

Changed Food Dimensions in the 21st Century: Tracing the Emerging Frontiers of Ethnographic Research on Food

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Abstract

The core element of food as material culture that differentiates the social and social lives of people and communities has been present in social hierarchies of class position and power. Anthropologists consider food and food behaviours as instruments for understanding other cultures and civilizations in the context of global and geographical breadth, hence studies on community food have taken a major role in the study of anthropology. Ethnography has always taken a comprehensive and empathic approach to research, based on the actual experiences of the people being researched. Commensality has long piqued the curiosity of anthropologists as a source and manifestation of group identities. Analyzing the presence and mannerisms of collectivities is another technique to investigate sociality. The changing landscape of food supply and consumption in the twenty-first century, particularly during the Covid-19 Lockdown epidemic, seems to have transformed global feeding and eating habits.

Key Words: Food, anthropology, Food and social differentiation, commensality, Food as gifts, manners, sociality, ethnography of food

Introduction

Anthropological study often switches between cultural analyses that focus on the processes that create and change cultures and processes that focus on the processes that build and alter cultures. Most anthropologists have rejected Darwinian explanations of cultural development since Franz Boas (1912). It would be inaccurate to assume that humanity's evolution from hunter-gatherer to farmer to industrial worker follows a straight progression from food shortage to plenty. Small-scale communities, according to Marshall Sahlins (1974), were the "first wealthy cultures"—rich in leisure time if not actual goods—because they could collect enough food with just a few hours of daily labour. Despite inequities in food availability and the occurrence of multiple food shortages, the contemporary diet seems to represent plenty.

The nature of food, which is culturally defined and given local connotations, is a crucial foundation. Different people in many countries exhibit discontent and hunger after eating a meal that does not include their usual staple foods, such as rice, wheat, maize, potatoes, and so on. Grains are often used to represent the Divine. In the Indian context, '*Ann bhagun hai*' literally means 'Grain is God.' Even in times of acute food shortages, not all "edible" products are considered food. Food taboos included cattle for Hindus, pigs or pork for Muslims, and frogs, which the Ainu despise but the French consider a delicacy. Food taboos, such as the Jewish ban against eating pork or the Buddhist prohibition against eating meat, reveal a lot about people's beliefs and views. From the beginning, food has been fundamental to the study of anthropology. The rituals of commensality, such as the shared sacrifice supper, were studied by William Robertson Smith (2002). Claude Levi-Strauss (1969), a French structuralist anthropologist, utilised linguistic study of myths to argue for shared conceptual structures across cultures and used binary oppositions to describe cultural activities, most memorably "the raw and the cooked." This anthropological food study focuses on social and cultural responses to food and how they have evolved through time. Food's cultural and symbolic worth is crucial in both "defining" what it is and what connotations it has for various individuals, particularly in today's world when plenty and terrible hunger exist on opposite ends of the spectrum.

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Anthropologists have been able to comprehend unique cultures and communities via the study of food and eating patterns. Anthropologists have long been fascinated by the subtleties of culture and society as they evolve across time and location. Anthropologists' preferred approach is ethnography, which is based on the lived experiences of the individuals being researched. Primary and secondary data, as well as practical observation, notably "participant observation," in which anthropologists experience the lives of people, are used to collect data. This is particularly true for anthropologists who are involved in food harvesting, preparation, and consumption. Direct involvement is not required for observation. Simply wandering around to see various styles of preparation, market places, sellers, and shops pertaining to the culinary arts are all viable ways to evaluate the food narrative. An anthropologist strives to respect people's beliefs and behaviours. Examining the gender inequality that exists in a community's eating customs may reveal a lot about a people's culture. As a widespread taboo, many religious rites involve strict rules prohibiting women from participating in many aspects of food preparation and consumption. Women are prohibited from boarding fishing boats in certain fishing towns, for example. Certain food items and dishes are not touched by women in certain cultures. Women, for example, did not prepare non-vegetarian dishes in many Indian households. All of the poultry and beef dishes of the royal Kitchens were cooked by the males. Fish, however was normally excluded, and women were adept at cooking it. In certain communities women do not chop certain vegetables. For example the pumpkin is never cut by women in certain villages in Uttar-Pradesh as it is said to represent the womb. In certain other communities in Northern India women have to forgo cooking and eating at least one vegetable. In most families women have been known to give up 'baingan' or brinjals (also called eggplant).

