

## THE HISTORICAL DIMENSION OF ALIMENTARY PRACTICES IN AFRICA

The historical dimension of alimentary practices is sufficiently emphasized today in publications dealing with the past development of European societies. And yet there is still surprise at the discovery that at the end of the Middle Ages, olive oil did not have the importance in Provence one is tempted to attribute to it since time immemorial in this region. Or the connoisseur of *cassoulet* in the southwestern part of France might be surprised to learn that his ancestors were unable to enjoy this dish until after the discovery of America and the introduction of the *Phaseolus* variety of beans in Europe.

In Africa the picture is even more rigid, both in the collective imagination and in specialized writings. Oral traditions have incorporated the successive contributions that make up the present

Translated by R. Scott Walker.

agricultural patrimony to the point of giving them an aura of eternity. A peasant in central Africa might state that corn has always been grown in his village, even though this grain only came from America in the sixteenth century. And Africanist literature of the early twentieth century truly provides a dualist image of agricultural production and the eating habits that result from it, deliberately contrasting a so-called “traditional” period, of determinate length and considered marked by the seal of immutability, with an era of transformations opened by external contacts and colonization. According to this point of view, ancient eras are part of ethnography while the contemporary epoch belongs to political economics: “tradition” as opposed to “development”. In both cases the options, calculations and initiatives of African peasant groups have been swept away in favor of either fateful coincidences of a geographical, biological or culturalist type, or of modernization policies of external or government origin.

For decades major works of tropical geography or anthropology have clearly stressed the socio-cultural dimensions of alimentation. By the 1930's Audrey Richards was studying in a global manner the links between the land, labor and diet among the Babemba of present-day Zambia.<sup>1</sup> More recently, in 1965, in a long article on the African meal, Louis-Vincent Thomas insisted on this point:

“The African, who is readily described as famished or at least undernourished, has, by a compensatory reflex, situated the alimentary act at the very heart of civilization: social life, language, fables and proverbs, cosmological systems ... religious activities ... metaphysical categories: all recall food. Thus the nutritionist who would neglect the socio-cultural dimensions of the alimentary question would have but truncated knowledge, while the planning he might conceive would necessarily be doomed to failure.”

But it must be admitted that the analysis of changes in food

<sup>1</sup> A. Richards, *Land, Labour and Diet in Northern Rhodesia*, London, 1939. See also J. Goody, *Cuisines, cuisine et classes*, Paris, 1984; today the work of the staff of CNRS in Paris on “Differential alimentary anthropology” directed by I. de Garine.

<sup>2</sup> L. V. Thomas, “Essai sur la conduite négro-africaine du repas”, *Bulletin de l'IFAN*, XXVII, B, n. 3-4, 1965, pp. 573-635.

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consumption has most often remained anchored in the tradition/modernity dualist framework. Three types of determinisms are constantly recalled to characterize “traditional” situations: biological determinisms (physical type both created by diet and predisposing for certain types of consumption), determinisms of climatic zones (hunting, gathering, animal husbandry, agriculture determined by varying rainfall levels), and finally so-called cultural determinisms (customs, beliefs and taboos). These various constraints are real, of course. An autobiography of a Senegalese migrant worker<sup>3</sup> showed, for example, the difficulty of adaptation to cooking that was foreign to the narrator’s homeland, beginning with the manner of cooking rice in Abidjan! Louis-Vincent Thomas also recalled the attachment of various ethnic groups represented in the peasantry of the Office of Nigeria to their respective cuisines, but he added immediately, “And if a Bozo consumes 76 g. of proteins compared to 68 g. for a Peul, does this come from the fact that he is biologically Bozo, professionally a fisherman or religiously half-animist, half-Muslim? Nothing is more incorrect than to separate biological data from socio-cultural patterns.” Culinary stereotypes indeed have easy success: sauerkraut, macaroni and ketchup inevitably conjure up national labels in our minds. Africa has not escaped this, but supposedly scientific labels, insidiously inherited from the racialism of the nineteenth century, have too often sanctioned what derived from cultural symbols, passing impressions, even prejudices or simple pleasantries. For example, in 1951 the *Ten-year Plan* for development of Ruanda-Urun attributed to each of three pseudo-ethnic categories of this former Belgian Territory (Batutsi, Bahutu and Batwa) specific particular meals, without taking into account either variations in living standards within each group or quite marked regional variations, and it concluded with the following: “The Batwa eat everything that is at hand, at any time of the day.” Is not the imagery of “savages” often drawn also in terms of the stomach, from cannibalism to omnivorousness?

