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# Routledge International Handbook of Food Studies

*Edited by  
Ken Albala*

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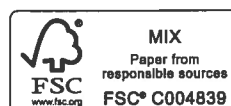
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# The anthropology of food

Robert Dirks and Gina Hunter

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*In this chapter on the anthropology of food, the authors examine eating and drinking as social and cultural experiences. From the earliest anthropological considerations of food to major recent works, the chapter provides an overview of how anthropologists have approached the study of food and culture. Seminal works for major theoretical approaches are discussed and new areas of research are identified. Conveying the breadth of anthropology, the authors discuss the role of cooking in human evolution, archaeological investigations of feasting, historical studies of global commodity trade, and in-depth studies of the foodways of particular communities among other topics. The authors state that anthropological research on food is distinguished by a commitment to holistic perspectives, dedication to comparative methods, and an abiding concern for origins and primal causes. Each of these defining characteristics is described via recent examples from the literature. Although few programs or funding opportunities designated specifically for food anthropology exist, the authors present a number of valuable research tools, data sets, and internet resources available to interested scholars.*

Anthropologists study food from different perspectives. Some look at eating and drinking in connection with other aspects of social life. Others are concerned with dietary matters and how food-related practices and beliefs affect physical well-being. These two points of view, referred to respectively as “the Anthropology of Food” and “Nutritional Anthropology,” need to be considered together if one wants a truly complete picture of a food culture. However, for the purposes of this book we limit our concern in this chapter to eating and drinking as social and cultural experiences. Major topics explored within this tradition have included the foodways of particular peoples and regions; the dynamics of various food systems; the cultural effects of ancient foodways; the ethnohistory of specific commodities; food-habit formation and change; the sociocultural effects of food shortage; food-related beliefs, rituals, and symbols; eating habits and etiquettes; and systems of food classification and meal structure. Our review highlights common threads among these studies.

## Historical background and major theoretical approaches

The anthropology of food has deep roots. E. B. Tylor (1865), the world’s first professional anthropologist, planted the seeds when he worked to establish the fact (disputed at the time) that cooking qualified as a human universal. Colonel John Bourke (1885) wrote the anthropology of

food's first dedicated paper, "The Urine Dance of the Zuni Indians of New Mexico" 20 years later. Inspired by his own ethnographic observations, the paper probed, as more recent anthropological studies have (e.g., MacClancy, Henry, and Macbeth, 2007), the very definition of edibility. Bourke invoked a historical explanation for the Zuni's ritualized ingestion of "vile aliment" by theorizing it was a cultural survival, a relic of what in the past must have been an occasionally necessary behavior for want of water. Robertson Smith, an Old Testament scholar and contemporary of Bourke, also wrote about food but without his penchant for speculative history. Regarding his own particular subject, Semitic sacrifice and sacrificial meals, Smith (1889) found meaning in their social functions.

Functionalist ideas dominated by the time a deliberate, programmatic anthropology of food debuted. Audrey Richards (1932, 1939), a student of theoretician Bronislaw Malinowski, led the way while working with nutritionists on a study of the Bemba of East Africa. Richards's observations focused on tribal social relationships and how they served nutritional needs. Her work and that of several like-minded investigators, including Raymond Firth (1934) and Meyer and Sonia Fortes (1936), produced robust accounts of food production, distribution, preparation, and consumption, including the many beliefs and rituals attached to each activity. Meanwhile, anthropologists in the United States turned to psychology for inspiration and began investigating the effects of child rearing, including feeding practices, on adult behavior (e.g., DuBois, 1941; Whiting and Child, 1953). Research took a decidedly practical turn and became more nutritionally oriented during the latter years of the Great Depression and throughout the Second World War. Still, there were theoretical benefits, including some understanding of how food habits changed (see Montgomery and Bennett, 1979).

Ecological thinking captivated general anthropology after the war. By the 1960s, this elevated food-related studies to a position of central importance within the field as a whole. Ethnographies about communities in virtually every corner of the world focused on the acquisition, sharing, and redistribution of food, exposing a generation of undergraduates to narratives about foodways in such faraway places as the Kalahari Desert (Lee, 1979) and the New Guinea Highlands (Rappaport, 1968). A number of investigators, most famously Marvin Harris (1966, 1977, 1985) and his collaborators (Harris and Ross, 1978, 1987), built their reputations on ecological explanations for the food preferences, taboos, and customary feasts of various peoples around the world.

