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Food Cultures and Food for Thought: Cultivating Local Knowledges in Africa

LISA MCNEE

Narratives and Knowledge

Narrative is the very stuff of thought, as we cannot claim to 'know' something if we cannot articulate that knowledge in language. Indeed, John Eakin claims that according to neurological case studies and cognitive science, we cannot even know ourselves if we are incapable of narrative (1999). Language, then, is the mediator of all knowledge, including local knowledge. However, language is not a transparent medium, as many theorists in literature and linguistics as well as in philosophy have been at pains to prove to us since the days of structuralism. In this light, we might refer to Lévi-Strauss' work on mythology (1969), Jakobson's famous essay on Baudelaire, Foucault's and Barthes' respective work on discourse and semiotics, or to Fredric Jameson's aptly titled study *The Prison-House of Language*.

In the following article, I intend to focus on the play of verbal dynamics in social exchange—particularly food exchanges, as food is necessary for survival—and on food as an important metaphor for knowledge (i.e. 'food for thought'). According to the anthropologist Michael Jackson,

The fact is that knowledge is directly linked to the production of *food* [my stress] and community and the relationship between thought, language, and activity is intrinsically closer in a preliterate subsistence society than in a modern literate society where knowledge is often abstracted and held aloof from the domains of bodily skills and material processes of production (Jackson, 1989: 132).

This way of thinking about knowledge suggests that an eclectic approach is in order. Africans have traded ideas and goods for centuries, so the origins of a product or thought are perhaps less important than the uses to which these are put in African locales. Adapting a new plant or cereal to African needs, nourishing and healing Africans with products from Asia, the Americas, or Europe, means collaborating in the processes of globalization that link all peoples and simultaneously allow the expression of cultural difference. By extension, these exchanges suggest new ways of thinking about the production of knowledge—food for the mind—as well.

This article is thus an experiment in reading the metaphor of 'food for thought' literally, and in it I seek to explore the connections between the body and cognitive processes. I will offer a very wide range of examples to explain how we might use

this metaphor to understand the production of local knowledge, for this eclecticism supports the argument that the search for origins is futile; exchange is a vital part of the production of knowledge. In addition, I will present anecdotal evidence from my fieldwork experiences and from the autobiographical works of Amadou Hampâté Bâ and other francophone writers that supports the notion that culture has not strayed so far from its etymological roots, which lie in cultivation and agriculture, as we might sometimes think.¹ Cultivating the mind involves cultivating foods in a very literal sense, for the mind does not operate without the proper nourishment, both in the physical and in the intellectual sense.

Home-grown Knowledge

Our first axiom is that local knowledge is profoundly pragmatic and adaptive in nature. Various etymologies reinforce this point of view. Jackson notes that the verb 'to know' is cognate with the word 'can' in all Indo-European languages (1989: 143). In Wolof, a language of the West Atlantic language group, 'xam-xam' has been translated as 'science, savoir, connaissance' [science, knowledge, awareness] by Arame Fal and her associates (Fal *et al.*, 1990). In common usage, even the French word 'science', which has entered Wolof slang, means something more like 'savoir-faire' or know-how than an abstract body of knowledge. Most of the words that Madan's *Standard Swahili-English Dictionary* translates as 'knowledge'—*elimu*, *habari*, *taarifa*—derive from Arabic, and mean information or news, rather than carrying purely abstract connotations of words. *Bayana* and *ubayana*, words that seem to have Bantu origins, are translated as 'clarity, certainty, evidence, and explanation' (*Standard Swahili-English Dictionary*, 1999: 25). Although it would be risky to generalize on the basis of etymologies, it does seem that many peoples associate knowledge with know-how.

In an oblique way, these etymologies indicate a new point of departure for the study of African thought systems. Rather than continuing to participate in the arguments for and against ethnophilosophy, all of which have led to a dead-end (Mudimbe, 1989; Hountoundji, 1983; Wiredu, 1980; Chukwudi Eze, 1997; Kom, 2000), then, I propose that we ask the purely practical question, 'Of what use is philosophy?' If Africans have no need of philosophy, it is unlikely that they will seek to theorize in the manner of Western dialecticians. If, on the other hand, philosophy has some practical purpose that fits a need, it is likely that Africans would come up with their own versions of 'philosophy'. Given that Western philosophy, once the 'queen of sciences', also seems to have lost its rank in the Western academy, the question is of global significance for that discipline.