To conclude this introduction, we will cite observations made by Jean-Pierre Chauveau in a recent article on the Ivory Coast:

<sup>3</sup> O. Dia & R. Colin-Nogues, *Yâkârê: Autobiographie d'Oumar*, Paris, 1982.

“It is very clear that well before the colonial period, choices in food-producing systems could vary in time and in space. These variations do not seem due to rigid determinisms of the ecological or cultural type any more than they can be explained by diffusion through ‘contact’ between ethnic groups. Such factors do occur, but they are in a sense over-ruled by precise historical and spatial contexts structuring all aspects of production and development.”<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, in their studies of colonial regimes of pre-colonial societies, historians of Africa in the 1960’s and 1970’s, sensitive above all to major political changes, gave a privileged place to sovereigns and States, wars and important commerce, cities, significant events. This was an essential stage. But it is now time to no longer leave villages, production methods, daily life, health and demography, beliefs and world views in the darkness of a sort of “traditional” substratum that lies outside of time. It is from such a point of view, for example, that works on rural history are being developed, with the association of European and African historians. Diet is one of the most difficult subjects in these works, if a true response is sought to precisely this challenge of refocusing the historical perspective. Far from drawing up a comparative table of results here, it seemed to us more honest and more stimulating to define different perspectives of research, with the questions, the domains and the methods they imply.<sup>5</sup>

## I. MONOTONY OR DIVERSITY IN AFRICAN DIET: A QUESTION TO BE STUDIED

Before asking about modifications in alimentary systems over the

<sup>4</sup> J.-P. Chauveau, J.-P. Dozon & J. Richard, “Histoires de riz, histoires d’igname: le cas de la moyenne Côte d’Ivoire”, *Africa*, 1981, 2, pp. 621-658. J.-P. Chauveau, “L’avenir d’une illusion. Histoire de la production et des politiques vivrières en Côte d’Ivoire”, *Etudes rurales*, 99-100, juillet-déc. 1985, pp. 281-325.

<sup>5</sup> J.-P. Chrétien (ed.), *Histoire rurale de l’Afrique des grands lacs*, Paris, 1983, *Cahiers du C.R.A.*, n. 4/*Cahiers d’histoire*, n. 2, co-published by C.R.A. (Paris 1) and the department of history of the University of Burundi, Paris-Bujumbura, 1984, special issue, “Histoire rurale”. J. Vansina, “Esquisse historique de l’agriculture en milieu forestier (Afrique équatoriale)”, *Muntu*, Libreville, n. 2, 1985, pp. 5-34.

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long term, based on the written, oral or archaeological sources that can be used by historians, a few prior remarks are suggested by geographical or anthropological studies describing the situation in African peasant groups in the twentieth century. There one discovers the complexity of the alimentation consumed within each society, which contradicts the stereotyped view of monotonous ancient diets, unchanging and without savor. These studies bring out clearly the different forms of variations, within the meals themselves, in the course of the day and according to the seasons, according to age or sex, conditions and status, as well as exceptional, but periodic, conditions of either penury or abundance. These variations are like a series of cracks in which could be inserted, over the centuries, borrowings, innovations, abandoning, restructuring of the types of food, its preparation and the manner of acquiring it. These questions ultimately lead to a global investigation into the definition of African diets and management of the entire environment.<sup>6</sup>

### *1. Underestimated African cuisines*

The insistent preoccupation with the struggle against famine has led observers to stress the essential nature of the “alimentary bowl”, the basic foods that furnish essential calories, namely cereals (noodles, porridge, semolina), tubers and leguminous plants, and to neglect everything that accompanies them, what is called, especially in East Africa, the “sauces”, which in fact are vegetables, fats and meats that provide seasoning as well as additional proteins and lipids, essential vitamins and minerals. These “sauces” correspond somewhat to what medieval dietetics called the “companagium”, everything that could be eaten with bread. In Kirundi, for example, the term *imboga*, literally, “vegetables”, can also designate fish or even meat inasmuch as they complement the bread or the pot of beans at a meal. These foods, essential from the viewpoint of cooking, can be supplied by kitchen gardens, small-scale raising of animals, fishing, hunting or, quite

