge systems. What is perhaps most relevant about this approach is the strong focus on issues of gender and other power relations. The topic of gender gained ground in the field of food studies over the last two decades starting with Avakians and Habers book - one of the first books dedicated to the topic - "From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies: Critical Perspectives on Women and Food" (2005) that was crucial in bringing to light the gendered dimensions of food, ranging to the more recently published book "Food and Femininity" (2015) by Cairns and Johnston.

Teherani-Krönner's approach of Meal Cultures connects questions of agricultural production and consumption looking at these spheres as overlapping. Therefore the approach can be of help to decenter the productivist principles of food and agricultural studies. It draws attention to processing, preparing, cooking, serving and sharing of a meal, based on the assumption that most produced food products are prepared or processed and not eaten raw. Further, as several other researchers have pointed out (i.e. DeVault 1991, Lupton 1996, Warde 1997) in many parts of the world, women are the caretakers of household members' food needs. To study those gendered performances and knowledge systems of food consumption and sovereignty, it is necessary to critically observe domestic food practices - or as we call it 'meal practices'- at the household level and to open up the 'black box of the household'. Attention to this micro level expands our understanding of often hidden and enumerated practices that sustain individuals and families; it further allows to observe how people experience and make meaning of food in everyday life as well as strategies utilized to feed household members. As Anke Niehof (2016) writes: "I see food security as anchored to households and nutrition security to individuals for most people [...] it is in their household that actions are undertaken and strategies deployed to meet their food needs". This view enables a researcher to examine local knowledge, needs, preferences and attitudes embedded in a gendered order.

The importance and meaning of *meals* and all the activities that go along with it – buying, preparing, cooking and sharing food – have been mainly recognized by anthropologists and sociologists (see also Brückner & Caglar 2016). Mary Douglas for example was one of the first addressing the question of what a meal is (1997), a long time after Georg Simmel published the short essay "The Sociology of the Meal" (1910). Ekström and Jonsson (2005: 39) point to the socioeconomic dimensions of food and meal preparation: "Food preparation also implies social activity, providing a social structure and organising the people who are eating together. Furthermore, food preparation has an economic dimension, household resource management".

While the discussion on meals or cooking more generally appeared to stand still for several years most recent publications indicate a return to it. The anthropologist David Sutton for example demonstrates by reviewing three books on cooking in his paper “Cooking is good to think” (2014) that the everyday practice of cooking has long been disregarded but gaining more attention in recent scholarly work.

With this background, we showed how cooking and other steps that finally lead to a meal provide context for raising questions that are central to food sovereignty and are of feminist importance. Therefore, we suggest the expression ‘Meal Sovereignty’ as a way to uncover consumer’s sovereignty in everyday life. But what, in fact, does *meal sovereignty* mean? To make the approach applicable we put a first definition, which is far from being complete or settled but we hope to specify it with the help of discussions to come:

Meal sovereignty is the right of people to be able to prepare and eat a meal that serves their needs, preference and pleasure. Meal sovereignty is dependent on both material and immaterial resources. Those resources are shaped by power relations such as gender relations but also relations of class, race and ethnicity are coming to play.

Material resources contain of the physical and economic access/availability to healthy and affordable food, electricity, water, transport, to well-developed cooking equipment and storage facilities.

On a more immaterial note, meal sovereignty points to sociocultural resources of a meal such as the necessary time and knowledge on how to plan and prepare a meal, the pleasure of preparing, sharing, eating and tasting a meal.

Together, these resources are overlapping shaping the right to experience a meal in its material and immaterial sense.

To dive into complex meal practices and to explore the approach of meal sovereignty the next sections seeks to contextualize the mentioned conceptual thoughts with empirical examples and methodological reflections drawing on a qualitative study in Kenya. The study is addressing consumer’s practices and preferences on African Indigenous Vegetables (AIVs), a traditional but underutilized food which gains increasingly importance due to its medicinal, nutritional and income generating value.

