

Anthropology Book Forum

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ABRANCHES, MARIA, 2022, *Food Connections: Production, Exchange and Consumption in West African Migration*, New York: Berghahn Books, 192 pp., ISBN 978-1-80073-373-2

Food Connections: Production, Exchange and Consumption in West African Migration is a well-written ethnography by Maria Abranches on the lives and experiences of migrants from Guinea-Bissau to Portugal, and the enduring connections that they aim to maintain with their relatives and their homeland. In her phenomenological approach to the subject, Abranches is able to thread a thorough discussion that intersects two key subjects of West African anthropology – food studies and migration – that have long been determined to be of significant interest within the regional subfield. However, Abranches’ approach shows us that an investigation of how the two interact can lead to more insights that may be overlooked by just looking at only one or the other in isolation.

Abranches leads us through the lives of Guinean migrants over the course of five chapters with rich ethnographic writing that manages to capture the mundane, such as quiet moments of conversation (77), and the exciting, such as the busy activities of agencies (103). Through narratives that revolve around the experiences of selected interlocutors, she presents her main argument that the ways in which the processes of production, exchange, and consumption alongside the interplay of the migration of people, plants, and animals, “affect people’s lifeworlds in ways that indicate a particular investment in connections” (4). Keeping with her central theme of connection, the book’s chapters are substantially interconnected with each other. While this means that the book is best read as a whole, this does not mean that individual chapters suffer when read independently, only that they are best engaged with as part of Abranches’ overall ethnography.

In Chapter 1, which focuses on the social spaces of production, Abranches takes a historical view in explaining land, territory, and social organization, criticizing the use of European views of land ownership in African contexts, as the latter cannot be thought of in simple concepts such as “coherent, homogenous, and stable” (24). Abranches shows how the urban farms through which vegetables that are key to products such as sauces (*mafe*) bound for Lisbon are grown can become spaces of performativity, with farmers and food sellers playing key roles in

connecting Guinean migrants to their homeland. Abranches traces how these spaces have changed historically, from precolonial land organization tied to contracts with spiritual entities call *Iran* to ethnic co-ownership of farming spaces and liberalization reforms and the growth of small-scale urban farms.

In Chapter 2, Abranches explores the sensorial experience of food, highlighting the spiritual and religious dimensions of consumption and how this allows Guinean migrants to maintain links to their homeland (53). Furthermore, Abranches shows how the processes of adaptation and negotiation are essential for migrants in order to integrate new materials into their cultural traditions and into meaningful social interactions (55). Chapter 3 takes a closer look at the process of travel and transportation, and how the movement of people and products serve to fuel and reorient intentions and projects of migration among those from Guinea-Bassau, in addition to projects of return among migrants in Portugal. Abranches considers how an imagined Lisbon is mediated by the materials that are sent to Guinea-Bassau (80), and how the movement of parcels sent to Lisbon materializes the desires of *bidieras*, or women food sellers, to move to Portugal (81). Additionally, Abranches also considers the role that memory plays in this mediation of imagination through materials, particularly in the case of Guinea-Bassau's colonial past (97).

Chapter 4 focuses on the transnational process of exchange, highlighting how the act of receiving food from home reminds migrants of their social ties and obligations at home (105). However, Abranches takes her discussion beyond the traditional discourse on exchange and value, highlighting how exchange can become very complicated in transnational contexts. For example, when food items, sent overseas as gifts, may then be sold once they arrive in Portugal, and yet the income from these gifts may be remitted back home, or reciprocated as gifts in other forms (107). Lastly, in Chapter 5, Abranches takes a closer look at the economic spaces that emerge in the foodscapes that surround migrants from Guinea-Bassau. In particular, Abranches provides a strong discussion in the role of formality and informality, and how the boundaries between these two are often more permeable and intertwined. In the case of shipping food between Guinea-Bassau and Portugal, informal arrangements are often needed to circumvent restrictions between formal regulations, and yet formal arrangements create a sense of structure and dependency that allow trades to not be fully reliant on small-scale social bonds and obligations (132).

Abranches adopts a phenomenologically-oriented approach that considers both experiences as well as the meaning of things as equally constitutive of people's realities (4). This makes for a novel approach to food and migration, which has often focused on more nutritional and

dietary aspects of the former and on economic and labor issues of the latter. There are a several advantages to this approach. For one, Abranches argues that most studies on migration focused on the arrival of migrants to the new country, but in reality most migrants' lives continue to be connected to the homeland, with homeland food playing a key role in that connection (7). Also enabled by a phenomenologically-oriented approach, Abranches is able to make use of multi-sited ethnographic methods which shift from different areas in Guinea-Bassau to Lisbon, Portugal and back. While the use of phenomenology highlights the everyday experiences of Abranches' interlocutors, and thus provides rich ethnographic information as the basis for her arguments, Abranches also makes careful note of the political and historical contexts through which the present-day food connections that exist among the Guinean migrants in Lisbon and their homeland-based kin emerge and operate. For example, in discussing spaces of production, Abranches shows how the notion of *tempu di Balanta*, or Balanta time, can illustrate how for the people of Guinea-Bassau the notion of ethnicity goes beyond the traditional idea of it being bound to a fixed territory (29).

Apart from providing rich ethnographic data on the lives of Guinean migrants, the strength of this book lies in Abranches' ability to highlight connections between her interlocutors and the larger field of West African scholarship. Abranches is able to situate her findings by drawing from a strong pool of earlier research on West African anthropologies of food and migration, and in doing so develops a subfield that effectively combines the two previously separate areas of discussion. However, the insights that Abranches has developed in her fieldwork are not only relevant to those interested in West African migration, but also in the larger transnational process of migration and the role that homeland food plays in this process. While the migrants of Guinea-Bassau form a unique case in the sense that most of the food items that they produce and consume come from small-scale farms and are distributed through small-scale traders, they nevertheless provide us with insights on how migration is never just a one way-process that starts and ends with the arrival of migrants in a new land. Rather, migration involves the reorientation of lifeworlds, mediated through materials and held together by connections between people and their kin, based all over the world. *Food Connections: Production, Exchange and Consumption in West African Migration* provides a strong blueprint for exploring this type of anthropological research on food and migration.

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