<sup>6</sup> Presentation by J. Devisse, D.E.A. seminar, Paris 1, “Histoire économique et sociale de l’Afrique”, 1987.

often, gathering. Economists and agronomists have often overlooked them. How is it possible to account for and promote these marginal activities, often not very serious, sometimes only seasonal, sometimes limited only to children or to women and yet omnipresent and discreet? Their particular importance in forest regions has been emphasized by several authors; and in this environment they are not limited simply to scattered clearings, but also include all forms of gathering in a natural setting that is well known for all its resources.<sup>7</sup>

It is precisely at the level of consumption, through study of cuisines, that one can best know the panoply of ancient alimentary resources. However, as Claude Savary emphasized in a recent issue of *Genève-Afrique*, this study often remains to be done:<sup>8</sup>

“There still exist today solid alimentary traditions linked to the land and to local products. In this respect it can be regretted that until now no one has made a detailed inventory of these. An atlas of traditional nourishment in sub-Saharan Africa would certainly be of great use to all those interested in questions of African alimentation and nutrition.”

Such an inventory, established from numerous monographs, reports or accounts containing scattered information, could certainly aid in forming a better knowledge of ancient conditions of African nutrition. Consultation of a table showing the composition of food<sup>9</sup> indicates the value of certain leafy vegetables for their supply of vitamins, calcium and iron.

But understanding ancient cuisines also supposes an analysis of tastes, which is hardly easy to undertake for lack of “cookbooks” and gastronomic treatises! On the other hand, conversations with

<sup>7</sup> G. Hulstaert, “L'évolution de la production alimentaire des Nkundo (XIXe-XXe siècles). Un bilan partisan”, *African Economic History* 7, 1979, pp. 171-181. J. Vansina, “L'homme, les forêts et le passé en Afrique”, *Annales ESC*, 1985, 6, pp. 1307-1334. S. Bahuchet, *Les pygmées Aka et la forêt centrafricaine*, Paris, 1985. See also the works of the geographer R. Pourtier.

<sup>8</sup> C. Savary, “Les aspects culturels de l'alimentation en Afrique”, *Genève-Afrique*, 1986, 1, pp. 85-110.

<sup>9</sup> H. Agbessi Dos-Santos & M. Damon, *Manuel de nutrition africaine*, I, Paris, 1987.

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elderly persons, reconstitution of meals along with careful semantic analysis of certain terms should make it possible to see, or rather to sense, this cultural dimension better. L. V. Thomas notes that among the Diola, the distinction between salty and sweet seems to be recent. We think we have found an analogous development in Burundi, where the word *gusosa*, “to be tasty, to be seasoned”, can signify both to have a salty or a sweet taste, since sugar was introduced relatively recently in adult nourishment. Cookbooks can only refer to recent recipes, often influenced by borrowings from oriental or Mediterranean cuisines, that is before widespread use, beginning on the coast, of flavors based on spices, where the taste of a dish depends on the degree of its seasoning or its “punch” from pepper or pimento (the former coming from the Far East and the latter from America). Previously (and this can also no doubt be found in the history of European cuisines) good flavoring seems to have been based on bitterness, on combinations of bitter vegetables, slightly rancid butter or dried meats, for example. This is the case in Burundi where one of the dishes enjoyed at family festivities, *birunge*, combined butter and vegetable such as colocasia leaves or a bitter spinach called *isogi* (*Gynandropsis pentaphylla*). Today it is often said that there was no cuisine in this region of Africa, only boiled food. Tastes have simply changed and new recipes have come from the Indian Ocean coast, from Zaire or from Europe. The comparison with the manner in which beers were appreciated, especially sorghum beer, is also enlightening. To pay respect to a dignitary, a quality beer called *umubaya* was offered, marked by this bitter taste. The old man who told us this in northern Burundi in August 1981 compared it to the salt water enjoyed by cows, the very picture of happiness!