Meal Sovereignty in Kenya – Empirical Insights on African Indigenous Vegetables

AIVs were widely used in Kenya as part of the household diets, however the introduction of exotic vegetables such as kale or cabbage by colonial rulers led to a decrease in popularity on the field and on the plate. Further, the symbolic nature changed: The image of the vegetables declined resulting in the perception AIVs being a ‘poor man’s food’ or a weed. The leafy vegetables are native to Kenya, around 200 varieties are recorded (Opyio 2014). Commonly consumed vegetables are for example Spiderplant (*Gynan-dropsis gynandra*), African Nightshade (*Solanum scabrum*), Amaranths (*Amaranthus blitum*) and Cowpeas (*Vigna unguiculata*). AIVs can be a powerful resource combating the situation of malnutrition in Kenya: They offer highly medicinal and nutritional potential

containing important micronutrients, they are well adapted to the local conditions and grow rapidly, thus are important in times of food scarcity. Moreover, indigenous vegetables are mainly produced by small scale farmers and so far rarely commercialized or produced in large scales, therefore they have the ability to promote livelihood situations on a local level. Consequently, Mary Abukutsa-Onyango, one of the pioneering scholars that brought attention to the indigenous varieties, demands: “It is [...] time to strategically reposition AIVs in the horticultural sector and restore their lost glory” (2010).

The invention of new leafy vegetables during the colonial times, the following decline in production of indigenous leafy vegetables and their negative perception caused a decline in the consumption of AIVs. Not only farm practices but also meal practices have been subjected and dominated by introduced foods not known in precolonial times. Here, food can be regarded as a “principal tool of colonization” (Alvarez, n.d.) powerfully effecting the meal sovereignty of consumers. Recently, international organizations and scholars increasingly emphasize the role of traditional and indigenous vegetables supporting knowledge creation and dissemination on AIV throughout the entire value chain. While it promises hope that the value of AIVs is recognized and they are on the radar of scholarly discussion, there are just a few studies that investigate AIVs through the lenses of consumers. Therefore, it is our goal to add to this gap by examining meal cultures related to AIVs meaning daily activities, needs and challenges to put a meal on the table as well as knowledge systems and agency. Drawing on exemplary empirical result we are going to ask: Are AIV consumers meal sovereign? And further: What might this mean for the debate of food sovereignty?

Empirical Insights

The following discussion is not a comprehensive analysis of all resources of meal sovereignty. Rather we want to emphasize on some resources and power relations that we believe are of importance and indicate the relevance of studying meal sovereignty. In order to account for the material and immaterial dimensions we provide empirical insight by first, exploring the relationship between meal work and gender and second, giving insight to the resources water and time. The study was conducted in 2015 and 2016 in three different research areas: Nairobi (urban), Nakuru (peri-urban) and Kakamega (rural). The research team interviewed 56 households to discover meal practices of AIVs using qualitative methods such as cooking-along interviews, focus group discussions and individual semi-structured interviews. We payed attention to the method of cooking-along interviews as it enables the researcher to uncover domestic meal practices by observing cooking techniques and interviewing at the same time. Further, the practice of cooking links public-private activities so that practices such as procuring the AIVs or fetching water as preconditions of cooking were also considered.

Gender & Meal Sovereignty

Feminists have long looked at intrahousehold gender dynamics to uncover power relations between men and women. Investigating gender relations enables addressing multiple social norms, practices, responsibilities, desires and attitudes

that organize and structure everyday life. Diana Lee-Smith notion of ‘gender contract’ describes those social mechanisms as “invisible agreements found in every society about how women and men behave” (1997: 5). On the one hand the invisibility makes it difficult to study those in its full complexity on the other are those contracts highly visible for example when it comes to meal responsibilities. Our focus here is on meal practices hence we seek to expand the understanding on how AIV meal work is shared, who has the knowledge on AIV preparation, who decides what food is served and how are those practices affected by considerations of what is conceived as feminine or masculine?

Our findings show that the division of labour continues to be highly gendered, but needs to be contextualized. The results for instance varied from place to place. Meal practices, how food is managed and used, is strongly shaped by gender relations in a sense that women are still more involved in fetching water, collecting firewood, procuring food and preparing the meal. The relationship between women and reproductive and thus meal work can be explained as socially constructed yet affecting their positioning within a family setting but also on a larger scale in society. Many women we interviewed had limited access to economic resources spending a large extend of their earnings on food or other household expenditures.