American philosophers such as Charles Sanders Peirce, John Dewey, William James and Richard Rorty have asked this question before, naming their school of thought 'pragmatism' as a sign of their philosophy's inherent usefulness. As James writes in his delightfully coherent and accessible *Pragmatism* (1907):

The pragmatic method in such cases [metaphysical disputes] is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to any one if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be

traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle (42).

Although we typically associate Western philosophy and epistemology with abstract, Cartesian knowledge based on the mind/body split, many branches of the discipline are practical. Epistemology, or the study of knowledge, involves testing the value of that knowledge. Western logicians have theorized three methods for testing sources of knowledge. Each of these methods is practical in nature, and focuses heavily on the outcome of a procedure.

- Perfect procedure uses independent criteria to evaluate the value of outcome.
- Imperfect procedure (e.g. legal proceedings, jury process): the means determine the end. Although it is clear that the procedure is faulty (for example, the presence of human researchers during laboratory tests alter the results of the tests), we know of no better procedure for coming to a conclusion.
- Pure procedure: rules of the game determine the results (e.g. competitions) (Elgin, 1998).

Although we may disagree with the way in which some African thinkers construe say, perfect procedure (whether they use the term or not, they use the method), we cannot say they are not logical. Characterizing African ‘traditional thought’ generally as holistic systems of knowledge and action, many have argued that Africa can offer no true philosophical legacy, and that its local knowledges are pre-scientific, conservative, and ‘closed’. Robin Horton (1967) in particular is associated with the view that

the ethnoscientist is not prepared to reject his theory or confess ignorance. Coincidence, probability and chance are tolerated by the formal scientist as a result of his ignorance, but for ethnoscience there are no random events. Traditional categories are protected by the folk system, while the formal scientist delights in the new, nonconforming event. In essence, the traditional system is ‘closed’ while formal science is ‘open’ with respect to the acquisition of new knowledge (Knight, 1980: 222).

However, as Knight argues, these distinctions are spurious, in that they describe ideal systems, rather than actual practice. ‘In actual practice, formal science reflects many aspects of an ethnoscience. For example, formal science is notoriously “trendy”’ (222).

And, as development projects show, African farmers (and cooks) are very ready to try new techniques. Like other farmers, they only reject them when they find that they are unsuited to their crops, land or circumstances.

This is not always clear to cultural outsiders who do not speak the local language well and understand idiomatic expressions literally. Richard Swanson, for instance, conflates the explanation of Gourma personal destiny for agricultural failures with a lack of persistence (1980: 75–76); however, the farmer who says ‘my head [fate] doesn’t want it’ is simply stating that forces out of his/her control have made that project a failure. A Western farmer might simply say that a crop ‘wasn’t for me’, and we would not question his/her persistence or patience. Moreover, African farmers have a low margin for risk. Quite probably, these Gourma farmers know that they do not have the economic means to survive more than two or three failures with a new project in raising chickens. Farmers everywhere are gamblers,

betting that the harvest will be good that year. They lose their bet when the rains don't come, pests eat the plants, or other factors intervene. Here again, knowledge is linked to judgment and action.²

Following the logic of perfect procedure, another Gourma farmer decided he could only tend black-and-white hens because all of the other chickens died. Since he did not consider the possibility that other causes might lie behind his success, his logical error was a certain reductionism. Western philosophers are guilty of the same error in many cases. Hegel, for instance, reduced all of Africa to an ahistorical slave continent because he did not know of any sources for African history. Although his philosophy of history relied on outcome (Africa did provide slaves during his life-time), his logical error was the same as the Gourma farmer's mistake: he did not consider other possibilities. Since the Gourma farmer could still benefit from raising black-and-white chickens, presumably easy to find, there was no practical reason for him to seek another answer. If his chickens produced other kinds of offspring, he could merely sell them.