Anthropologists more inclined to see culture as a manifestation of shared mentalities rather than as a reflection of practical necessities attracted substantial followings as well. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969, 1973, 1978) used ideas about food and cooking to develop his immensely influential structuralist theory, a set of ideas about the principles of cultural representation. Mary Douglas (1966), working independently but also seeking to understand representation, studied notions of purity, pollution, and taboo. Her analysis, based on a reading of Old Testament proscriptions, led to the conclusion that food taboos were all about categorical identities and symbolic boundaries.

A polemic developed – cultural ecologists and economic analysts (together referred to as materialists) on one side, structuralists on the other. Partisans engaged in fierce debates, but three books published in the 1980s quieted the controversy, in large part because of their eclecticism. The first two, Jack Goody's (1982) *Cooking, Cuisine and Class* and Sidney Mintz's (1985) *Sweetness and Power*, reintroduced food anthropologists to history and used it to show how both material conditions and symbolic representations changed over time. Goody's book revolved around the distinction between high and low cuisines. He explained why the difference exists in some societies and not in others by using comparative history as a framework for sociological and cultural analysis. Mintz's volume traced the history of sugar from luxury good to basic commodity. His

narrative, focused on England, attended to changes in symbolic meanings, and sketched the nutritional functionalities behind the transformation. Ultimately, however, Mintz explained England's outsized commitment to sugar as a consequence of past economic and political events.

As food anthropologists were becoming more attentive to history, a decidedly less formalistic concern with food symbols that had been brewing for a decade or more crystallized in Mary Weismantel's (1988) *Food, Gender, and Poverty in the Ecuadorian Andes* and a number of other works (Kahn, 1986; Munn, 1986; Pollock, 1985). Weismantel focused on Zumbagua, a parish of mostly indigenous Ecuadorians. Through an exploration of their culture, her readers learned that diet, cuisine, talk about food, and kitchen routines all mattered. All contributed to a better understanding of Andean culinary history; current ecological and economic crises; changing cultural and political allegiances; categorical differences between men and women, old and young; and conflicts between traditional and modern ways.

Identity (national, ethnic, gender, generational) became a resounding theme within the anthropology of food. Clever variations abounded. Carol Counihan (2004), for example, recorded the life histories of the members of a single Florentine family, showing how extended family and gender relations became realized through food-related work and commensality. However, by the end of the millennium the food and identity theme had become well-worn and vulnerable to criticism. Jeremy MacClancy (2004: 63–64) suggested that too often anthropologists relied on vague, singular, and static notions of identity. Jon Holtzman (2009: 60) wondered if food itself harbors qualities that make it an especially cogent means of identification or whether Westerners simply nominated it as such. David Sutton (2001: 170) tried to move past the idea that food "symbolizes" identities. Examining the ways eating and drinking structure daily and ritual events on the Greek Island of Kalymnos, he found that food conveys memories and in so doing engenders and maintains historical consciousness. Holtzman (2009) came to a similar conclusion among the Samburu of Northern Kenya. There he documented dietary changes brought about by economic development, a decreasing commitment to a pastoral lifestyle, and an increasing dependence on "town food." The Samburu talked about these changes with contradiction and ambivalence, but it struck Holtzman that their foods had become important references for thinking about their predicament and key loci for historical consciousness.

## Research methodologies

Anthropologists have studied food-related practices and beliefs from nearly every conceivable angle. This makes it difficult at times to tell what is distinctive about their discipline. However, certain ways of thinking pervade the enterprise and affect its methods. These traits include a commitment to holistic perspectives, dedication to comparative methods, and an abiding concern for origins and primal causes (cf., Anderson, 2005: 240–41).

