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Culturally appropriate food: Researching cultural aspects of food sovereignty

Devon Sampson and Chelsea Wills

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Abstract

One way that food sovereignty challenges conventional notions of food security is by insisting that culture is and should be part of food systems. Many definitions of food sovereignty assert a right to “culturally appropriate” food, but who decides what is culturally appropriate? We argue that food and farming “culture” is too often assumed to be static and settled by a default consensus within farming communities, when in fact it is dynamically changing and the subject of significant disagreements. We present findings from two years of participatory action research in rural Yucatan, Mexico that offers glimpses into the process by which cultural values of food and farming are agreed upon, contested, and disseminated. We involved a group of recent high school graduates from a rural municipality in participatory photography work as part of a research project on agrobiodiversity and food sovereignty that we collaboratively presented in the municipality and later at national and international venues. Their work captured moments of agreement and dissent in what constitutes culturally appropriate food. At the same time, the youth researchers used the photography as a means to a stronger voice in defining the kinds of food and agriculture they want for themselves and their community. What is “culturally appropriate” is dynamically worked, never reaching a static consensus, but still affecting food sovereignty in tangible, material ways.

Introduction

Food exists at the nexus of material and meaning. This is why our most intimate looks into food systems in Tzucacab, a rural municipality in Yucatan, Mexico, happened at lunch. A woman who moments before was the subject of an interview is now wilting green Chaya leaves in a pan and scrambling them with eggs. We’re talking about the poor yields due to drought, about how her grandfather grew the best watermelons. We can’t not talk about food at lunch. She sends a grandchild out to buy tortillas, which come back in a white paper wrapper, and she apologizes that she didn’t have time to make them by hand this time, due to an obligation at her daughter’s school. We are special guests and are served first. The food we eat and the way we eat it are the result of the opportunities and constraints of what is available, in both materials and labor; the desires, tastes, the traditions of food; and the uneasy politics of access and privilege. All combine in an unstable moment to shape this meal. Changing economies put certain foods in or out of reach, changing weather brings crops or it doesn’t. Culture, as unstable and as consequential as economies or weather, defines what good food is, and what food is fit for a guest.

Most food sovereignty advocates claim a right to a culturally appropriate food, in addition to enough food, healthy food, and a role for smallholders in their food systems. Take, for

example, the definition in the Declaration of Nyéleni that came out of a Via Campesina-organized conferenced in rural Mali. It begins, “Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems...” (Via Campesina 2007). Culture gets top billing, probably because it is at the heart of how and why different peoples make the food and agriculture systems that they do, and why they engage in political struggle for a meaningful place in food systems. A claim to culturally appropriate food is one way food sovereignty is different from food security, as defined by more established institutions. The closest the Food and Agriculture Organization comes to an equivalent claim is that food security includes “food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO 2001). Food culture is collectively held. Food preferences are not.

Culture¹ is collectively held, but not without disagreement or change. Why do people grow what they grow, and eat what they eat? Why and how do they struggle to do so? These questions are partly economic, partly political, but also partly cultural. As scholars of food movements, we generally treat the political and economic aspects of food as complex, changing, contested, and interrelated. Cultural aspects deserve the same kind of treatment. A simplistic explanation would be that “what is good food?” is a cultural question, while “how to get it?” is a political-economic question. But culture is intertwined with politics and economies. Desirable foods can become an undesirable mark of poverty and then become desirable again with shifting political-economic access (Crockett and Stuber 1992), and eating poor people’s foods can help determine political class (Bennett 1943, Oths et al. 2010). Political claims to state resources are often strengthened or weakened by cultural markers, for example, cultural factors that shape a peoples’ claim to indigenusness (Li 2000). With culture affecting claims to food and the materials needed to produce it, and politics and economies affecting the culture of food, it would seem that the culture of food would be at the center of food sovereignty research. In our review of the academic food sovereignty literature, we found many references to the importance of culture-- for instance, the need to respect local cultures in food sovereignty projects (Rosset et al. 2011), or of strengthening cultural practices as a way of resisting the neoliberal reduction of food and agriculture to the price form (McMichael 2008)-- but none that treated culture as something dynamically changing, and no cultural studies of food.