It is important to retain a sense of humility when seeking to understand local knowledge, for sometimes 'old wives' tales' turn out to be more accurate than current science. Indeed, scientists have recently discovered that folk taboos on expecting mothers eating certain kinds of foods or listening to certain sounds have a factual basis.

Research has already shown that day-old infants show a preference for their mother's voice and language and respond more positively to the theme music of her favorite soap opera than to other songs. They're clearly listening from the womb ... But a study in this month's *Pediatrics* journal indicates that they're tasting, too ... flavors cross from the mother's blood into the amniotic fluid, and that [sic] by the third trimester, the fetus has functioning taste buds and olfactory cells. The findings could shed light on the perseverance of ethnic cuisines. 'The foods you eat come to define who you are', Dr. Mennella said. 'Human milk is mirroring a culture' (O'Neill, 2001: 2).

Given this new information, we must re-evaluate our attitudes toward local knowledges banning certain foods for pregnant women's consumption, as well as our attitudes toward those who try to introduce their children to, say, classical music while they are in the womb. If the old wives' tales concerning foods and sounds that affect the infant in the womb are true, other forms of local knowledge that 'rational' scientists have scoffed at may be true as well. In addition, the scholarly commonplace that common sense is not always true may be valid; however, we must remember that 'common sense' varies according to locale, and is a form of judgment, rather than a knowledge based on absolutes.

Nourishing Distinctions: Food and Power

Our second axiom regarding local knowledge is that locating knowledge also involves locating power, since knowledge often arises at the sites where power is contested. The oft repeated phrase 'knowledge is power' holds some truth, just as many proverbs do. When attempting to localize knowledge, we must ask who controls knowledge, and who disseminates it. We must ask ourselves who has

access to knowledge, and be able to describe the channels leading to knowledge. In many cases, local knowledge is prized just as treasure is, and its location is often a secret, even to members of the group in question, as Carolyn Bledsoe's research in Sierra Leone suggests. Sometimes elders will die without sharing their knowledge, as they feel that they have found no appropriate heirs to this lore. The hierarchical initiation structure of secret societies like Poro and Sandè confirm that this is a widespread pattern for the control of knowledge's dissemination.

Secrecy often affects the distribution of power as well. This is a worldwide phenomenon; in Western democracies, voters benefit from the secrecy of the voting booth. In less democratic fashion, most governments also have their 'éminences grises', or figures of power who remain in the shadows behind elected figures. In addition, secret conclaves may choose leaders, or privileged groups of elders or initiates may do so. However, the expression of power is not always so secretive. Power also depends on parades, and on the clear distribution of roles. Those in power make their presence felt most clearly by directing the distribution of goods, such as food. Famine, according to many specialists, is often the result of political decisions. In Ethiopia and the Sudan, the decision to spend state funds on war offers one example. Controlling famine by distributing foodstuffs to all in order to keep the nation strong in the face of enemies is another possible strategy, one widely praised in the ancient world.

According to Johannes Fabian (1990), power itself is closely associated with food in Shaba, Congo-Zaire. In his fieldwork with the theatrical Troupe Mufwankolo, he learned a current saying: 'Le pouvoir se mange entier' [power is eaten whole]. At dinner, the host offered him the chicken gizzard, explaining that this choice morsel goes to the person of highest status. Fabian at first attempted to share the gizzard, but all of the men present refused, and he received a curt explanation in the form of the saying. Finally, he returned the gizzard to the man who had offered it to him, as a sign of respect (1990: 22–23). When Fabian attempted to determine the origins and history of the proverb, he was unable to 'place' it (26–29) in time beyond the colonial period. Although he does not consider the possibility that the proverb derives from the colonial policy of assimilation—a word connoting the digestion of conquered territories—it is quite possible that this is the origin of the word.

In any case, the notion that power is a whole entity and cannot be shared is of great importance. Sharing food with someone is a sign that one considers the person to be an equal, a friend; slaves and servants certainly never eat with their masters, or only on rare occasions (Saturnalia in ancient Rome, or carnival periods in other societies). In ancient Egypt, the manner of eating expressed social distinctions very clearly, as Edda Bresciani explains (43). Paradoxically, the host who pays for the meal often gains prestige by inviting people, even though the invitation may imply respect or a desire for the other's friendship.

