The Moral and Ethical Aspects of Gold Coast Foodways

IN THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY GOLD COAST, just east of present-day Accra, good food established and maintained the identity, safety, and continuity of the Sukpe community. English Colonial District Record Books from 1912 documented the oral history of the Dangme-speaking peoples’ migration from Nigeria to the mouth of the Volta River on the Atlantic. Oral histories were collected as part of the Crown Lands Bill of 1897, meant to ascertain how tribes came to acquire the lands they currently inhabited. Following documentation of histories, boundaries were mapped, and certificates of validity were issued to facilitate negotiations for gold concessions. In an extension of the discussion of purity and strength—or shakti—that Dewan explores, and in contrast to Prieto-Piastro’s discussion of food’s role in obscuring place in conflicts that involve different religious and national identities, the Sukpe used food and faith to fix boundaries. This history deals with the anxiety created by British efforts to appropriate fallow lands for gold production, and the need for local people to maintain their connection to and ownership of the land with regular sacrifices of food.

A cooking contest won the migrating Sukpe control over the vital salt and fishing trade on the Volta River, a trade that would sustain them throughout the cessation of the transatlantic slave trade in the nineteenth century. On an urgent survey expedition, the wulomei (priest) and hunter Lomo-weir encountered the Ewe-speaking Ahaviatse, another expeditionary hunter from nearby Agavedon, on the eastern side of the Volta. They disputed fervently among themselves as to who first saw the land and creeks thereon, including the nearby Nyito creek. Both resoundingly decided that each would go to his home to bring back fire. No sooner had Ahaviatse left than Lomo-weir furtively took flint from his hunting bag, made a fire, and cooked some fish from the creek.

Lomo-weir may have fried this fish in palm oil with Spanish peppers, or perhaps cooked a ragout of fish with hibiscus, bits of smoked fish, palm oil, and Spanish peppers. He ate and left some for Ahaviatse. Upon the Ewe hunter’s return, he found chop (food) ready for him. He disputed was resolutely settled in favor of Lomo-weir. The victorious Sukpe gained the lands from the Mi valley in the west, inclusive of the land between the lagoon and the coast, all the way to the Volta in the east. The hunters willingly befriended each other, with Ahaviatse choosing to resettle his people near Lomo-weir’s, creating the settlement named Big Ada. The present-day Greater Accra Region of Ghana, where Big Ada is still located, would become especially prosperous in the nineteenth century due to its trade in palm oil, fish, and salt.

How did Lomo-weir manage to win the land with its vital fishing rights and salt production capabilities simply by being the first to cook supper? The Sukpe wielded ritual food preparation as a weapon with which to gain advantage over the Ewe-speaking inhabitants near the Volta River. As a priest, Lomo-weir’s function was to read the will of local gods and spirits, and appeal to them for assistance. A priest was also charged with the establishment and maintenance of shrines for this purpose. Food was the most common sacrifice at these shrines. Lomo-weir would have observed ritual while hunting and preparing food, in sacrifice and thanks to local deities. In a place and time where sin was equated with the neglect of deities, iniquity itself could be expunged, and land ownership was established, by the offering of food sacrifice. Thus, good food was contingent upon observances of the moral and ethical dimensions of the local spiritual landscape.

In the case of the Sukpe, Lomo-weir’s ritual food observances helped to further ensure the survival and stability of his people in their flight to safety. This historical and ritual cooking contest empowered the Sukpe to establish rightfully a stronghold in a place far away from the slave raids of the ever-expanding Akan empire to the west. Later in the twentieth century, the story of this cooking contest was accepted by the British colonial government as a foundation for the demarcation of Sukpe lands. Good food to the Sukpe was ritual food that had powerful spiritual significance, and which was used to give them the influence and authority to make a new place for themselves on the coast.
In this migration story, food and its transformation into nourishment with fire decided claims about the division of resources and determined, in part, relations among people. Food’s ritual use as a spatial marker was testament to the power of the transformative properties of cooking. Lest we forget the crucial role cooking plays in the story of being human, this history shows how good food and cooking enabled eighteenth-century West Africans to lay claim to, and to create a future for, themselves.

REFERENCES
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