

Anthropology Book Forum

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BRANDI SIMPSON MILLER, 2022, *Food and Identity in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Ghana: Food, Fights, and Regionalism*. Cham: Springer International, 327 pp. ISBN: 978-3-030-88403-1

Food and Identity in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Ghana: Food, Fights, and Regionalism, by Brandi Simpson Miller (2022) deals with the historic developments of Ghanaian foodways¹ in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Rooted in her own identity as a Nigerian-US American scholar and woman of color she resolves – despite most of her archival sources being European – to write from a more local (Ghanaian) perspective. This has proven to be dearly needed as this volume advances the current body of literature on food and identity in Africa. The monograph unveils how culture, gender, age, and ethnicity structure food production, eating habits and values attached to commodities and meals in different regions. Based on a bouquet of well-connected historical and archival sources combined with her own empirical evidence, this book offers a densely knit understanding of Ghanaian foodways that has not been easily accessible before. Thus, without question, the cumbrous work that went into finding, analyzing, and accurately piecing together different sources, deserves to receive recognition in its own merit. Simpson Miller successfully relates her work to the current political discourse on food, globalization, and nutrition in Ghana. Further, the interspersed local recipes throughout the book allow a unique level of engagement with its content.

Simpson Miller quickly establishes that – despite general similarities – there is no all-encompassing-agreement of a shared national food identity in Ghana (Chapters 1 – 2). Instead, she distinguishes three eco-culinary regions based on a comparatively homogenous belief system around the main meal of the day and the concept of proper food (Chapter 3). This prominently includes the gendered character of meal preparation, cooking, and responsibility for the feeding of a family. Consequently, the book follows those three eco-culinary zones

¹ Foodways stands for “the eating habits and culinary practices of a people, region, or historical period” (Merriam-Webster 2024).

separately in Chapters 4 – 6: the forest, coastal and savanna zones. In all three cases, adjustments were made in times of (natural, political, and economic) crisis. Those led to changes in the key ingredients (starches), while the composition of the meals remained relatively stable. The same is true for the integration of New World foods which were incorporated either into the main meal of the day (“The Proper Meal,” Chapter 3) or as a meal with less implications for the region’s identity. Strongly related to Simpson Miller’s aim to decolonize literature on foodways and identity, Chapter 7 examines the influence of colonialism and trade with Europeans on local foodways. Through the very early trading relationships with Western countries, exchange can be traced back to as early as the mid-fifteenth-century. The Portuguese were the first European nation to have “landed” on the West African coast (Hargrove 2015). As this chapter reflects the book’s initial purpose, it rightly so takes up the most space. Simpson Miller concludes that the cultural importance of regional meals and foods form ethnic identity and embody sense of community that endured centuries of European influence. In fact, recently the location-dependent character of foodways has been celebrated as a national good distinguishing Ghana from other nations. In the final chapter Simpson Miller connects previous developments in regional foodways with the consequences of globalization and current debates about food security. She argues that the limited outlook of current debates that merely look at food in terms of insecurity neglects the creativity and agency that characterize Ghanaian foodways.

Simpson Miller herein demonstrates the relevance of her work by highlighting the persistence of certain patterns related to foodways today. This makes hands-on-policy recommendations possible to overcome issues that have been prevalent for the past decades. Rooted in her own analysis, she sensibly points out that the current discourse on food security, focusing on nutritional issues, does not target long-standing basic issues. Instead, she proposes direct action towards food production and infrastructure. Further work may use this as a starting point to investigate potential ways of improving the Ghanaian food system by keeping the eco-culinary origin of regional foodways in mind.

Brandi Simpson Miller’s work contributes to the decolonization of literature on African foodways through countering the current body of literature that is either relatively broad or is concerned with how African concepts of food translated through the transatlantic-slave trade to the Americas. Here, however, Simpson Miller’s outstanding work contributes both a focus on local historical knowledge and a thorough and detail-oriented investigation. Whilst doing

justice to the prominent position starchy staples occupy, Simpson Miller examines the role of other foods, that became relevant over time. This allows for a holistic understanding of Ghana's food landscape and the relation of different foods to each other. Hence, Simpson Miller provides an excellent vantage point that goes beyond her own disciplinary boundaries and invites inter- and trans-disciplinary considerations to benefit from her work. Thus, further work may expand on this in conducting long-term- and in-depth forms of ethnographic research. Potentially, narrative case studies could be related to this book to supply more of an understanding of the day-to-day making and (re)production of foodways.

To conclude, Brandi Simpson Miller's book was much needed to liberate the Western dominated-discourse of food (in)security in Ghana and other (West) African countries. She provides an excellent understanding of the historical developments of Ghana's foodways that should stand as the starting point for similar research.

Works Cited:

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Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. "foodways," accessed January 4, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/foodways>.

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