Amadou Hampâté Bâ, the Malian author of an important novel (*L'étrange destin de Wangrin*, 1972), several out-standing studies in oral literature, and a three-volume memoir, describes this quite clearly in his memoirs. He left Ouagadougou in the 1920s in a cloud of glory because of his sumptuous manner of receiving guests at his wedding and at a memorable performance when the royal griots of the Naba came to his courtyard (1994: 129). He claims that at least 100 guests came to the feast, so it was a considerable event. Similarly, as leader of his youth group, or

waaldé, he needed the economic means to provide smaller-scale feasts for his friends (1990). As he was the weakest member of the group physically, his family's high economic and social status may have had something to do with the fact that he became leader of the group.

Food, then, is a means for acquiring prestige. It follows that most guests wish to respond in kind, for fear of losing face. Charles Piot describes the stakes in these interchanges in his book on the Kabré of northern Togo, *Remotely Global* (1999) in vivid fashion. His acquaintance Tikénawé made market beer (*dolo*) and sold it to Palabéi, a chief, on credit. He owed her a considerable amount at the end of the year, and Piot asked her whether this was not a case of a senior man 'taking advantage of a younger woman' (63–64), but she responded unexpectedly. '“Certainly not”, she responded. “The opposite is true here: I had a chief who was in debt to me all year long. Because of this, he had to ‘respect’ me. Whenever he saw me, he reminded me of his debt to me. This is worth far more to me than a few calabashes of beer”' (64).

Bâ gives an equally telling anecdote about power and food exchanges when recounting the story of his trip to Ouagadougou. During the river trip, he meets a fisherman and gives him several gifts. In response, the fisherman invites him and his guard to dinner, tells the story of Markadougouba at Bâ's request, and gives him provisions for the rest of the trip. Bâ comments, 'Il était visiblement heureux de cette visite, qu'il n'oublierait pas de sitôt. Mais j'avais le sentiment que j'y avais gagné beaucoup plus que lui' [He was visibly happy about this visit, which he would not forget very quickly. But I had the feeling that I had gained much more than he] (1994: 32). Rhetorically, then, Bâ reasserts his superiority over the fisherman, in spite of the fact that the fisherman had provided food so generously.

Sometimes trickster-like figures use food to gain the upper hand. In his memoirs, Bâ offers many stories of the use of food to gain prestige or implement power. He did not always come out on top. As a Muslim, he could not drink alcoholic beverages. However, when he accepted his first position in the colonial registration service in Ouagadougou, one of his Mossi acquaintances tricks him into drinking a beverage called *toosi*, a finer grade of *dolo*, the millet beer of the area. Unaware that this drink too is alcoholic, Amadou experiences his first hangover (1994: 98–100). Here, knowledge, power and food come together in an interesting nexus. On another occasion, Amadou plays the trickster himself, and fools the French doctor with a feigned illness (that he ascribes to the efforts of a local marabout for the reader's benefit) that he says can only be cured by drinking milk on a daily basis. 'Il me manque le lait, qui est la base de la nourriture des Peuls. Les Mossis n'en buvant jamais, on n'en trouve pratiquement pas à Ouagadougou' [I miss milk, which is the staple foodstuff of the Fulani. As the Mossi don't ever drink it, one can hardly find it in Ouagadougou]³ (1994: 140). Since Ouagadougou was not well-supplied with milk at the time, he thus gained official consent to move to Dori, an area dominated by Halpulaaren (1994: 138–141).

This story offers a useful example of a weapon of the weak. Under French colonialism, food taboos were accepted by the administration as sufficient reason for not serving in certain areas, as well as for not undertaking certain tasks. Although the French did seek to assimilate West Africans, they also attempted to use the information that colonial-period ethnologists such as Delafosse, Delavignette, Griaule and Labouret had acquired in order to administer colonials. Indeed,

Bâ claims that the administrators had more power than the military (1994: 166), a remark that many might find surprising.⁴ Moreover, we might find it even more surprising that these administrators would take issues of food and food taboos seriously. Given the importance of food and cuisine in French culture, however, perhaps this should not be as surprising as it is for us today.⁵