Food is regarded with an intrinsic and perceptive sense in diverse cultures, and it is associated with a variety of behaviours. The anthropology of food takes into consideration both physical and cultural factors. The senses have a tendency to interact based on recollection. The social construction of food memories elicits strong feelings of nostalgia and serves as a springboard for future recollections. The fieldworker unearths these deeply ingrained cultural norms. Food has varied meanings in different cultures. Aside from the bodily necessity to stave off hunger with a handful of nuts or grain, there is a vast range of overeating and gluttony as expressed in a magnificent display before a visitor to indicate the hosts' social position. For example, in certain vegetarian, middle-class Indian homes, 'paneer' or cottage cheese meals are a special treat to show off the host's wealth and to honour the visitor by elevating him or her to a higher social rank.

The History of Food and Eating

Food has a special role in the lives of people as a metaphor. It has traditionally been eaten in large gatherings by social groupings. Solidarity eating is a typical occurrence in which civilizations hunted, collected, and ate together in order to display an unified face to other communities or mutual adversaries. Families and individuals, towns and cultures all benefited from this visceral experience of dining together. For example, in Himachal Pradesh's 'Bhaat,' everyone pitches in to prepare the allotted feast before sitting down to dine. This has lent validity to a variety of life clichés, such as "the family that eats together, stays together." In group feeding traditions, there are also successive expressions of solidarity and equality. Many military, for example, still place a high value on 'regimental feasts.' Several societies hold ceremonial dinners for rites of passage, social holidays such as 'Thanksgiving Dinner,' and commemorative events such as birthdays and anniversaries. Even when food isn't being consumed, there is a sense of food collectivity. Fasting is observed by Hindus during Navratras, Muslims during Ramzan, Christians during Lent, and Jews during Yom Kippur. These characteristics are instilled in children during the early stages of socialisation, and they are passed down the generations. All civilizations have noticed the spatial and temporal expansions of food power. It supports human endeavours to turn nature into humanity.

The Sikh ritual of 'langer,' which represents communal dining, has broken through societal boundaries. Everyone is seated on the same platform and eats the same communal meal. There isn't any kind of prejudice. As a result, food serves as a powerful leveller.

Food, on the other hand, continues to be exclusive. In today's world, for example, the effects of urbanisation and industrialization have prompted a desire for "natural," "fresh," and "organic" meals. Previously, food trends such as 'fast food,' 'pre-prepared food,' 'frozen food,' and the bane of obese people, 'junk food,' had a return. Addictive people were exposed to a lot of harmful substances that are harmful to human health. That is, however, a different avenue of empirical investigation.

Regional Desegregations: Merging Identities

Foods that people eat on a regular basis have an important influence in uniting and dividing them. Thus, whereas formerly only the nobility could afford white bread, the commoners had to make do with coarse, black bread, today's fashion trends

have turned multigrain, brown coarse bread 'elitist,' while white bread has been consigned to the hoi-polloi or poor man's bread. In India during the early 1970s the wheat-eating people of Northern India had not had rice included in their staple diet like the people of central and Southern India. Today, however, the ubiquitous idli, dosa, and other rice-based delicacies like biryani as well as rice in various forms, are the food of choice for many a North Indian palate. Interestingly the South Indian cuisine is adopting a range of parothas, or wheat and refined flour leavened cakes. Rice was originally considered a luxury in states like Punjab, where it was prepared just once or twice a week. Today, majority of Punjabi children and teens may eat rice in different combinations for more than one main meal each day, and this is on a preferred basis.

For most societies, the act of shared eating and cooking is a significant communal event that strengthens both social bonds and hierarchy. Festival cooking is a shared responsibility duty conducted by restructured and restricted male and female groups. Festival labour is separated to a large degree. Some of the persons who are often engaged in the preparation have very specific abilities. These responsibilities are assigned in a hierarchical order, with one person in charge of the whole meal. These labour parties carry on culinary traditions from generation to generation, with the elders withholding some key phases in the preparation process in order to preserve the long-standing history of cuisine entwined with social relationships.

Because the journey of food includes the finer details of communication with specific regard to the cycles of economics, politics, history, and environment, studies of food need an anthropological approach that is holistic. Economically and politically, food is acknowledged as an intrinsic language. A unique hierarchical order in a given civilization determines who cooks, how, and when. There are unwritten standards that govern the ranks and file of people who make the meals, whether they are cooking for a home or a community. While a newly-wed wife may be requested to make something sweet when she first arrives at her husband's house, there are some kitchen etiquette rules that apply to every family in India. In a joint-family structure, the matriarch is in charge of deciding what goes into the daily meal and how it is prepared. Young and elderly are both cared for in this kitchen politics, and they are treated with great respect in a variety of cultures. Such as, a visiting relative, married daughter, or even a single individual returning from the city where he had gone to seek his fortune, as was the case with so many migrants. Changes in consumer behaviour may cause and be impacted by technological advancements that lead to riches and political power in diverse countries.

