CHAPTER 3

FOOD CULTURES

Folake Samuel and Neelam Makhani

Outline

• Food culture
• Diets in Africa
• South Asian diets
• Globalization of food culture in developing countries

Objectives

At the completion of this chapter you should be able to:

• Understand how culture affects the dietary habits of a society
• Know the different cultural outlooks about foods and their use in developing countries, particularly countries in Africa and South Asia
• Understand the term *globalization* with respect to food culture in developing countries
1. **FOOD CULTURE**

*Food* refers to nutritious substances that when eaten sustain life and health. Dietary habits therefore play a key role in supporting life and well-being. *Culture*, on the other hand, refers to beliefs, attitudes, and practices accepted by the members of a particular group or society. Culture characterizes people in terms of language, customs, values, norms, rules, technologies, products, organizations, and institutions. Culture has also been described as a social identity associated with shared behaviour, a pattern that includes food habits, dress, language, family structure, and sometimes religious affiliation.

Food does not only have nutritional value, it also has cultural value. Culture largely determines the food we eat, while the foods available in the environment are themselves an important building block of culture and tradition of the people. Food culture involves the ways in which humans use food, including how food is obtained and stored, how it is prepared, how it is served and to whom, how it is consumed, and how people celebrate special occasions with special foods. Food culture arises out of the place of a people’s origin and whether they still live there or not. It is also shaped by several other factors: resources (climate, land, soil, water, and fuel); belief and information (religion, education and literacy, communication); ethnicity (indigenous or immigrant); technology (hunting, gathering, agricultural, horticultural, aquacultural, fishing, food processing and storage, transport, cooking); colonization; and by health status and health care (Wahlqvist & Lee, 2007).

Many have observed that culturally based food habits are often tightly held onto, and are therefore difficult to change through adoption, acculturation, and assimilation. Assimilation occurs when an individual or a group of persons drop the original cultural identity of food to fully merge into a new one. This may occur when they move to another society with different cultural norms and food culture.

2. **ASPECTS OF FOOD CULTURE**

For human beings, daily food intake is an intricate phenomenon that arises from the need to satisfy hunger (for survival and well-being) but also to meet social needs. In this latter respect, human beings differ from animals. Moreover, humans not only gather or hunt food, but they also cultivate plants and raise livestock. They cook food, use utensils for eating, create rules for behaviour (“table manners”), and use food in social and religious rituals (Kittler & Sucher, 2007). As described by Fox (2003), eating is a profoundly social urge:

Food is almost always shared; people eat together; mealtimes are events when the whole family or settlement or village comes together. Food is also an occasion for sharing, for distributing and giving, for the expression of altruism, whether from parents to children, children to in-laws, or anyone to visitors and strangers. Food is the most important thing a mother gives a child; it is the substance of her own body, and in most parts of the world mother’s milk is still the only safe food for infants. Thus food becomes not just a symbol of, but the reality of, love and security.

2.1 **Social Aspects of Eating**

Food is also eaten for meeting the need for a sense of belonging: the use of food shows that an individual belongs to a group. As humans crave to fit into society, it follows naturally that people often adopt a dietary practice to demonstrate a sense of belonging. For example, people of the African diaspora may choose to eat African foods on certain occasions or at parties as an expression of ethnic identity. Food can be linked to status, and this is plainly seen when people’s dietary habits change as they move up the socio-economic ladder. They tend to go beyond mere consumption of basic staple items for survival to the purchase and intake of more expensive and indeed exotic forms of diet that are prestigious and can adequately “match” their status. Foods that are considered within their own culture as “food for the poor” are consciously excluded from the daily diet as these could “taint” their achieved social position. In general, eating with particular people connotes social equality with those people – many societies regulate who can dine together as a means of establishing class (Kittler & Sucher, 2007). Moreover, a gendered dimension is seen in some cultures where women and children eat apart from men.

2.2 **Conservatism of Cuisine**

Another aspect of the culture-food interaction is the concept of “conservatism of cuisine.” Although what
people eat is based in part on what has traditionally been available to them, food habits are also culturally defined. Thus, some food items, although edible and nutritious, remain taboo among certain population groups. In essence, what determines consumption of a particular food is not only its availability (and our ability to purchase it) but, importantly, its cultural acceptability.

The Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) defines food security as a state in which all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. As the inclusion of the term food preferences in this definition indicates, food security has a dimension beyond the physiological. Food preferences, while sometimes purely idiosyncratic, are strongly determined by culture and tradition: what is considered acceptable as food is dictated to a large extent by cultural norms. This explains why people are often reluctant to try foods that are unfamiliar to them – why they tend to be conservative in their choice of cuisine.