Knowledge Ownership: Food for the Nation

A third axiom is that food culture is the nexus for the creation of cultural identities, as well as local knowledges, and thus plays a role in the affirmation of proprietary claims to knowledge. Affirmations of ownership are often nationalistic and make dubious claims to purity or original ownership of particular ideas and/or foods. Some post-colonial writers do not distinguish between supposedly negative cultural imports and actual poison. In a fiery denunciation of such cultural exchanges, Kala-Lobe wrote in 1976 that

D'un côté, on pillait aux Africains leurs biens du sol, du sous-sol, du ciel et de la mer. De l'autres [sic], on les sommait d'acheter et de consommer des produits importés, empoisonnés, à la place de leurs denrées traditionnelles beaucoup plus saines. Tout cela fait partie du diabolique plan d'extermination de la Race Noire ... (219).

On one hand, they pillaged Africans' goods of the soil, of the under-strata, of the sky and of the sea. On the other, they forced them to buy and consume imported, poisoned products in place of their traditional foodstuffs, [which were] much more healthy. All of that is part of the diabolical plan to exterminate the Black Race ...

Clearly, he believes that it is possible to define a specifically African food culture. Although we will question that belief, arguing for a far more fluid and nuanced picture of culture and knowledge, the issue of exploitation that he addresses is an important one. The foods that came to Africa from the Americas came via the slave trade, and they were used to facilitate the slave trade. Traders needed to feed large numbers of people, but they had disturbed all agricultural cultivation in the areas in which they were active. The manioc was the perfect substitute for other, more labour-intensive crops, as it can stay in the ground for up to two years, and needs no other storage. However, it is indeed less nutritious than the foods Africans ate before it was introduced in the forest regions of the continent where it is most widely used, and can be dangerous if not properly processed. (The 'sweet' manioc does not need a great deal of processing, but the other variety contains a high level of natural toxins.)

Eileen Julien, on the other hand, argues against attempts to guarantee the authenticity of African cultures and literatures; such attempts are a 'prescription for mystification' (1992: 154). Following that logic, I would argue that it matters less where a product or idea originates, and much more what one does with the foodstuff or idea. As an anecdote from my fieldwork in Senegal in 1993 illustrates, however, I was not always aware of this point. I was chatting with friends in the courtyard after lunch, waiting for the moment when we should prepare tea for any eventual guests. The children, meanwhile, had run off to play. Souleymane, the five-year-old son of my friend Mame Daba, suddenly arrived at the head of a troop

of children aged between four and eight, all singing a song whose refrain was ‘Pain, boulette’ (bread, meatball). I was instantly on alert for the elusive ‘local knowledge’ and evidence of the children’s invention of their own songs. In my naïveté, I thought no one would be more untouched by ‘MacWorld’ culture than young children in Louga, Senegal, who are still learning about their own culture and do not yet attend school. In addition, children usually turn away from ‘foreign’ foods and tastes, preferring the familiar. Indeed, many people are quite conservative when it comes to food.

We are what we eat, according to the popular saying, and our home is where the hearth (and the cooking pot) is, after all. ‘Qui dit “identité culinaire” dit “identité culturelle” ou vice versa’, [Whoever says ‘culinary identity’ says ‘cultural identity’ or vice versa] according to Iwiyè Kala-Lobe (196). Similarly, Igor Cusack has argued in a recent article that the notion that every nation must have its own cuisine is widespread (2000: 208), for it is ‘the constructed edifice of the national cuisine, whatever it is, that contributes to the nation-building project’ (209). Campaigns that promote African cereals, such as the Senegalese billboards stating ‘Dugub sunu allal’ (Millet, our wealth), are part of that project of inventing the new nation. Millet was indeed the primary cereal domesticated in the region, and can be considered the traditional Senegalese staple.

Ironically, the national dishes of postcolonial Africa are often inventions of the new elite (Cusack, 2000: 209), and some are based on ingredients of foreign origin. In Senegal, people are very proud of the national dish, the *céeb u jën* (rice and fish) that is the delicious daily staple of Senegalese cooking. Although rice is grown in Casamance, the rebellious southern province of Senegal, crops are limited and have always been the source of conflict between *Casamançais* and outsiders who want their rice.⁶ Currently, rice is being grown in the Senegal River valley as well, but in fact, rice became a major feature in the Senegalese diet because of the colonizer’s policy.