## Holistic perspectives

Anthropology's holism makes it a kind of synthetic discipline. Unlike analytic fields (e.g. economics) in the business of breaking phenomena down, anthropologists are more inclined to fit things together. Ecologists rely on essentially the same method: take disparate observations and ideas and show how they relate as components of a larger system. Previous generations of anthropologists who studied foodways in small-scale societies often came away with impressively comprehensive accounts that explicitly showed how eating and drinking were part of their subjects' domestic, economic, political, and spiritual lives. In addition to several of the works cited above, Rosemary

Firth's (1966) monograph about Malay peasants, Michael Young's (1971) work on the Goodenough Islands, L.C. Okere's (1983) and O.A. Anigbo's (1987) writings about the Nigerian Igbo, and Mick Johnsson's (1988) account of the Aymara of Bolivia immediately come to mind.

As anthropologists increasingly began to turn their attention to large-scale societies, food anthropologists followed suit. Investigators produced comprehensive accounts of foodways among minority groups (e.g., Goode, Theophano, and Curtis, 1984; Goode, Curtis, and Theophano, 1984; Gutierrez, 1984, 1992), residents of urban areas (e.g., Flynn, 2005a, 2005b), and members of local organizations (e.g., Curran, 1989). Theodore Bestor's *Tsukiji: The Fish Market at the Center of the World* (2004) tackled one of Japan's most famous alimentary institutions. Chapters on Tsukiji's place in Japanese history and the world economy set the stage. Descriptions of the role of fish in contemporary Japanese culture, the intricacies of Tsukiji's auctions, and the social relations among market participants come together to shed light on the otherwise dimly understood transactions that bring much of the world's fresh tuna to the consumers' table.

In addition to studying communities and organizations, food anthropologists have looked carefully at national and regional food systems. Colonel Bourke, shortly after his study of the Zuni, wrote anthropology's first regional study, "The Folk Foods of the Rio Grande Valley and of Northern Mexico" (1895). It offered a purely descriptive account of the traditional foods of the Mexican-American border region, which at that time was *terra incognita* as far as most Americans were concerned. Current works attend to systemic processes and institutions with widespread involvements. Edward Fischer and Peter Benson (2006), for instance, investigated Guatemalan broccoli imported into the United States. Broccoli epitomized middle-class American concerns with "eating right" but represented a new, export crop for Mayan farmers. Fischer and Benson described the networks binding American consumers to Mayan farmers and examined what compelled broccoli farming under extremely risky circumstances. Richard Wilk's (2006) work on Belizean foodways combined ethnographic, archaeological, and historical data to show how global processes produce local culinary traditions. Curiously, Wilk discovered that the most consistent local element in Belizean food culture is an appreciation of foods from other countries. At the national and regional levels, the foodways of extinct civilizations are also part of the Anthropology of Food's stock and trade. Assyriologist Jean Bottero's book, *The Oldest Cuisine in the World* (2004), recently attracted attention by combining archaeology with information gleaned from cuneiform inscriptions to describe the food culture of ancient Mesopotamia in considerable detail. Such comprehensive accounts usually require a cooperative approach. John Staller and Michael Carrasco, for example, collected papers about Mesoamerican foods from 25 regional experts, drawn from a variety of anthropological sub-fields and neighboring disciplines, including archaeology, ethnohistory, ethnography, ethnobotany, linguistics, ceramics, mythology, iconography, and epigraphy. Published as *Pre-Columbian Foodways in Mesoamerica* (2010), a volume of nearly 700 pages, the collection surveyed production, distribution, redistribution, and consumption, projecting for the first time a truly big picture of Mesoamerica's ancient food system and key institutions. Overviews of modern national and regional foodways, though not nearly so inclusive as *Pre-Columbian Foodways*, have been compiled for the US (Brown and Mussell, 1984; Humphrey and Humphrey, 1988), the Middle East (Zubaida and Tapper, 1994), South Asia (Khare and Rao, 1986), and Oceania (Kahn and Sexton, 1988; Manderson, 1986; Pollock, 1992).

### Comparative methods

Anthropology lays claim to global expertise based on its meticulous attention to the remains of the past coupled with its long-standing engagement with present-day populations from every corner of the earth, living in every kind of society imaginable. Data acquired worldwide, and

even from the observations of non-human primates, pave the way for comparative studies as a means for testing ideas.