¹ Dictionaries generally list three meanings of culture: the working of the earth, the arts and intellectual achievements of humanity, and the distinctive ideas, customs, social behavior or way of life of a people. The present paper on agriculture, photography, and social change touches on all three definitions, but we’re concerned mostly with the third here. When we talk about investigating cultural aspects of food sovereignty we refer to the academic project of cultural studies that looks critically at how meaning is created and disseminated.

We suspect that the cultural claim of food sovereignty has received relatively little attention because (1) there is a tendency to assume the cultural appropriateness of food is agreed upon within communities advocating for food sovereignty, and that it is static in time even if it changes from place to place, (2) the cultural appropriateness of food is assumed to be less consequential than more material claims to *enough* food, *healthy* food, and local control over food and agriculture policy, and (3) cultural appropriateness is seen as more subjective and less knowable than other aspects of food sovereignty, and therefore not worth research attention. We argue that none of these assumptions are true.

Here we present a collaborative study in rural Yucatan, Mexico that indicates that the cultural appropriateness of food is contested and shifting, that collective definitions of cultural appropriateness are worked out in the contexts of complex and unequal power, and that ideas of cultural appropriateness are consequential in the politics and strategies of feeding oneself. Here, cultural appropriateness shapes and is shaped by the more material aspects of food sovereignty. We present this study also as suggestion of how participatory research into food sovereignty might take culture seriously, for a better understanding of food sovereignty struggles and stronger tools for community organizing and advocacy.

Investigating cultural aspects of food sovereignty

We worked with a group of six recent graduates of a technical high school in the rural municipality of Tzucacab, Yucatan, Mexico during 2011 and 2012. It was a collaboration between us, the authors: an agroecologist and an artist. In this collaboration we agreed that the work would treat both agroecological and cultural aspects of the work with rigor. We also collaborated with the six students (who we call collectively youth researchers or youth photographers) from May to October of 2011 on research into food sovereignty and agrobiodiversity. During the most intensive part of the work we met with the students two days each week for 16 weeks, measuring agrobiodiversity in home gardens in the municipality, conducting focus groups on food sovereignty and food traditions, and looking into issues that mattered to the students using participatory photography. We concentrate on the participatory photography work here, but the students photographic work was framed by their experience counting plants in home gardens and running focus groups with us.

We used the PhotoVoice methodology (Wang and Burris 1997) as a framework for a participatory photography project. PhotoVoice was first used as a way bridge needs assessment and advocacy in the public health field (Wang and Burris 1994), and has since been employed with refugees and people living with many kinds of disabilities and diseases. The medium has several advantages for communicating across asymmetrical power relationships and strengthening politically underrepresented voices: Good photographs can be viscerally

persuasive. The way photographs capture a point-of-view makes it an especially effective tool for sharing lived experience. Photographers, subjects and audiences need not be literate or share a common language.

The youth researchers were not patients, but they did have an underrepresented voice, in their community and beyond. There seems to be a conceptual place for the experiences of indigenous elders, for example in lamenting the loss of traditional foods and farming ways. There also seems to be conceptual room for thinking about young Mexicans, but this is mostly limited to either urban young people or migration stories. In the stories we heard in Tzucacab and also in discussions in urban Mexico and abroad, we noticed that narratives were limited to stories of rural and indigenous elders and urban or urbanizing youth. Those voices are important, but the youth researchers do not fit into these narratives. They - the very people who are currently making decisions that are shaping the future of food and agriculture in their community- fall into a conceptual “gap” between rural/old and urban/young, the way the semi-settled Meritus Dayak people and agroecosystems that Anna Tsing works with fall into a “gap” between wild and tame, contributing to their political invisibility (Tsing 2004).

A voice in the formal and informal politics of food is necessary to make claims to the material things of food sovereignty: enough food, healthy food, and the means to produce it. It is also necessary in the ongoing, messy process by which food systems and one’s place in them are defined. We were not so interested in defining what *culturally appropriate* food was to these photographers at this time as much as we were interested in looking into the processes by which appropriate food is defined and re-defined by a group that is seldom heard from, and, hopefully, in providing some tools and training that would make those voices stronger.

We were careful to treat the photography as cultural production, not simple documentation. We met for two afternoon workshops each week during the project for peer critiques of the students photographs. The youth researchers quickly learned the technical aspects of digital photography, and much more of our workshop time was spent working on visual literacy and effective storytelling through photography. We used examples of photography from popular publications like Rolling Stone and fine art works like those of Annie Liebowitz and Graciela Iturbide as a way to explore what an effective image could be, and the stories that images could tell. A local reporter gave a workshop on reporting through photography. The youth researchers critiqued each others’ images for composition and visual appeal, as well as the clarity of what they were trying to portray.

The other focus of the workshops was working with the youth researchers to develop a stronger voice in and through their work. Our process of making and reflecting on photographic

work is a praxis of action and reflection, inspired by Freire's rural literacy work (2005 [1970], also cited in Wang and Burris 2004). Youth researchers worked in a cycle: taking photographs, reflecting on that work, taking more photographs, reflecting again. We asked the photographers to choose their favorite photos each week, to explain why they like those photos, and for the group to critique them. They wrote captions for each photo, which were also critiqued by the group and revised by the photographers several times. The result was a movement over the weeks from relatively impersonal photographs (of just plants or foods, for example) to more personal and intimate photographs (mostly of family members), and from many off-topic photographs (of puppies, or of friends striking sexy poses at school) towards more focused work that communicated a message. Captions moved from vague and descriptive ("When a crop changes color it is ripe") to more personal and communicative ("The color change shows that this habanero chile is just ready to eat").

The photographic work culminated in an exhibition in the community in October of 2011. We spent several weeks selecting and preparing photographs with the youth researchers, planning the event, and preparing and practicing the researchers' presentation of the photographs to the community. We printed the photographs on vinyl banners and hung them in front of the municipal government building. Students invited friends and families, and we invited local campesino leaders and decision makers from the local, state, and federal governments. Later, we showed the exhibition in the state capital of Merida and in Mexico City, and then with two of the youth researchers we took the exhibition on a speaking tour of universities and Yucatecan cultural groups in California.

The exhibitions gave the work an audience, and the youth researchers discussed these various audiences during critiques while they were taking photographs. What did they want to communicate to their community? What did they want to communicate about their community to a regional or international audience? Some common themes emerged. To their community, that they are proud of where they come from, that they notice the complexity and dignity of work their parents do, that they are frustrated with many people's disregard for the integrity of their town. To a larger audience, that they come from a good place and that they are concerned for its future.

Photographs capture moments of culture in progress

Leonor Dzul Uc² began taking photographs of her mother and aunt cooking and her family eating, and we encouraged her to not just document how food is made, but to take photographs that challenge the way women's knowledge and work remains relatively invisible in Tzucacab. In one series she photographed each step of her mother making tortillas, which resulted in 22 photographs, from cooking the corn kernels in lime to pulling hot tortillas of the *comal* and putting them in a *lek* - a kind of gourd- to keep warm. The intricacy surprised her even though she had watched it happen every day of her life and helped her mother with most of the steps at different times. As an example to illustrate the skill involved, she calls attention to a photograph she took when her mother said she knew the corn was done cooking: it changes color subtly, and overcooking or undercooking will effect the flavor and texture of the tortillas.

The tortilla series was one of the most popular in the exhibition in Tzucacab, where people gathered around it to discuss finer points of tortilla making. It was successful in bringing women's labor and craft into a more visible, public sphere, and in highlighting women's skilled labor in local food systems. In rural Yucatan, Leonor's and her mother's pride in the craft leapt of the vinyl prints to infect an audience of tortilla-makers and eaters. To audiences outside of Yucatan, Leonor used the series was a way to talk about the importance of traditional foods and their risk of their disappearance.

² We use the youth researchers' full names here because they are collaborators in, not subjects of, this research, and they deserve credit for their work. The photographs are owned jointly by the photographers and us, and are used here with the photographers' permission.



[Image 1. Washing the *Nixtamal*. In this moment when I took the photo, my mom was washing the nixtamal before she took it to be ground. I like the way she moved her hands to remove the peels from the corn so it would be clean. Leonor Dzul Uc, 2011]

Hand-made whole-corn tortillas are perhaps the perfect symbol of food sovereignty in rural Yucatan, where they are loved by nearly everyone for their superior taste and the way they satisfy hunger far better than tortillas made by machine from Maseca and other brands of dehydrated corn masa. They come, however, at the cost of a great deal of women's labor. It would be simplistic to say that handmade tortillas are a material representation of food sovereignty while Maseca tortillas are not. Some of the staunchest advocates of traditional foods and farming we know in Tzucacab regularly eat Maseca tortillas because the combined commitments of farming and activism leave them little time to make tortillas by hand. An insistence on handmade tortillas can contain both a pride in the tradition and a disturbing assumption about how women should spend their time. We know that in the early twentieth century, when electric mills replaced grinding stones for grinding corn into masa, many men decried the technology, suggesting that the time savings, as well as the need to leave the house

to walk to the mill, would cause promiscuity (Pilcher 2007: 107). Women's work preparing food is entangled with craft and pride but also sexism and marginalized labor.

Leonor's photography peered into another "gap" in Tsing's (2004) sense of the word- the place where women's skilled labor is made relatively invisible because it does not quite fit comfortably into the category of everyday drudgery or cultural heritage. It floats somewhere in-between, or it encompasses both. Falling into this gap, along with a patriarchal attitude that women's work is facile is less skilled and less complex than men's work, make the craft of tortilla making invisible.

Handmade tortillas embody a widely held food preference to be sure, but Leonor focuses on the culture of tortilla making by photographing the knowledge and labor of making tortillas rather than the tortillas themselves. In presenting the photographs, she talks about how, while photographing, she learned new things about making tortillas and about why her mother makes tortillas. She captures moments of culture being transferred; of the knowledge and values of a food becoming commonly held within her household. The photographs show a relationship around food and labor as much as the material food being made. Audiences often asked, will Leonor make tortillas by hand when she has a family? She would like to, she says, but it's complicated. She is now in college studying to be a computer engineer, a career that may not give her time to make tortillas. The preference for handmade tortillas is easy for Leonor, but the cultural appropriateness, like the all aspects of culture, are in the process of being defined and re-defined in a changing economic context.

For another series, Leonor photographed three families, hers and two neighbors, preparing and eating lunch. She says that the diversity of foods surprised her. She learned new dishes that she had never heard of before that her neighbors cook every week. In the most intimate photo of the series, Leonor's family is taking their first bites of a pork and vegetable stew called *puchero*. The tortillas are on the table along with a *lek* gourd, a bowl of fresh radish *salpicón* relish, an orange, and a large bottle of Pepsi.

To urban audiences, it is the bottle of Pepsi that stands out as an out-of-place ingredient in an indigenous meal. At a gallery opening in downtown Merida, the capital of Yucatan State, a tourist cornered Leonor by this photograph to give her a lecture on the perils of consuming sugary drinks. We watched with concern while the woman told Leonor about the diabetes epidemic and the superiority of natural fruit juices to processed sodas, but Leonor kept her composure. She replied that she knows that too much sugar is unhealthy, that her family drinks many different beverages at different times, and that her job as a photographer in this context is to capture the moment as she knows it. She could have removed the Pepsi for the

photograph, she said, but chose not to. To Leonor the Pepsi is one component in a meal, to the tourist (and many other people who have since voiced similar concerns about that photograph), it is evidence of declining integrity, or even inauthenticity, in reference to an imaginary version of what indigenous food culture should be.



[Image 2: My Family Eating Lunch. My family is eating stew. My cousins came from Candelaria, Quinana Roo, and we shared food with them that day. Leonor Dzul Uc, 2011]

It is clashes in food cultures like this where the entangled nature of culture and power becomes clear. Who gets to define what foods are appropriate? It's easy to make fun of the tourist exercising her privilege in the colonial tradition of telling indigenous people how to eat. But we find something more intriguing in the tangle of unequal power and privilege that underlies her response to Leonor's photograph and in Leonor's response to her. Leo grants that there are dubious health effects of soft drinks, but she insists that the soda exists in a larger context- of other foods on the table, of a special occasion with cousins from out of town, of a mother and aunt who have more say over the menu than Leonor does. I would add Pepsi as another

character in the photograph, not just as a bottle of soda but as a multinational corporation with deep political and economic power in Mexico. What is appropriate to eat is always defined in a context of power, and almost always, unequal power. The photo invites a look into cultural appropriateness being worked out- an iteration in the iterative definition of culturally appropriate food in Leonor's family. Her interaction with the tourist begs the question, Who gets to decide what and how to eat?

Culture is implicated in both Leonor's and the tourist's claim to authority. It is implicated also in Leonor's reframing of tortilla making as craft. The photographs and the photographers presentation of them are a look into tension and change in the culture of food. At the same time, the photographs are a means of working it out, a instrument in a cultural process, in some cases getting to agreements on cultural appropriateness and in others contesting stereotypes that make their specific experience less visible.

Gilberto Jimenez Chi, another youth researcher, took photographs that he hoped would change people's actions and attitudes towards his town. For one photo essay, he photographed the trash that piles up in and around the town plaza every day. It incensed him that his neighbors had so little regard for their town that they would fill it with trash. His original idea was to photograph the same places just after they were cleaned, and then later in the day when they were full of trash. As the idea developed, he started taking photos of the way trash circulated through the town: an overflowing trash can after a town dance, the street cleaning crew early in the morning, vultures eating from the municipal dump. The final photographs beg the question, how are you part of a community and a place?



[Image 3. The Garbage Truck. This morning the garbage truck is going by the station and three workers are picking up the trash from the corner. Gilberto Jimenez Chi, 2011).

This series is less focused on food systems in a literal way than Leonor's work or the other series that Gilberto made, but for Gilberto it gets at what it means to be a campesino, to be from and of a rural place. In Gilberto's family being a campesino is a source of great pride. Gilberto's deep and enthusiastic knowledge of rare plants were invaluable assets in our biodiversity study, and we have had long conversations with Gilberto and his family about how one should treat the land. But being a campesino also has its stigma, even in a rural town where most people are campesinos, and especially for an ambitious teenager. During critiques, Gilberto talked about how he was torn- he is dedicated to this place, but sometimes he wanted out. He often felt people in Tzucacab were frustratingly closed-minded and had a small worldview. The investigation of trash came from this tension. He wants the audience to think about what it means to be part of a place, and how you treat a place. He hopes people will start thinking of this place -Tzucacab- as important, valuable, and worth keeping clean. The photographs are intended to make a cultural change.

Questions about staying or leaving, and about farming or pursuing other livelihoods, permeated much of what the youth researchers did with us. These questions came both from within the group and from their audiences, local and international. They carry great weight in our investigation of agrobiodiversity because conservation depends on young people continuing to farm in diverse, low-input agroecosystems. The questions matter to food sovereignty in Tzucacab, among many other reasons, because these young people are currently making decisions that will shape the food system in their community and define how they participate in it. Gilberto's photographs of trash assert his belonging to this place, along with an ethic of how one should treat one's land and place. They are also a means of transmitting Gilberto's values of place in hopes that they become commonly held.

Notes on methodologies for investigating cultural aspects of food sovereignty

Photography is one of many possible mediums and PhotoVoice one of many possible methodologies for participatory research into culture. What is important is that the research is participatory. Outsiders' best interpretations of cultural appropriateness might be able to describe cultural norms around food, but they can not offer insight into the cultural processes by which the appropriateness of food is debated and worked out over time. To us, truly participatory work does not (only) produce an abstracted understanding of a phenomena for an abstract audience, it produces real insights among researchers and participants alike, and shares those insights with known audiences.

It treats participants as experts on their own lived experience, including the experience of sharing their experience. In a reflection session after the first exhibition, the photographers told us that the most difficult part of the project was learning how to approach people, describe what they wanted and how they would use photographs, and generate the trust needed to take those photos. Other difficult parts were preparing statements about their photographs for exhibitions and interviews with the press and on the local radio station. These experiences and skills are products of the project as much as the photographs³, which is why we describe moments from critiques, presentations, and gallery openings as data in this paper.

We are under no illusion that the photographs represent a simple version of the world as the photographers see it. The photographs capture not just the youth researchers' point of view, but their point of view in relation to us and other participants. There are four kinds of participants in this photography: Us, the authors; the student researchers; their families and

³ Participatory Action Research theorist Orlando Fals-Borda (1987) asserts that work is not really participatory unless the participants are at least one of the parties learning from the research. He emphasizes that building the analytical and reflective capacity for participants and outside researchers is part of participatory action research, not just a means to it. We took this as a principal in designing and executing this study.

other subjects of their photography; and the audiences of the work. The photographs reflect these collaborative spaces. Our work is often compared to efforts to “capture the world as campesinos see it” by, for example, handing out disposable cameras to children in a rural village and analyzing the resulting photographs. Those photographs would still reflect the relationship between the researchers and the participants, only it would be a very shallow relationship. We invested in a strong relationship with the student photographers through many weeks of collaborative work and rigorous reflection.

A place for culture in food sovereignty research

With claims to food sovereignty, people make a claim to making (and keeping) food and agriculture systems their own. What that means is culturally defined, and continually re-defined, in context of asymmetrical power relationships. Looking into the cultural processes by which good food and good farming is defined, and by which values of food and farming are disseminated or contested, can illuminate what people are struggling for when they struggle for food sovereignty. We don't expect cultural research to result in definitive definitions of culturally appropriate food, even for a specific place, because cultural norms are continually contested. They don't resolve into a list of appropriate and inappropriate foods, or good and bad farming practices. However, cultural research can offer a look into the processes by which good food and farming becomes a commonly (though not universally) held value. Moreover, good participatory research can help surface underrepresented perspectives and strengthen the voices and political efficacy of participants in struggles for food systems that reflect those values.

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FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES

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A fundamentally contested concept, food sovereignty has — as a political project and campaign, an alternative, a social movement, and an analytical framework — barged into global agrarian discourse over the last two decades. Since then, it has inspired and mobilized diverse publics: workers, scholars and public intellectuals, farmers and peasant movements, NGOs and human rights activists in the North and global South. The term has become a challenging subject for social science research, and has been interpreted and reinterpreted in a variety of ways by various groups and individuals. Indeed, it is a concept that is broadly defined as the right of peoples to democratically control or determine the shape of their food system, and to produce sufficient and healthy food in culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable ways in and near their territory. As such it spans issues such as food politics, agroecology, land reform, biofuels, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), urban gardening, the patenting of life forms, labor migration, the feeding of volatile cities, ecological sustainability, and subsistence rights.

Sponsored by the [Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University](#) and the [Journal of Peasant Studies](#), and co-organized by [Food First](#), [Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies \(ICAS\)](#) and the [International Institute of Social Studies \(ISS\)](#) in The Hague, as well as the Amsterdam-based [Transnational Institute \(TNI\)](#), the conference “Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue” will be held at Yale University on September 14–15, 2013. The event will bring together leading scholars and political activists who are advocates of and sympathetic to the idea of food sovereignty, as well as those who are skeptical to the concept of food sovereignty to foster a critical and productive dialogue on the issue. The purpose of the meeting is to examine what food sovereignty might mean, how it might be variously construed, and what policies (e.g. of land use, commodity policy, and food subsidies) it implies. Moreover, such a dialogue aims at exploring whether the subject of food sovereignty has an “intellectual future” in critical agrarian studies and, if so, on what terms.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Devon Sampson](#) is a PhD candidate in Environmental Studies at UC Santa Cruz. His research in Yucatan, Mexico examines the links between the biodiversity that farmers manage and household food security. Devon uses a participatory action research approach and methods from ecology and the social sciences to investigate the many ways that agrobiodiversity supports food security in a risky and changing climate and economy. His work contests the idea that diverse farms are expendable in the project of feeding the world.

[Chelsea Wills](#) is a social practice artist. Her works are often collaborative and participatory, and she uses artistic processes to shed new light on issues important to communities. She exhibits widely in the United States, Mexico and Europe. She holds an M.A. in education from UC Berkeley and a BFA from UC Santa Cruz.