From about 1870, the French began growing ground nuts, so that by the 1930s over half of the agricultural land in Senegal was allocated to this crop. Meanwhile, in Indochina the French were producing rice, so that importing rice to Africa made sense. As a result, the government of independent Senegal is burdened with an enormous rice import bill and wants to boost the consumption of local grains such as millet and sorghum. However, rice is easy to cook, while the local grains need more complex preparation (Cusack, 2000: 210).

Amadou Hampâté Bâ’s recollection of rice being ‘une nourriture de roi’ [food of kings] according to an adage current in Bandiagara in his youth confirms the popularity of this policy. Only the wealthy could afford rice in the pre-WWI era, so when little Amkoullel had rice for dinner, he would make sure to run out of the courtyard before washing his hands, and asked his playmates to sniff his hand and guess what he had eaten. ‘Il s’émerveillait: “C’est du riz! Oh! C’est du riz!” Gonflé d’orgueil comme un crapaud, j’éclatais de rire: “Ça, ça ne s’appelle pas du riz, mais de la céréale royale!”’ (Bâ, 1990: 194–195) [He wondered: ‘It’s rice! It’s rice!’ Swelled with conceit like a toad, I burst out laughing: ‘That, that isn’t called rice, but the royal grain!’] This attitude persisted even in post-colonial Senegal, according to the historian Mamadou Sy (personal communication, June 2001).

And the bread and meatballs of the song the children sang in Mame Daba's courtyard? I soon learned to my chagrin that the song was the Senegalese pop singer Souleymane Faye's version of a James Brown song! (The James Brown song does not even mention food.) The song does provide an interesting insight in that the Senegalese version focuses on foods brought to Africa during the colonial period: wheat bread and meatballs. These are now integral components in the local diet, yet it is clear that they are not 'traditional'. This song demonstrates once again that the local is also part of the global.

In fact, this proves to be the case with most African foodstuffs, for many of the staple grains and tubers such as manioc, taro, the banana, the plantain, the peanut, the potato, the tomato, and maize came from South America or Asia (see Cusack, 2000: 210; Newman, 2000: 1330–1339; McClatchey, 2000: 175–181). Millet, finger millet (eleusine) and fonio were domesticated in Africa, and other grasses provide nourishment, but the dishes we associate with Africa—dishes such as *tô*, *foufou*, *ugali* and *gari*—are products of another set of local knowledges, made available through the European trans-Atlantic trade. Africans literally ate Amerindian and Asian cultures.

Western foodstuffs and table manners have also entered into the cultural codes of many Africans. In Senegal, the honoured guest or highest-status diner often receives a spoon, even when eating at the communal dish. Sometimes, to honour the guest, s/he is given a separate bowl. This is an extension of the logic of typical Senegalese generosity that leads a hostess to push the choicest morsels of fish, meat or vegetables toward her guest when the guest does eat at the communal platter.

Other Western habits have been adopted by urban Africans as a sign of special status or privilege, but these table manners do not eradicate African table manners so much as they supplement them. For instance, Karen Tranberg Hansen writes that she 'came across Zambian civil servant households in which the male cook prepared "English" food (e.g. meat and boiled vegetables, served separately) for the household head, and the wife cooked Zambian food (*nshima* and relish) for herself and the children' in Lusaka (1999: 83). As Gracia Clark pointed out to me (personal communication, June 2001), this adoption of Western table manners reflects an adaptation, rather than a whole-sale adoption of a new etiquette. The Zambian civil servant's use of the table dovetails with African table manners, for men do not eat with women and children, but separately.

Another practice implies adaptation of a Western product to facilitate an African manner of serving food. Hansen describes kitchen parties, women's gatherings that take place prior to weddings, as occasions on which each guest receives a separately wrapped meal. This is the custom for kitchen parties given by people at all class levels (1999: 85). These table manners have spread to Tanzania as well. In 1990, I was invited to a wedding in Zanzibar Town, and observed something similar. Although the wedding organizers were clearly very influenced by the customs of the Arab countries of the Gulf, to judge from the clothing of the attendants and dancers, the food was served in individually-wrapped servings. This contrasts greatly with Senegalese feasts of similar sorts, where food is always served in platters to groups.