The findings show, that women predominantly hold the knowledge on AIV preparation, knowledge that is passed on from one generation to the next – usually along rigid gender lines – meaning that most of our respondents were thought by their mothers or grandmothers on how to choose good quality and cook the AIVs. The performed gendered division of labour starts in a young age, when girls have to help in the kitchen and are introduces to household chores while boys have other obligations outside the house for instance rearing the cattle’s. Cooking seems to be an inappropriate activity for young men as it centers on caregiving for the family, a responsibility that is often left to mothers seen as family caregivers. Studying AIV meal practices showed, that women have to carry heavy workload, nevertheless, cooking is also regarded as a creative activity that gives the women pleasure. They experiment with new recipes and ingredients and are able to express their tradition and knowledge via that practice. Likewise, women make room to maneuver and enact agency finding a way to negotiate dominant ideas and rules:

One women, a widow in her mid-seventies, our research team had interviewed in 2015 in Nairobi used her knowledge and skill to cook the traditional leafy vegetables: Friends and acquaintances knew about her competence to cook the traditional vegetables and the way she is enthusiastic about their cultural and nutritional value. They loved the taste of her traditionally prepared meals as well as the fact, that someone prepared the AIVs for them, not having to undergo the laborious activity as we will explain later in this paper. The women decided to make her knowledge and ability to cook delicious AIVs to a business (one beside several other small businesses sustaining her life) and friends became costumers. She sold prepared AIVs accompanied with Ugali, the traditional food along with the leafy greens, to hotels, friends and offers catering service for events like weddings. Here, having knowledge on how to cook AIVs has an emancipatory effect on her livelihood insofar that she made an income with it and thus increasing her level of sovereignty. Even though this sounds like a success, meeting the women a year later in 2016 showed how fragile and dependent on economic conditions this achievement is. She had to put the project on ice for the time being as Kenya was hit by an economic crisis resulting in the fact that consumers are less willing to spend money on orders.

Also the price volatilities for AIVs especially during the dry season was an immense obstacle she faced.

In urban middle class we observed a less rigid gendered division of labour, indicating a slight social change. How men are challenging the idea that they are not supposed to take part in care work is not well researched in Eastern Africa as well as in most parts of the world. However, it is an important element in fully understanding the gendered relations of meal sovereignty. In most cases of our study men were just cooking AIVs when the wife was sick or out of the house. Some single men however, who were not able to hand over work, were cooking AIVs. We found that especially middle class men demonstrating a growing interest in cooking and more generally in health aspects of food and well-being. For those, cooking is an everyday task they do not mind and should be shared among all household members. Further, it is a pleasure, a creative and enjoyable activity. This very brief description of our results illustrates that traditional norms and values persist, but in varying degrees depending on the context.

Water & Meal Sovereignty

A well-developed water infrastructure is essential when it comes to cooking and generally has a critical impact on meal sovereignty. Peoples ability to cook relies to a great extent on access to water, on the one hand to clean and wash the food and on the other to cook it. Water is also used for a wide range of other activities: drinking, washing, cleaning, storage and agriculture.

By studying the connection of meal and water it again becomes clear, that meal practices are highly gendered: Organizing and collecting water is women's work, women secure the provisioning of water for the household. Our results show, the cooking of AIVs requires a lot of water, after the leaves are plucked the vegetables should be washed at a minimum of three times, additionally water for cooking is needed. To emphasize the link between producers and consumer sovereignty it has to be mentioned that most of the consumers of AIVs in rural Kakamega are also producers so that water scarcity is a twofold problem: If there is no water, farmers cannot irrigate their fields just as they cannot use it for household consumption. Due to the dry spell and the lack of rainfall the 'Nairobi City Water and Sewerage Company' has released this year in January the water rationing program, a schedule indicating when from January to April particular areas of Nairobi going to have water. In order to be able to use water on a daily level many consumers need to store water in tanks, buy it at waterkiosks or from privately operated companies. Those provisional systems are often higher priced and require carrying heavy water buckets home. Also seasonal changes and scarcity result in higher prices. In rural areas households depend mainly on springs which are often located far apart.