2.3 Food Taboos
A food taboo refers to the act of abstaining from certain foods by reason of culture or religion. Food taboos dictate what may or may not be eaten, and by whom, at what periods certain foods may or may not be eaten, and which foods can or cannot be eaten together. Cultural guidelines may also exist regarding how a particular crop is to be harvested or how a certain type of animal is to be slaughtered, cooked, and served. Many Jewish households keep kosher, for example, in accordance with the kashrut, or dietary law. Or, to take another example, in most Western cultures, the idea of eating dog or horse meat is repugnant, as is the thought of eating insects, which are considered a delicacy in some cultures.

Food taboos can also be tied to the reproductive cycle. Pregnant women, for example, may be allowed to eat certain foods but not others. Cultural values and beliefs can also affect infant feeding practices, including the practice of breast-feeding, in ways that may have either a positive or negative impact on a child’s nutritional status. For example, in some cultures, mothers are told that a child with diarrhoea should abstain from food in order to “cleanse” the belly. Another widely held belief in some cultures is that colostrum is “dirty” and should be discarded, and a baby should therefore not be suckled until the “white milk” appears.

2.4 Etiquette
Proper etiquette for serving and eating food also shows great variation between different cultures. In many cultures, only the right hand may be used for eating, because the other hand (the left) is, culturally, not suitable, as it is designated for sanitation purposes. While meals must be eaten silently in some cultures, in others mealtimes are looked forward to as a period for family discussion and interaction. In considering all these possibilities, it should be accepted that there are no absolute right or wrong food habits, as conclusions can only be made within the perspective of one’s own culture – provided that the food habits in question are of nutritional benefit to the consumers.

2.5 Religious Aspects
Food plays different, important roles in many religious faiths and practices. These roles are usually rigid and tenaciously held by the adherents of the faiths. Then again, these roles may vary within a faith or philosophy. For instance, most Buddhists are vegetarians so as to avoid killing animals. Some Buddhists avoid meat and dairy products, while others only shun beef. Many Hindus are vegetarian but this is not obligatory. Muslims follow a list of foods that are allowed (halal, Arabic for “permitted” or “lawful”) and those that are prohibited (haram), such as pork and alcohol. Rastafarians follow the Ital diet (where Ital is derived from vital), which means a natural and sane way of life. Ital is largely a vegan or vegetarian diet, though some people consume limited types of meat in accordance with the dietary laws of the Old Testament. Christian practices vary by denomination and sect. While Catholic and Orthodox Christians observe several feast and fast days during the year, most Protestants observe only Easter and Christmas as feast days and don’t follow ritualized fasting. Some Christians do not drink alcohol, including many members of various Protestant churches. Seventh Day Adventists avoid both caffeinated and alcoholic beverages, and they are vegetarians.
2.6 Symbolic Aspects
Aside from faith-related food taboos, religious symbolism of foods occupies a significant position in indigenous societies. An example of religious symbolism has been documented in Ghana, where Oto, a sacred dish made from hard-boiled eggs, mashed yam, and palm oil, is commonly served as part of several ceremonies (Osseo-Asare, 2003). Such Ghanaian ceremonies include the naming ceremony for a new baby (an "outdooring"), the purification of the mother after birth, at puberty ceremonies for girls, at festivals associated with twins (whom the Akan and Ga people consider sacred), and at special occasions after the birth of the third, seventh, or tenth child of the same sex (based on numbers that are sacred in the Akan and Ga cultures).

Palm wine and cola nuts are important symbolic foods throughout West Africa. In Nigeria, for example, palm wine is of paramount importance at most social functions (Okafor, 1979). It is used in pouring libations, offering prayers, and heralding events. Cola nuts are regarded as important symbols of welcome and hospitality. Among the Igbo of Southern Nigeria, all discussions, prayers, and ceremonies begin with the breaking of cola nuts, and without cola, these occasions are not regarded as serious (Okigbo, 1980).

3. DIETS IN AFRICA
We now turn our attention to the diets followed in Africa. It is the second largest continent in the world and has a vast array of geographic, ethnic, and cultural diversity. This diversity includes widely varying dietary habits. Here are a few examples of the foods that are eaten: Injera, an Ethiopian flat bread; Tajine, a Moroccan lamb or poultry stew; pounded yam and egusi soup, a Nigerian tuber and vegetable dish; Sukuma wiki, a Kenyan vegetable dish; and Bobotie, a South African meatloaf. However, each region of Africa has its distinct cuisines.

3.1 Northern Africa
Much of the diet of Northern Africa is based on grains, which are used to prepare flat breads and porridges. Couscous (made from hard wheat and millet) is often the main dish at lunch, which is the primary meal. This may be accompanied by vegetables and meat from a variety of domesticated and wild animals. Legumes, such as broad beans (fava beans), lentils, yellow peas, and black-eyed peas, are also important staples. Cooking with olive oil, onions, and garlic is common. Notable spices include cumin, caraway, clove, and cinnamon, while the fruits consumed include oranges, lemons, pears, and mandrakes. Alcoholic drinks are forbidden in many places, as the cuisine largely reflects the Islamic traditions of the region. Mint tea and coffee are very popular non-alcoholic beverages in this region.