Although Hansen stresses the apparent oddity of giving people separately-wrapped meals in a culture where people usually eat out of the same platter, she and I forgot that Africans also served foods wrapped individually in banana leaves

in the past (Gracia Clark, personal communication, June 2001). Now African hosts have chosen to use Saran wrap, a Western product, to replace banana leaf wrappers, but this does not imply an abandonment of African table manners, but an adaptation of a Western product that suits African needs. Indeed, the use of 'foreign' foods and table manners on occasion does not so much displace African table manners and foods as supplement them. The typical diner is very committed to the long tradition of African foods based on a staple starchy food and a stew or relish on top, as well as to African etiquette. In the same manner, foodstuffs from around the world have become part of African cuisine because they could be adapted to African tastes and needs.

Purity and Utility: Sometimes You Just Have to Get Your Hands Dirty

A fourth axiom is that knowledge is transferable, and grows through exchange. In other words, local knowledge is always 'glocal' in some sense. In sum, this is an argument against the logic of cultural purity that drives Kala-Lobe to push for a 'purely' African culture. The highly legitimate need to assert proprietary rights over knowledge has certain limits. What is the sense of pure knowledge if it has no purpose? Should African cooks, usually women, accept 'traditional' foods in the name of an abstract concept of national culture, rather than adapting new food products that are easier and quicker to prepare, even though this might mean that they will have less time for other activities? Given that knowledge means power in many if not most cases, what are the ethical problems involved in this conundrum? It is easy to point to the Manhattan Project scientists and argue that the quest for knowledge for knowledge's own sake is sometimes ethically tainted. Politicians put the hydrogen bomb to questionable purposes, and the scientists' search for knowledge served those ends. Indeed, we might even argue that hoarding knowledge that could be used elsewhere is as morally reprehensible as stockpiling food during a famine. Since Western nations do both, what are the ethical consequences of knowledge production along the lines of the Western model?

One of the key differences between Western philosophies and African philosophies is that Western societies have chosen to professionalize and corporatize the function of philosopher and of scientist, making it possible for individuals to claim proprietary rights to certain ideas or even certain types of knowledge. The existence of professional stratification is a sign of wealth, and thus of prestige. That professional class of philosophers distinguishes itself from theologians. However, such was not always the case—until the end of the nineteenth century, the era of Nietzsche, most philosophers were careful to tread lightly when religious sensibilities were concerned. In addition, many Western philosophers might more correctly be called cosmologists, as they often choose to play in the field of metaphysical abstractions that James excludes from his field of inquiry for practical reasons (i.e. we cannot come to any verifiable conclusions about, say, the existence of God). Philosophy thus underwrites some very dangerous positions. In contrast to these metaphysicians, pragmatists argue for localizing all knowledge. As Michael Jackson explains,

the fight against abstraction and reification is a fight against the forgetfulness that is the ground of the possibility of such acts [of racist hatred]. For

without the radical splitting of person from Principle, being from Being, local from Global, existence from Idea, I cannot even begin to imagine the Other except as myself (Jackson, 1998: 202).

Abstracting Western philosophy from the practical need to demonstrate the usefulness and the credibility of an idea simply discredits philosophical practice. Pragmatic philosophies, however, avoid or attempt to avoid the shoals of fallacious abstractions.

It follows that saying that African societies do not have philosophers is rather like saying that they do not have leaders or religious teachers because these people exercise other professions in addition to their roles as philosophers or theologians. Philosophy literally means 'love of knowledge'. How can one possibly deny that there are African thinkers who love knowledge and are devoted to it? Africans assimilate and adapt foreign types of the 'denrée mentale', or mental food, just as they have adapted and assimilated foreign types of food. But make no mistake—Africans do with these imports what they will. Instead of making cornbread or tortillas, they make *tô* with maize, or *foufou* with instant potato flakes, adapting a readily available product to their own ends. Similarly, African thinkers do not necessarily share Western preoccupations, and might use Western tools to make different philosophical 'dishes'. A universalizing, monistic form of rationalism does not apply. Instead, we might look to a pragmatic pluralism, of James's sort, in order to examine the fluid exchanges that take place between Africa and the rest of the world.