The socio-cultural ethos of cultures has been brought together by the dietary framework of human life, which has transcended time and place. After the processes of human development and expansion brought about various other associated changes, the whole collective of farming, collecting, hunting, and delivering food to the family or communal kitchens has experienced a tremendous transformation. In many regions of the globe, there was a significant shift away from the practise of patiently preparing a meal and serving it to a family. Families and groups gathered around communal hearths. This changed dramatically when several waves of change brought the concepts of pre-cooked dinners and dining out, as well as the more recent trends of take-out and food delivery, which telescoped and eventually lost the vast vista of indigenous and routine, seasonal, and healthy foods until posterity. Today, numerous generations recall grandmas' cooking, seasonal fruit gathering, and family preserves and pickle-making activities. People all around the globe were instilled with the practise of using every component of accessible, storable foods. Human populations had learned important lessons through wars and plagues. However, at some point in the future, these tendencies shifted. Food and its healthful practises have been short-changed by the human population in both the developed and developing worlds in order to embrace fast solutions to existence. The introduction use of food supplements for those who do not have the time for a wholesome, nutrition's meal have become common replacements in everyday lives. Changed working hours have greatly influenced the dietary habits of people. Numerous cups of coffee, quick fix approach to meals have all taken their toll on the health and tolerance of populations across the world.

Concepts of Food in the 21st Century

In a relatively short time, we went from cooking to warming to out-of-the-box dining. Fast food travels to the furthest reaches of the globe. Burgers, chicken, and fries, the concept of 'Chinese' or noodles in a box, pizza, and a variety of desserts ranging from doughnuts to waffles and more are the common lingo of the population today, especially among millennials and Gen Y and Gen Z, indicating that cooking has moved from home kitchens to market-based kitchens. Cooking hearths at home were rapidly supplanted by other facilities such as home theatres and gyms as more people accepted urban living and its fast-paced lifestyle.

The most significant shift occurred when women left their homes and hearths to work outside the house. Cooking and caring for the children and the elderly were quickly replaced by earning a second income for the household. Food received the worst

of the blow. On the home front, gradual reforms started to take place. To make housekeeping less arduous, mechanisation was revolutionised. Markets inundated with kitchen equipment to aid the 'woman of the home.' However, the most significant shift occurred when the notion of takeout and meal delivery to the door was introduced. Many of them, in fact, remain at home and set up kitchens to meet the rising demand. A variety of novel breakthroughs were made into the older realms of food, dining, and socialising. The notion of a "working lunch" arose to provide office workers with a new kind of solidarity. Office dynamics created a unique community where most individuals gravitated toward 'working together,' 'dining together,' 'achieving together,' and 'celebrating together.' As a result, the corporate world arose, devouring not only the time allotted for family life, but also the crucial bond of a family eating and staying together.

Total upheaval of food dynamics occurred and the resultants were fragmentation and a virtual breakdown of the family. Increased numbers of single persons and decreased number of cooking sessions in the home are reflective of this. From the morning coffee to late dinners, the entire gamut of food and feeding underwent a sea change.

Post Covid-19 Lockdown: A New Wave of Food Practices

While the trends discussed briefly above were making their unmitigated, unchecked assault on traditions in food and food habits, humankind was yet to suffer a major blow that would bring about a halt and a reassessment of essential food and drink provision and satiation levels. There were numerous chances where mankind stood still and took stock. One such was the world wide impact of the pandemic started in late 2019 and which continues to hold a good part of the world in its grip even in mid 2022. This impacted deeply and severely on the food habits of large numbers of people. Food studies took on a renewed significance on the study patterns of ethnographers the world over. This process was greatly helped along with the advent of digitalization. The entry of the digital era into food made the entire horizon of empirical studies all the more broader. The perceptions of environment as also the eating habits of the world's populations changed as did their habitats.

Scholars are now exploring the emerging phenomenon of digitalisation of food and eating and the emerging implications of these novel products, processes, and practices. Current studies abound on the digitalisation of food through the lens of 'digital food cultures' (Lupton, 2018; Lupton & Feldman, 2020) and 'digital food' (Lewis, 2019).

Schneider and Eli (2021) made a distinction between studies of digital food and studies of digital eating. They defined studies of digital food as those that focused either on novel food substances or on digitally-enabled and data-focused production and distribution processes of foods. For this purpose the studies of digital eating have been defined as those that focus on novel eating practices enabled and maintained through mobile, sensor-based, digital technologies. The studies of digital food according to (Schneider and Eli, 2021) attended to the digitised histories, economies and trajectories of new food items the studies of digital eating alternately focus on the changed subjectivities and roles that eating and its digitally mediated practices play.

As a consequence, the majority of digital food research has focused on what people consume as a result of digitised and datafied innovation and manufacturing processes. Understanding how individuals eat differently while utilising digital technologies, platforms, and devices, as well as the resultant information within the realm of eating and feeding, falls within the scope of digital eating.