3.2 West Africa
Food staples in West Africa vary widely, ranging from rice, which is common from Mauritania to Liberia and across to the Sahel, to root crops, primarily varieties of yam and cassava, which are common along the coast from Côte d’Ivoire to Nigeria and Cameroon. The staple is eaten with soups made from legumes, green leafy vegetables, other vegetables, meat, fish, or other foods from animal sources, with palm or vegetable oil. The soups of West Africa tend to be generously flavoured with peppers and other condiments and spices to add taste and variety. As observed by Osseo-Asare (2003), the “sacred” combination of pepper, onions, and tomatoes, otherwise known as “the ingredients,” form a “holy trinity” (a term also used in New Orleans cooking), providing in the appropriate amounts, the base for endless varieties of soups, stews, sauces, and gravies in the region.

3.3 Central and East Africa
In Central and Eastern Africa, the abundant green bananas and plantain are used as the base of the main dish. This may be eaten with a relish made from pumpkin, cowpea, or cassava leaves, with the addition of groundnut sauce or red palm oil (Oniang’o et al., 2003). Other main staples include potatoes, rice, and a maize meal that is cooked up into a thick porridge. Beef, goat, chicken, or sheep are the most common meats.
3.4 Southern Africa

The traditional meal in the Southern African region is centred on a staple crop, usually rice or maize, served with a stew. The most common dish made from cornmeal is called mealie meal, pap, or nshima, depending on the country. It is usually eaten with stew poured over it; the stew may include a boiled vegetable, such as cabbage, spinach, carrots, or turnips. Chicken and beef are widely eaten. A great variety of fruits are available in the southern part of the continent. Within this region, South Africa is of special interest because it is a mixture of several cultures. South Africans of Dutch, other European and Asian Indian descent have diets similar to those eaten in their countries of origin. This is one reason why the country appears to be farther along than the rest of Africa in adopting a Westernized diet and lifestyle.

3.5 The Changing Face of Diets in Africa

Many African countries have in the past three generations experienced extensive changes in food supplies and household diets (Oniang’o et al., 2003). Exotic, non-traditional foods now dominate many urban areas. Even in rural areas, the range of traditional domestic foodstuffs has been considerably reduced, partly because of increased cost of production and processing, and also because of long and laborious domestic preparation methods. Shifts in the traditional eating patterns, new forms of cooking, and new sources of food have emerged, coupled with shifts towards higher levels of women’s participation in the workforce and subsequent changes in domestic roles and culinary practices.

4. THE SOUTH ASIAN DIET

South Asians are of Indian, Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi, and Pakistani origin. Their food and cultural practices, although similar to each other in many ways, vary from region to region, reflecting the varied religious beliefs of the different peoples. Geographical location has also had an important influence. For example, the majority of people living in India are Hindus and tend to be vegetarians. Non-Hindu people living in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh choose fish more frequently. Each cultural group has its own eating habits; however, they all share similar food choices.

The most common staples used in the South Asian diet are rice (chawal) and flour (atta). Rice is either used plain or it may include spices to make pilaf. Wheat and corn flour is used to make a variety of flat breads. These may be made into roti, naan, puri, or paratha. A griddle (tawa) is used to cook roti, and other breads like puri and paratha are fried in vegetable oil.

A variety of legumes (dried peas and beans) and lentils are used in South Asian cooking. Lentils are used to make daals, which have a soup-like consistency. Some common legumes and lentils include red lentils (masoor), black bean (urad), chickpeas (channa), pigeon pea (tuvar), and green gram (mung). These may either be used whole or split in curries, or processed into flour. Lentil flour is used to coat vegetables before frying. Chickpea flour is a very common ingredient as a batter mix for deep-fried snacks.

Meat choices used in South Asian cooking include beef, goat, and lamb. Use of beef is very minimal because of the religious (Hindu) belief that the cow is a sacred animal. Muslims use beef or lamb but don’t use pork. Use of halal meat is a mainstay among the Muslims. Fish is used among communities that are non-Hindu and/or living in the coastal areas. Meat is used in curries or as a filling in snacks.

Snack foods are very common in South Asian eating. They are either used as appetizers or in the evening as a snack with tea. A very popular snack food is samosa. A variety of fillings is used to make this finger food, including potatoes, mixed vegetables, minced meat, cheese (paneer), and curried chickpeas.

South Asians consume cow’s milk on a daily basis. It is used to make yogurt, buttermilk, and desserts. In India, the cow is considered a sacred animal because it provides milk. Buffalo milk is also used in India. Coconut milk is used in many south Indian dishes to cook rice, meat, and vegetables.