The story of the Western search for an African philosophy, then, can be characterized as a quest for a Western form of knowledge that has successfully been extended into the academy and cloaked as universal knowledge. Instead of continuing on this path, we should seek permutations of philosophy that we might not see from within the framework of a professionalized, academic model. At the same time, it is not necessary to return to the muddy conceptual waters of an ethnophilosophy that defined *everything* as philosophy. Some people love knowledge, while others are less interested in lore. The true difference between philosophers and the rest of the world lies in the realm of intellectual commitment, rather than professional, geographical or ethnic differences. Although the recipes for knowledge are endless, this remains a constant: 'La mentale denrée, comme une autre, indispensable, garde son cours' [Mental food, like another, indispensable, retains its exchange value] (374).⁷

NOTES

¹ See Chapter 1, 'Versions of Culture', of Terry Eagleton's *The Idea of Culture* (2000) for an overview of the history of the uses of the word culture in English.

² Metaphors are important indicators of cultural values; however, as Michael Jackson argues, they operate below the surface of every-day consciousness in most cases.

References to the body are implicit and usually below the threshold of our awareness. In everyday life, when we say a nuisance is a 'pain in the neck', or a 'headache', or a 'handful' or that someone is 'stiff-necked' or 'looks down on us', we are seldom mindful of the *actual* links between the mental or emotional attitude signified and the bodily praxis which does the signifying. If a nuisance actually does give us a headache or sore neck we are still unlikely to regard the relationship between the verbal form and the actual event as anything other than arbitrary. This is, I believe, the case in both literate and nonliterate societies. For instance, when in English we speak of the mouth of a river it is usually without any thought or visualization of a human mouth. Among the

Kuranko of Sierra Leone the same suspension of disbelief applies in everyday speech. One enters a house through its 'mouth' (i.e. door), or 'cuts one's mouth off' from one's natal home (when building a house of one's own) or 'cuts one's mouth off from another person' (when one takes umbrage) without necessarily being aware of the psychophysical side of the metaphors, e.g. that leaving home is like 'cutting one's mouth off the breast' at weaning because, thereafter, one can no longer depend on the family granary for food (Jackson, 1989: 143).

³ All translations are mine.

⁴ When his *commandant de cercle* lowers the flag as a sign of mourning because his part African son has died, the captain who disputes this order learns his lesson: the commander orders him to return to France at the head of a troupe of Algerian soldiers who must return via the Sahara. Bâ puts it as follows:

Le capitaine ignorait sans doute qu'à la colonie un Blanc pouvait tout se permettre, sauf se frotter à un administrateur colonial. Tout le monde, Blancs et Noirs, était à la merci des administrateurs coloniaux. Ils étaient là comme une pierre au milieu d'un tas d'oeufs: si un oeuf tombe sur la pierre, l'oeuf se casse; se c'est la pierre qui tombe sur l'oeuf, c'est encore l'oeuf qui se casse (1994: 166).

⁵ The classic example is the nineteenth-century writer Brillat-Savarin, but French attempts to philosophize over food continue. Michel Onfray writes of his first taste of a vintage from Yquem, 'Le flacon fut ouvert, posé devant nos yeux. Suivre de longues minutes d'un silence comme seulement en sont capables, je crois, les fidèles d'un culte' (1995: 20). Food, then, represents the sacred for this 'philosopher of hedonism', as he characterizes himself (see also Descombes, 1995).

⁶ Sembène Ousmane dramatized the conflict over rice engendered when the French requisitioned the harvest to feed troops during WWII in the film *Emitaï* (1972).

⁷ As Descombes explains, Mallarmé was comparing books to food at a time when many were predicting that the book market would crash, as people were not reading much. Mallarmé (1945) observes that bookstores seemed to be doing well, judging by the piles of books. 'A l'étalage des boutiques, la marchandise destinée à nourrir l'esprit abonde. Le cours de la denrée mentale ne s'est pas effondré' (Descombes, 1995: 11).

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