To have steady and affordable access to water resources allows to be meal sovereign and this is relying on the fulfillment of the human right to water. Many households in Kenya are not connected to piped water. Even if households have piped access to water it is provided on an irregular basis and consumers face water rationing which impedes the production and preparation of AIVs.

Time & Meal Sovereignty

Time sovereignty is one of the most important resources when it comes to cooking. Arguing for the right to decide on which food to consume and eat means also arguing for the right to have sufficient time for meals. The issue of time is widely discussed in debates on work-life balance especially from a feminist perspective, as the time for productive and reproductive responsibilities often is unbalanced and incompatible. This dilemma is described as a care crisis (Floro 2012, Winker 2015,). Meal work located at the center of care thus is an essential element of the crisis. Time, as one dimension of meal sovereignty, is far from being gender neutral insofar that the previously described gender order ties time use for care and meal work mainly to women.

Our results confirm that time is of particular concern regarding AIVs as the preparation of the leafy vegetables is highly time-consuming and can take – depending on variety – up to three hours. In the urban setting of Nairobi the idea of the male breadwinner and the female homemaker is slightly changing and women increasingly move in wage work. Consequently, this does often not allow enough time for meal work. Many cannot shoulder all responsibilities having to employ maids. Clearly, a shifting of care work to other family members or household employees takes place. In most of the interviews women explained that cooking the AIVs is an activity for the weekend when sufficient time is available to prepare the vegetables well and not in a hurry. Then the vegetables are cooked in bulk and stored in the fridge ready to eat for the whole week. To cope with time shortage some consumers prefer to buy already plucked and cut vegetables that are available on open-air markets. Here, the direct contact to the seller allows to make special requests for a small surcharge. Others circumvent the problem by saving the time of going to the market buying AIVs from door-to-door sellers. To reserve the vegetables via phone call is also one strategy to overcome time barriers, for instance when just being able to go to the market after work in the late afternoon and not early in the morning when most of the vegetables are sold. In conclusion of this, we can argue that demanding meal sovereignty clearly indicates a conflict and unevenness between productive and reproductive time.

Conclusion

One of the main conclusions of this paper is that current discussions on food sovereignty don't go far enough: It is necessary to center consumers within the discussion on food sovereignty, and more concretely, to study their meal practices in connection with the necessary material and immaterial resources. A conceptual change towards meal sovereignty offers a framework for addressing these issues. To come back to our first initial question “Are AIV consumers meal sovereign?” we would argue that this is partly the case. The examples showed well how an unequal share of meal work and scarcity of water and time is a struggle for consumers putting them in a precarious position. Problematizing those materiality's and immaterialities gives the opportunity to discuss challenges of daily responsibilities at the household level, which are often neglected or simply swept under the carpet. More often than not, those needs and challenges are seen as a private concern of each individual rather than as a basic human right or as a matter of broader structural processes and power relations. Food sovereignty cannot be viewed in

isolation of meal practices and the gender and power relations shaping it. It is only by studying and analyzing those practices of everyday life and its consequences, that we can fully understand what meal sovereignty means and how it can be fostered.

Ultimately, we have to answer our second question: “What might this mean for the debate of food sovereignty?”. First of all, the theoretical debate about consumers sovereignty needs to be strengthened, for example by linking it to social practice theories. To translate this into policy more empirical research on meal sovereignty is needed. This research has to be interdisciplinary, open for fields such as social science, urban and regional planning, agricultural studies and nutritional studies. Particularly the link to urban and regional planning is crucial as here designing and building resources for households is at the center. We need to bring together concerns about production, distribution and consumption by greater interdisciplinary collaboration. Finally, we hope that the approach of meal culture might be taken up for that goal.