### *2. Socio-cultural differentiations*

Description of festive meals prepared for major collective celebrations or for assemblies at the court of the powerful, compared to that of every-day meals, reveals a similarity that is astonishing if we think of the distinctions in Europe between the cuisine of chateaux and wealthy residences and that of outlying areas or villages, “*grande cuisine*” and ordinary cooking. The

difference, in pre-colonial Africa, seems to have been based on exceptional abundance, especially of products normally consumed in a meager fashion such as meat, but not on the recipes or the composition of dishes. If we examine this more closely, there are marked nuances in the quality of dishes and the care employed in preparing them. But the clearest differences are those linked to the status of persons: age, sex, clan origins, reserved or “impure” professions, menstrual period or pregnancy, mourning, initiation, the day after a birth or a wedding, etc. Taboos were numerous, justified somewhat by arguments of hygiene, symbolism, morality or religion, understandable only in the cultural logic proper to each society. The perverse effects of certain prohibitions on the alimentary level are often denounced.

Other socio-cultural breakdowns also merit attention: the management of food supplies, rules of table hospitality and etiquette in the act of eating. Geographers, sociologists and historians have rightly emphasized that in societies where in general land was plentiful, management of harvests was crucial, that is, storage techniques and control of granaries (in the broad sense of the term). Familial, social and political structures are significantly involved in this process, with forms of solidarity and reciprocity, and privileged positions taken into account in varying degrees by the mechanisms of redistribution.<sup>10</sup>

Table hospitality, expressed by the group led to sitting down each day to share a common nourishment (not without practical subdivisions within this group, particularly between the sexes), is also enlightening with regard to “familial” solidarity in a rather broad sense. “Relationship” is expressed at least as much in this common consumption as in genealogies that only partially account for relationships that go beyond genealogy. In this respect it is useful to distinguish between food strictly speaking and drink. The latter is generally linked to expanded sociability, to groups of young people, to political receptions, to religious ceremonies, to the leisure time of hunters or village laborers. Elsewhere<sup>11</sup> we have

<sup>10</sup> C. Meillassoux, *Femmes, greniers et capitaux*, Paris, 1975.

<sup>11</sup> J.-P. Chrétien, “Agronomie, consommation et travail dans l’agriculture du Burundi du XVIIIe au XXe siècle”, in M. Cartier (ed.), *Le travail et ses représentations*, Paris, 1984, pp. 123-178.



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analyzed the duality of the “pitcher of beer” and the “pot of beans” in ancient Burundi. On the one hand is a group of men, including an entire hillside neighborhood, sitting around pitchers set in the forecourt of the enclosure or at the entrance to the house, and drinking which facilitates speaking and decision making; on the other is the sociability controlled by women at the family level, around the hearth, in the most intimate room away from curious eyes. Even at the level of production (essentially sorghum and bananas for one sex, beans, sweet potatoes and corn for the other), a parallel duality can be found in the distribution of tasks and in taboos. It is not possible to describe the nutritional and gustatory qualities of these different products apart from the context that defines “good living”.

A final classification is that which contrasts polite eaters and reasonable drinkers with gluttons and drunkards. This code of etiquette is apparent in tales, riddles, sayings or in specialized vocabulary. For example in Burundi, the primary example of gluttony was associated with the image of an insatiable appetite for meat (*uburara*), the negative reflection of a certain limitation in eating this type of food, since the raising of cattle was associated essentially with the production of milk, without mentioning the social and political role of the cow in this society.

### *3. Seasonal variations*

Meals, like the labor of the fields, are marked by the rhythms of rainfall and the dates of harvests. There are bad seasons, poor harvests always threatening to be transformed into famine, and moments of relative abundance. The diet varies not only in quantities of calories available but also in nutritional quality. The situation varies enormously from one region to another and always requires minute observations spread out over the entire year if it is to be fully appreciated.<sup>12</sup> Peasants seek to compensate for these inevitable irregularities by diversifying production and activities: winter crops and crops planted at the bottom of valleys when rivers

<sup>12</sup> See for example the works of S. Bahuchet and of M. Hladik on Central Africa.

are low or dry; an intensification of fishing and hunting during the dry season; two annual harvests when the climate allows it, with the alimentary diversification that this implies (yams during one part of the year and grain the other among the Gonja, according to J. Goody); increased recourse to livestock, which has its own rhythms that depend on the dates of calving. Agronomical observation of so-called traditional cultural practices reveals the merits of this multiplication of productions, which quite often takes the form of associated agricultural systems. These provide staggered harvests, reducing the work of weeding and providing more long-lasting protection of the fields against erosion on slopes.<sup>13</sup> Along with the practice of associated agriculture comes, to a certain extent, meals with a single dish, combining, for example, peas, bananas and sweet potatoes (in the region of the Great Lakes). A final element serves to guarantee alimentary security; this is regional trade of food along border zones between sectors of differing altitude, or contrasting soil and rainfall levels. These quite fluid exchanges, often without markets, have too often been overlooked in economic descriptions.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4. *Exceptional situations*