### Case comparisons

Comparative studies range from simple to complex. Case comparisons, the simplest sort, are regularly used to support or debunk assertions based on the study of a single instance. Sidney Mintz (1985), for instance, sought to clinch his argument about the importance of political economy in promoting sugar in England by writing a final chapter comparing and contrasting its political and economic history with that of France, a nation never so committed to sugar as its neighbor across the channel. Using multiple case studies, Robert Dirks (1980) lent credence to Colin Turnbull's (1972) ethnographic account of the Ik, an African group ravaged by famine. Critics had found the depravities reported by Turnbull hard to believe (see *Current Anthropology*, Volume 15: 99–102; Volume 16: 343–58). Dirks marshaled more than a dozen accounts of food emergencies worldwide revealing similar responses to famine elsewhere in the world.

### Controlled comparisons

In the controlled comparison, another anthropological standby, cases are selected based on the presence or absence of some particular trait. Jack Goody's (1982) aforementioned *Cooking, Cuisine and Class* relied on this approach. Goody lined up societies that distinguish between high and low cuisines on one side, societies that make no such distinction on the other, and asked: "Are there differences between the two sets that might explain their contrasting conceptions?" In a similar vein, Dietler and Hayden (2001) assembled numerous archaeological and ethnographic examples of ceremonial feasting from around the world and compared them to find consistencies. Their research revealed that institutionalized feasting has functioned worldwide to force surplus production. Feasting has contributed to the emergence of social inequity, has served to validate status, and has been associated with the production of prestige goods, including specialty foods (Hayden, 2001: 24).

### Holocultural studies

Cross-cultural or so-called "holocultural" studies, the most complex of anthropology's comparative methodologies, depend on data from a large sample of societies to subject hypotheses to statistical tests. The first such study within the anthropology of food tested the theory that fluctuations in food supply helped explain annual rituals of conflict (Dirks, 1988) and looked at food supply in connection with the incidence of warfare (Ember and Ember, 1992) and the cultural value placed on social cooperation (Poggie, 1995). Subsequent research has examined food supply and storage in relation to the development of counting (Divale, 1999) and cultural attitudes toward salt (Parman, 2002).

### Origins and primal causes

Anthropology's concern with human origins and the roots of social and cultural life sustains paleoanthropology, drives inquiries regarding animal and plant domestication, and inspires researchers' efforts to better understand human nature. In top-notch works like Bestor's *Tsukiji* (2004), the essential character of *Homo sapiens* is ultimately at issue. At one level, the book seems little more than a colorful tour of a curious institution. The author's deeper purpose,



however, is to challenge conventional economic theory and formalistic conceptions about how markets work.

Addressing human nature from another angle, anthropological studies of food habits and dietary patterns have figured prominently in models of evolution. The "Man-the-Hunter" hypothesis, originated in the 1960s, maintained that the genus *Homo* evolved from a population of Australopithecines on account of greater reliance on tools, more aggressive predation, and increased meat consumption. More recently, Richard Wrangham (2009) proposed that while meat eating may have given impetus to the evolution of *Homo habilis* some 2.5 million years ago, the subsequent emergence of *Homo erectus* and the eventual development of *Homo sapiens* depended on the control of fire and the invention of cooking. Pre-digestion through the application of heat would explain observed reductions in chewing apparatus, increases in cranial capacity, and other anatomical changes. Socioculturally, it elucidates behavioral and organizational transformations inferred by comparing humans with other primates. Cooking, as Wrangham sees it, explains the emergence of relatively stable mating patterns and the sexual division of labor, particularly with regard to the universal predominance of females in the kitchen. His arguments cannot be substantiated by direct archaeological evidence because of the ephemeral nature of a camp fire, but by weaving together knowledge from a variety of fields, including biochemistry, nutrition, anatomy, physiology, zoology, primatology, evolutionary ecology, prehistory, history, ethnography, ethnology, economic anthropology, sociology, and time-motion studies, Wrangham constructs a plausible model.

Social and cultural anthropologists too have used multidisciplinary approaches to address some of the anthropology of food's bigger issues. Symposia organized by the International Commission on the Anthropology of Food and Nutrition (ICAF) periodically address such seminal topics as the dynamics of food sharing, the development of food preferences, and the relationship between food and status. In a resulting publication, *Food and the Status Quest* (Wiessner and Schiefenovel, 1996), co-editor Polly Wiessner (1996) summarized what the various disciplines brought to the table. The primatologists indicated just how deep status seeking and rank formation is to the human phylogeny and laid down a baseline against which science can measure the effects of human culture. Archaeological papers put the status quest as expressed through food in a temporal perspective and underscored the influence of status-related food concerns on the production of food and drink and in driving social evolution. Ethnologists familiar with particular cultures in different parts of the world reported on a variety of food transactions and their effects on status. Taken together, their papers revealed a considerable measure of cultural pliability. Still, societies universally honor givers above receivers, and humans appear deeply and irrepressibly determined to affect status by alimentary means.

### Avenues for future research

The anthropology of food will continue to explore a number of familiar areas in the years ahead. The social crises caused by migrants and the introduction of their foods has been a favorite topic in the past. Recent attention to the strengthening of old traditions in communities hosting newly arrived immigrants (Gariné *et al.*, n.d.: 10) represents a new direction for research and suggests other viewpoints yet to be explored. Anthropologists still have much to contribute to the history of globalization from the perspective of local communities. In recent years, the challenge that industrial homogenization presents to the local specialty food and craft producers has engaged a number of anthropologists (e.g., Heath and Meneley, 2007; Terrio, 2000), but much remains to be done to better our understanding of the culture of niche foods. Studies of the role of food in marking ethnic, regional, and national identity remain popular, and signs of increasing theoretical sophistication bode well for their future.

The first steps have been taken in new directions. A quick review of recent doctoral dissertations shows few studies focused on the travels of particular food items and greater concern with how food preparation and consumption creates a sense of place and cultivates specific tastes. Investigations of taste may offer a rich avenue for exploring "food as food" (Holtzman, 2009), particularly if they include its physiological, emotional, aesthetic, class, and other socially relevant dimensions. The locavore movement and other reactions to globalization are fertile areas for future investigation, especially as energy and commodity prices increase to the point of altering the current economics of food trade. Anthropologists' grasp on food-related symbols and meanings and the structural aspects of food systems positions them well to consider the social consequences of economic change as well as issues of sustainability and food safety. Given the tremendous popularity in the US of cooking programming on television, celebrity chefs, and food-centered blogs, future investigators might also give more attention to culinary performance and the media as an arena of investigation.

The anthropology of food will become more quantitative in the future. Currently, the literature contains little numerical data and even less statistical analysis. This could hardly be otherwise in a field dominated by cultural anthropologists, many of whom dismiss quantitative research as narrowly conceived. Cultural anthropologists often maintain that a well-conceived qualitative study stands on its own. Ellen Messer (2004: 181–82) disputes this and indeed faults two otherwise well-regarded anthropologies of food, James Watson's (1997) study of McDonald's restaurants in the Far East and Richard Wilk's (2006) culinary history of Belize, as being too insular and disconnected from important themes in nutritional anthropology and other areas of food studies. Pressure on food anthropologists to broaden their methodological horizons and report such basics as how frequently foods are eaten is likely to increase in the future, particularly as standards of evidence and demands on accountability increase.

### Practical considerations

#### Funding

The best way to secure support from funders is to investigate topics they see as socially relevant. MacBeth and MacClancy (2004: 4) refer to an environment of "hard-nosed pragmatism." It began in the UK during the 1990s, spread to the rest of Europe, and now prevails worldwide. Gone for the most part are the days of post-modernism when anthropologists had the luxury of contemplating the literary aspects of their work. In today's world, nutritional anthropology rates as more relevant than the anthropology of food. Nevertheless, studies of food ideologies, cultures of consumption, food disorders, agricultural organization, and McDonaldization remain in demand (MacBeth and MacClancy, 2004: 4).

No agency devotes itself exclusively to promoting the anthropology of food. However, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, which funds research in all branches of anthropology, has awarded dozens of food-related research grants over the past decade. Recently funded projects include studies of urban food markets and networks in Madrid; blood, food and sociality in Iran; longitudinal studies of health transition and culture change in Vanuatu; and the identities of millet versus rice consumers in Neolithic Northern China ([www.wennergren.org/grantees](http://www.wennergren.org/grantees)).

The majority of food anthropologists hold teaching posts and conduct research on a part-time basis. The ordinary costs involved are absorbed primarily by the institutions that employ them. However, when it comes to big-ticket items, such as research trips far from home, investigators usually find it necessary to apply to various funding agencies for grants. Theodore Bestor's (2004: xix–xxi) support for *Tsukiji* appears typical. It materialized in bits and pieces, paying for

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research trips and teaching appointments over a period of 14 years. Bestor acknowledges the Japan Foundation, the US Department of Education Fulbright Program, the Joint Committee on Japanese Studies of the American Council of Learned Societies and the Social Science Research Council, the National Science Foundation, the New York Sea Grant Institute, and some ten other organizations.

### Programs

Academic programs having to do primarily with the anthropology of food are few and far between. Indiana University offers the only PhD students select among anthropology's four major subfields (archaeology, biological anthropology, linguistics, and sociocultural anthropology) and take additional courses in food and nutrition. The School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London has organized an MA program in the anthropology of food. Full-time students undertake a year of continuous study, using break periods to read and prepare coursework. The program focuses on the study of famine and the role of food aid in nutritionally insecure regions. At New Mexico State University, graduate students in anthropology can minor in food studies.

### Research tools

One of the most important tools for anthropological research are the Human Relations Area Files. The files consists of full-text ethnographic and historical accounts of nearly 400 societies around the world, providing ready information about a great variety of cultures. A system of detailed, standardized indexing allows users to pull out facts about foods and other aspects of culture quickly and in its original context. Access to the Human Relations Area Files, either on microfiche or on the web (as the eHRAF Collection of Ethnography) is through member libraries. The more recently developed eHRAF Collection of Archaeology provides readily accessible information about prehistoric populations.

Robert Freedman's monumental, two-volume *Human Food Uses: A Cross-Cultural, Comprehensive Annotated Bibliography* (1981, 1983) constitutes another exceedingly valuable research tool. It lists and describes nearly every scholarly publication about food and every paper about food consumption presented at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association over a period of approximately 100 years. Other valuable bibliographies include Christine Wilson's (1979) *Food-Custom and Nurture: An Annotated Bibliography on Sociocultural and Biocultural Aspects of Nutrition* and Robert Dirks's *World Food Habits* (see below).

### Data sets

Holocultural studies rely for the most part on a data set known as the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample (SCCS). Its development began in 1957 when Yale anthropologist George Murdock first published the World Ethnographic Sample, consisting of 565 cultures coded for 30 variables. Ten years later the sample contained 1,200 cultures coded for more than 100 variables. In 1969, Murdock and Douglas White developed the SCCS, consisting of 186 well-documented societies selected to represent a world sample of human experience and cultural expression. Currently, the SCCS is coded for more than 2,000 variables, including a large number having to do with subsistence, food supply, the division of labor, exchange and other forms of distribution, and child-rearing practices (see *World Cultures* [ISSN 1045-0564], a paper and internet journal).

### Internet resources

The anthropology of food is represented on a handful of internet sites. For bibliographic references organized by region and topic, professionals and students alike turn to World Food Habits ([www.foodhabits.info](http://www.foodhabits.info)). Members of the American Anthropological Association's Society for Food and Nutrition have a blog site entitled Food Anthropology ([foodanthro.wordpress.com](http://foodanthro.wordpress.com)) where members publicize their own research and comment on current issues. A network of European researchers maintain Anthropology of Food ([aof.revues.org/index.html](http://aof.revues.org/index.html)), an open-access web journal published in French and English since the early 1990s.

### Scholarships and awards

The Society for the Anthropology of Food and Nutrition (SAFN) sponsors the annual Christine Wilson Award competition. Prizes are presented to the outstanding undergraduate and graduate research papers either in Nutritional Anthropology or the Anthropology of Foods.

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