References

- Abukutsa-Onyango, M.O. (2010): African Indigenous Vegetables in Kenya: Strategic Repositioning in the Horticultural Sector. Inaugural lecture at Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology. Nairobi, Kenya. Retrieved from http://www.researchgate.net/profile/Mary_Abukutsa-Onyango/publication/235323508_AFRICAN_INDIGENOUS_VEGETABLES_IN_KENYA_Strategic_Repositioning_in_the_Horticultural_Sector/links/0fcfd510bd36cca82a000000.pdf.
- Alvarez, L. (n.d.): Colonization, Food, and the Practice of Eating. Retrieved from: <http://www.foodispower.org/colonization-food-and-the-practice-of-eating/>.
- Avakian, A. V. / Haber, B. (ed.) (2005): From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies: Critical Perspectives on Women and Food. Amherst, Boston: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Brückner, M. & Caglar, G. (2016): Understanding Meal Cultures — Improving the Consumption of African Indigenous Vegetables: Insights from Sociology and Anthropology of Food. In: African Journal of Horticultural Science, Vol. 9: 53-61.
- DeVault, M.L. (1991). Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Cairns, K. / Johnston, J. (2015): Food and femininity. London: Bloomsbury.
- Ekström, M.P. / Jonsson, I.M. (2005): Family meals: Competence, cooking and company. Retrieved from: <http://www.helsinki.fi/kty/Nordplus/FICS.pdf>.

- Floro, M. S. (2012): The Crises of Environment and Social Reproduction: Understanding their Linkages. In: Journal of Gender Studies, Heft 32, 15. Jahrgang 2012, 13-32.
- Lee-Smith, Diana (1997): My house is my husband - A Kenyan Study of Women's Access to Land and Housing. Lund: University Press.
- Lupton, D. (1996): Food, the body, and the self. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Niehof, A. (2016): Food and nutrition security as gendered social practice. Applied Studies in Agribusiness and Commerce 10 (2-3), 59-67.
- Nyeléni (2007): Declaration of Nyéléni: Declaration of the Forum for Food Sovereignty. Sélingué, Mali. Retrieved from: <https://nyeleni.org/IMG/pdf/DeclNyeleni-en.pdf>.
- Opyio, A.M. (2014): Traditional Leafy Vegetables: Status and Future Prospects. Presentation Hortinlea Summer School. Kenyatta University September 2014.
- Sutton, D. (2014): Cooking is Good to Think. In: Body & Society. Vol. 20 (1), 133-148.
- Teherani-Krönner, P. & Hamburger, B. (ed.) (2014): Mahlzeitenpolitik: Zur Kulturökologie von Ernährung und Gender. München: oekom.
- Warde, A. (1997). Consumption, Food and Taste: Culinary Antinomies and Commodity Culture. London [i.a.]: Sage.
- Winker, Gabriele (2015): Care Revolution – Schritte in eine solidarische Gesellschaft. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag

Nazioarteko Hizketaaldia

ELIKADURAREN ETORKIZUNA ETA NEKAZARITZAREN ERRONKAK XXI. MENDERAKO:

Mundua nork, nola eta zer-nolako inplikazio sozial, ekonomiko eta ekologikorekin elikatuko duen izango da eztabaidagaia

2017ko apirilaren 24 / 26. Europa Biltzar Jauregia. Vitoria-Gasteiz. Araba. Euskal Herria. Europa.

International Colloquium

THE FUTURE OF FOOD AND CHALLENGES FOR AGRICULTURE IN THE 21st CENTURY:

Debates about who, how and with what social, economic and ecological implications we will feed the world.

April 24th - 26th. Europa Congress Palace. Vitoria Gasteiz. Álava. Basque Country/Europe

Coloquio Internacional

EL FUTURO DE LA ALIMENTACIÓN Y RETOS DE LA AGRICULTURA PARA EL SIGLO XXI:

Debates sobre quién, cómo y con qué implicaciones sociales, económicas y ecológicas alimentará el mundo.

24 / 26 de Abril, 2017. Palacio de Congresos Europa. Vitoria-Gasteiz. Álava. País Vasco. Europa.

GUNTZAILEAK/COLABORAN/COLLABORATING ORGANIZATIONS



LAGUNTZA EKONOMIKOA/APOYAN/WITH SUPPORT FROM