On certain occasions the preparation of food requires exceptional efforts that can reveal the failings, the priorities or the archaisms in a system. Three situations of this type can be noted, of unequal severity: famines, migrations and major collective celebrations. Famines and demographic crises extending over several agricultural seasons reveal the fragility and the inequalities in a society. These call up resources in gathering that are at best makeshift methods, before leading to departure toward less affected regions in an effort to escape the worst.<sup>15</sup> Less dramatic migratory

<sup>13</sup> J. Miège, "Les facteurs naturels de l'alimentation en Afrique", *Genève-Afrique*, 1986, 1, pp. 111-121. H. Dupriez, *Paysans d'Afrique noire*, Nivelle, 1980.

<sup>14</sup> J.-P. Chauveau, *Africa*, 1981, 2, already cited. D. Newbury, "Lake Kivu Regional Trade in the Nineteenth Century", *Journal des africanistes*, 1980, 2, pp. 6-30.

<sup>15</sup> M. Chastanet, *Les crises de subsistances dans les villages Soninke du cercle de Bakel de 1858 à 1945*. Dakar (ORSTOM), 1982.

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movements, those linked to searches for new pastures, to the non-agricultural work of the dry season (iron ore processing, salt mining, peddling) or to various social obligations require use of the most portable and most resistant food products (grain and flour, leguminous plants), which are not necessarily the most appreciated ones. Finally major political-religious ceremonies involving an entire region or an entire tribe are the occasion for producing ritual dishes, but also those that are the most preferred. Thus in Burundi, on the occasion of the annual royal feast of the sowing of sorghum (the *muganuro*) and the familial feast of the first eleusine harvests, not only are both these products featured but also dishes such as the *birunge* mentioned earlier, colocasia, bananas, milk, etc.

Although monotony and drought can in fact characterize African nourishment, this is because the elements of conviviality are disrupted, due to emigration and famine. As Claude Savary rightly notes in the article already mentioned:

“The monotony of African meals, when it exists, is caused by other reasons, which are for the most part socio-economic in origin. In hard times or periods of famine, a farmer is content to eat the poorest dishes (a little dried rice, a few grilled tubers).”

## II. CONTINUITY AND RUPTURE: PROCESS OF INNOVATION

Keeping the preceding observations in mind, we can now attempt to analyze changes in ancient African alimentation, from the beginnings of agriculture to the nineteenth century, and especially to note the traces of these transformations and the interpretations that can be made of them.

### 1. *The great pre-colonial agricultural mutations*

We will not go here into the scholarly debate on the chronology, the “cradles” and the factors for the emergence of the earliest forms of agriculture, other than to recall that this history began in the region of the savannas located between the Sahara and the forest, at least three thousand years ago. Several sites seem to have

developed in roughly parallel fashion in different ecological environments: Sudan savannas with sorghum, millet, gourds, etc.; forest edges with palm-oil trees, yams and all sorts of roots, leaves and leguminous plants; and finally the Ethiopian highlands with eleusine and the pseudo-banana ensete. Animal husbandry also has its history, with cattle going back to the Fifth millennium B.C. in the Sahara before then expanding over all of eastern Africa and the plateaux of southern Africa by the time of Christ. The diversity of certain crops (green vegetables, different beans of the *Vigna* variety or tubers of the *Coleus* variety) was later overshadowed somewhat, it would seem, by new crops thought to be more effective, and the earlier ones were shunted off to periods of gathering or a sort of “vegiculture” reserved for children or for periods of famine.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed two successive agricultural revolutions supplanted the ancient vegetable crops. First was the introduction of plants from the Far East, the banana tree and the taro (or colocasia), in the course of the first millennium A.D., and then the arrival of plants from America brought to central and eastern Africa by the Portuguese between the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries (corn, sweet potatoes, cassava, *Phaseolus* beans, tobacco, pimentos). Astonished by the scope of these foreign borrowings, certain African authors have sometimes protested, throwing into doubt the historical, botanical and linguistic proofs of this phenomenon. In fact such a transformation in agricultural practices, in timetables and the use of land, as well as in diet and culinary preparations, should attract attention instead to the extraordinary capacity of African peasants to modify their practices over the course of the last five centuries, without technical assistance or agronomical overseers. This change and this dynamism merit being better known and better understood in order to explain, *a contrario*, the motives for the apparent peasant “inertia”, ritually denounced in the old reports of colonial administrators as well as in certain reports by contemporary