However, the boundaries of 'digital' in digital food studies must be specified and researched from the beginning. Food and eating have been seen to be digitised in a multi-directional, interactive process. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the new age digitization of food has been altering the shapes of food and eating patterns, describing the roles of many players, and creating the requisite platforms and structures needed to give it the required form. The full path from food procurement to food consumption places is covered by food digitization. The recent years of research into the merits and limits of digital food have been governed by a shift in approach.

Studying food and eating offers a unique and rich lens to fostering understanding on food cultures in terms of individual and society. Digital food and digital eating have been theorised by several scholars but what remains to be understood is that nothing much seems to have changed from pre-digital to digital times. There is increasing research interest in food studies currently with two main thought processes that emphasise the socio-cultural, economic and political factors giving shape to the patterns of emerging food consumption and eating habits. The overlap between the two strands of thought have been symbolized as:

- To study how and food eating are represented on social media, blogs and micro-blogging platforms (Leer & Povlsen, 2016 and Lewis & Phillipov, 2016)
- How these have promoted digital fads, food cultures and activism.

The entire gamut of food seems to have developed a wider range of vocabulary like mobile apps that ‘track’ a user’s food consumption or the caloric intake. Therefore, in this new age, food and its production, distribution and consumption are increasingly being translated into digital data. No doubt the digital age research requirements differ with broad based yet incisive exploration of digital food and eating which enable the in-depth understanding of how the dynamism of food and eating intersect with digitally-enabled technologies of food production, cooking and eating.

There is a growing need for empirical research on digitalisation of food and eating relational approaches for example as embodied in the Actor-Network Theory, new materialisms and relational geography. Food scholars have investigated critical accounts of how individual and social eating practices dialogue with macro-level infrastructures (Abbots et al., 2015; Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Carolan, 2011). How networks or assemblages of eating extend from the individual, embodied event of consuming food to the wider political-economic structures that shape the landscapes of food growing, manufacturing, and marketing (Forney et al., 2018; Le Heron et al., 2016).

Ethnography has played a critical role in food studies but ethnographic research in digital food studies is still not widespread. To date, there has been little ethnographic research on the relational co-constitution of food-body-society with and through digital media platforms and devices, with a particularly glaring lack of engagement with infrastructures of digital media platforms and how they shape emergent eating practices (Studies of dietary and Calorie tracking can be seen in the works of Didziokaitė et al., 2018 and Ruckenstein, 2015).

An exception is the research of sociologist Michael Carolan (2017b), who has recently studied how digital platforms ‘shape the foodscapes we imagine and enact’ (Carolan, 2017b: 818) and also explores the ‘types of active selves’ that interactive assemblages engender based on thick description of two case studies, FarmDrop, a food distribution platform for London-based producers and consumers, and Farm Hack, a US-based group of farmers who promote open code, hack digital locks built into software of farm equipment, and share the information with each other.

Digital Platforms for Food and Eating

Digital Food Activism (Schneider et al., 2018a), explores digital platforms as influential actors in networks of eating. It analyses how emergent forms of food activism – enabled and shaped by digital platforms – remap networks of food politics, production, distribution, and consumption, transforming relationships between consumers and industrial and policy actors.

Giving a new terminology food hacktivism, Melissa Caldwell (2018) draws on multi-sited participant observation as an attendee of food hacking events, based in the United States, Eastern Europe and Russia. Caldwell explores how a newly emerging cluster of food hackers, citizen-scientists and entrepreneurs create disruptive food experiences through digital technologies. She finds that activists’ playful and experimental attitudes to food implicate social justice concerns about equity, safety and access to knowledge, and that digital materialities and spaces allow for the development of participatory food communities that challenge notions of property and expertise. Sarah Lyon’s (2018) elucidates how people engage with digital technologies to challenge relations of power in the food industry.

Conclusion

The journey of food and mankind has transcended ages but has come to take on a special meaning in the current century. How far this trend of diminished social interactions of food tends to go remains the focus of studies to come. It is nevertheless a matter of genuine and growing concern to know if food as we know it is set to disappear altogether and reappear in an *avatar* bringing to mind the sci-fi projections of medicinal doses of supplements instead of the true items. Red juicy carrot have disappeared from large parts of the world to be replaced by what one international respondent from Texas – another agriculturally rich geographical region like Punjab in India emphatically said, ‘it tastes like cardboard’.

It is time therefore to take stock and see how the situation can be substantially taken care off keeping the imminent danger of the medicinal inputs replacing wholesome vegetables and grains food as is known to mankind today. The authors perceive

tremendous scope for deeper research on the various aspects of this evolutionary concept of food and feeding habits infringing upon the inherent cultural norms and ways of humankind contemporaneously.

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