Vegetables are an indispensable ingredient in South Asian cooking. They can be part of an appetizer, snack, soup, or main or side dish. They are also used to make different pickles (achaar). Some common vegetables include potato, green peas, eggplants, and okra. Vegetables may be used at all meals. They are typically cooked with oil and different spices to make them into curries.

Many fruits are used by South Asians either at a meal or as a snack. Mangoes are very common and eaten
either fresh or pickled. They are also used in a variety of desserts and in drinks. Other common fruits used include papaya, grapes, and guava.

Most South Asian curries are cooked in vegetable oil, which traditionally is used liberally in cooking. In north and west India, peanut oil is most popular, while in east India, mustard oil is commonly used. Coconut oil is used widely in southern India and along the coastal regions. Another fat used in many recipes is ghee (clarified butter). It is made from cows’ milk. Foods are deep-fried either in oil or ghee in traditional South Asian cooking. Animal fat is never used in the cultures of the region, mainly because of religious practices.

Indian cuisine is characterized by the use of a variety of herbs and spices. Commonly used spices include chilli pepper, black mustard seed (rai), cumin (jeera), coriander (dhania), turmeric (haldi), fenugreek (methi), garlic (lasan), ginger (adrak), and asafoetida (hing). A popular spice mix is garam masala, which is a powder that typically includes dried spices such as cardamom, cinnamon, and cloves. This spice mix varies from region to region.

Tea (chai) is used very commonly by South Asians. It is usually consumed at breakfast and with snacks. The process of making tea involves boiling water with tea leaves. Spices such as cardamom, cinnamon, and/or cloves are added to the tea mix as it boils. Sugar is also added, followed by the addition of fresh milk. Besides tea, some cold beverages, such as lemonade (Nimbu Pani), buttermilk (lassi), and coconut water, are used.

South Asian cuisine includes numerous desserts, such as gulab jamun, kheer, and ras malai, which are generally eaten in small quantities. Gulab jamun consists of dried milk dumplings, deep fried and soaked in sugar and rose water syrup. Kheer is a creamy rice pudding flavoured with cardamom, saffron, and nuts. Ras malai are dumplings made from Indian cheese (paneer) that are soaked in sweetened milk. Such desserts, which are intensely sweet, are mainly consumed on special occasions or as part of religious celebrations.

Eating habits among South Asians tend to be similar in many ways. The meal pattern usually consists of three meals and an evening snack. Many families gather in the evening to have tea and a snack. The main meal is eaten much later into the evening (8–9 pm). Breakfast foods include tea and some sort of flat bread. Many families have pickles (achhaar) and/or chutneys with flat bread. Foods eaten at lunch and dinner tend to be very similar. Both meals include rice, flat bread, two or three kinds of vegetable curries, lentils (daal), and plain yogurt and/or buttermilk (lassi). If meat is used, then a meat curry will also be present. Condiments include a variety of pickles and chutneys. Traditionally, meals are eaten either on the floor or on very low stools. Food is usually eaten with the right hand. A small piece of the flat bread is used to scoop the vegetable curry for eating. Cutlery is not used commonly.

Fasting is practised by many South Asian religious groups. Muslims fast during the Holy Month of Ramadhan, each day from sunrise to sunset. During this fast neither food nor water is taken. Among Hindus, fasting may either be on a certain day of the week or month, and some foods and water are allowed during the day. This type of fasting includes one main meal during the day.

5. THE GLOBALIZATION OF FOOD CULTURE IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

In the past, colonialism influenced the food culture in many countries as the colonialists brought new foods and cultures to indigenous people where they established their colonies, and in return, took new foods and cultures back home. However, the dietary habits and nutrition environment in contemporary times are being influenced by globalization and other socio-economic factors that are changing the traditional pattern of indigenous diets all over the world. The different cultural perspectives to food are gradually being eroded, while entirely new ones or amalgams of the traditional and new are being formed. There is rapid diffusion of food culture from one region of the world to another, and people are quickly adopting new food patterns. These changes are being hastened by modernization, urbanization, economic development, and market globalization, and have been implicated in the development of nutrition-related, chronic diseases of lifestyle among populations in which these changes are occurring. This trend is referred to as the “nutrition transition” and is described in Chapter 4.

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781927356111.01
We need to improve our understanding of changes in food culture and dietary patterns in developing countries. Studies are needed on both community and national scales to assess and understand these changes in the consumption of food among different socio-economic classes of the populace. In line with this, a dearth of information on traditional African food habits is of concern to nutrition experts, as this knowledge is necessary to gain an understanding of how traditional dietary patterns could potentially reverse current trends in chronic diseases of lifestyle and improve the health status of indigenous populations throughout Africa, and perhaps in the wider world (Raschke et al., 2007).

REFERENCES

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES