J.D. La Fleur

_Fusion Foodways of Africa's Gold Coast in the Atlantic Era._ Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2012. xvi + 214 pp. (Cloth US$146.00)

This is a stimulating and informative book that engages its subject in a _longue durée_ framework. J.D. La Fleur offers an informed and detailed cultural, social, and technical account of agriculture, food, and culinary culture in the Gold Coast region from prehistoric foraging to mature farming. The focus, however, is on the era of the “Columbian exchange,” involving the movement of people, plants, animals, disease, and ideas in the Atlantic Basin between 1500 and 1850 CE and the impact of Atlantic crops on established agricultural technologies and culinary cultures. The book has six chapters, a comprehensive bibliography, and an index divided into three useful subsections. In addition, there are nine instructive maps, five illustrations, and word lists of crops, beverages, and processed foods in different Gold Coast languages. It draws on archival sources in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, published primary and secondary sources, and unpublished works comprising theses, dissertations, and conference papers. Interdisciplinary in its methodological approach, it relies on data from archaeology, ethnology, comparative and historical linguistics, historical demography, historical geography, and historical ecology.

Chapter 1 (“Finding History in Early Afro-Atlantic Foodways”) offers a critical examination of current historiographical studies of precolonial agriculture in Africa and introduces an alternative approach to this field. The themes include the technical and ideological processes associated with the incorporation of Atlantic crops into Gold Coast agricultural regimes, the cultural and social implications of new food technologies, and the effects of changing food technologies on local ecosystems.

Chapter 2 (“Introducing the Land to Culture: An Interpretation”) is partly a speculative history due to limited data. It proposes possible food procuring strategies in the region from before 25,000 BCE up to the second millennium CE. According to La Fleur, by about 1400 CE a common agricultural strategy existed throughout the Gold Coast and complementing this farming tradition were specialized communities engaged in hunting, fishing, collecting, and trapping.

Chapter 3 (“Seeds of Change: Early African Experimentation with Foreign Starches”) discusses the impact of foreign starches on cuisine and local farming strategies. Starch foods included maize from the Americas, plantain from Central Africa, and Asian varieties of rice. Women farmers, living in the vicinity of Portuguese commercial stations, began the initial cultivation of these crops in their kitchen gardens toward the end of the fifteenth century. Analyzing early word lists of Gold Coast languages for neologisms and European loan words,
La Fleur traces the spread and adoption of these crops and their associated farming techniques. By the middle of the sixteenth century maize was an established crop in the savanna-woodlands north of the rain forest and by the end of the century plantain was a staple in forest agriculture. In 1600 Asian and not African rice was being sold in coastal markets. As described by La Fleur, the sixteenth century was a time of widespread experimentation as local farmers added new starchy foods to their subsistence strategies.

Chapter 4 (“You Reap What You Sow: The Profits and Perils of the New Starchy Staples”) covers the period from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. La Fleur discusses the advantages plantain culture had over yam culture, arguing for example that plantain cultivation “freed up time that elders and ‘big men’ could direct toward the extraction of gold” (p. 109). The chapter describes how Atlantic-era breads and beer became part of the culinary repertoire of coastal towns in the course of the seventeenth century and indicates how this was achieved through the agency of Allada cooks employed in European trading stations. From the sixteenth century onward, maize production was promoted by coastal kings, big men, and independent entrepreneurs to cater to European factors’ need for provisions, and by the seventeenth century maize consumption was regarded as a symbol of wealth and high status. The chapter ends with a lengthy discussion of the unforeseen consequences deriving from new food technologies, such as poverty, malnutrition, disease, and violence.

Chapter 5 (“The Porcupine’s Shame: Bearing the Burden of Cassava Culture”) reveals that the adoption of cassava as a staple crop was achieved only in the mid-nineteenth century, following the arrival of diasporic Africans from the Americas. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century cassava cultivation was largely limited to small plots in and around Accra. Chapter 6 (“Finding Food in Afro-Atlantic History”) proposes new ways to introduce a more visible African dimension in Atlantic history, for example by emphasizing the role of women who, in La Fleur’s view, served as “gatekeepers to the introduction of new crops into domestic gardens and then into their kitchens” (p. 189).

There are a couple of critical points to be made. La Fleur does not refer to the “country wives” of European traders in Gold Coast ports; given the culinary nature of their households that would have catered to African and European diets, these women would have been instrumental in the introduction of new crops. Nor does he discuss the role of towns and urbanization in changing food technologies and dietary habits over the long duration. What were the dietary needs and culinary demands of townspeople? However, these are minor issues and should not detract from the fact that this is an excellent book.
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