<sup>16</sup> J. R. Harlan, J. M. J. De Wet & A. B. Stemler (eds), *Origins of African Plant Domestication*, The Hague, 1976. T. Shaw, “Early Agriculture in Africa”, *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 1972, 2, pp. 143-191. J. R. Harlan, “The Origins of Indigenous African Agriculture”, in *Cambridge History of Africa*, 1, 1982, pp. 624-657. R. Porteres & J. Barrau, “Débuts, développement et expansion des techniques agricoles”, in *Histoire générale de l’Afrique*, UNESCO, I, Paris, 1980, pp. 725-744.

experts.

## 2. *Indices of ancient changes*

As we remarked at the beginning, the standard image of a so-called “traditional” Africa has quite often misled the study of the past of these societies. Oral sources have always been tempted to set in a quite distant past usages that were frequently quite recent, and written colonial sources generally refused to suppose any change whatever before the arrival of the Europeans. To be sure many so-called “customary” realities have proven to have been reshaped, or even created, during the three-quarters of a century of colonial rule, and this barrier must be penetrated in order to discover the dynamics (and the hindrances) of earlier centuries.<sup>17</sup>

Available sources are of different natures and each time raise specific problems. Archaeological indicators<sup>18</sup> can be direct (evidence of land clearing or of the presence of cultivated crops deduced by using palynology to date pollen fossils) or indirect (millstones and ceramic ware, objects pointing to cooking, sedentary life and agriculture). Systematic oral research done *in situ*, in villages and in the country, can help in reconstituting the ancient activities (at least back one century) with the additional support of written testimony left by travelers, missionaries or colonial agents of the nineteenth century (or from the three preceding centuries). Thus J. P. Chauveau, J. P. Dozon and J. Richard<sup>19</sup> can demonstrate that the classic dichotomy applied in the Ivory Coast, between “the land of rice” to the west of the Bandama and the “land of the yam” to the east, is overly simplified and does not correspond to agricultural and commercial realities observed in the nineteenth century. The resources of each region were then much more diversified and relative specialization was

<sup>17</sup> See our introduction to *Histoire rurale ...*, cited above. Also E. Gu-Konu, “Le développement rural: que recouvrent les mots?”, in ORSTOM, *Le développement rural en questions*, Paris, 1984, pp. 483-497.

<sup>18</sup> J. Devisse (ed.), “L’Afrique”, in *Grand atlas de l’archéologie*, Paris, 1985, pp. 306-323.

<sup>19</sup> J.-P. Chauveau *et al.*, *Africa*, already cited.

encouraged especially in the colonial era. Similarly we have shown in Burundi,<sup>20</sup> according to archival documents and oral research, that the plains along Lake Tanganyika have not always had the desolate appearance described by the Belgian administration and later by contemporary geography, in order to bring out more clearly the transformations brought about by peasant groups installed there in the 1950's. Before the calamities of the very late nineteenth century, and especially before the great epidemic of sleeping sickness in the first third of the twentieth century, this region was quite prosperous and highly populated, living especially from fishing, animal husbandry and plantations of banana and palm-oil trees.

Oral tradition also provides unwitting information, in rituals, in "literature", in the language itself. Deciphering it is not always easy, since innovations tend to be fused into the existing imagination and into pre-established vocabulary. We are confronted with a subtle play of apparent continuity and revealing cracks in new strata. Let us return to the example of Burundi.<sup>21</sup> The major annual rituals of sorghum and eleusine, proverbs and tales, agrarian vocabulary, the most important "social" food and drink (beer, noodles) are associated with the most ancient agricultural products (older African grains, gourds, vegetables, but also bananas and taro), whereas plants coming from America, which furnished essential alimentation in the nineteenth century and which also required the greatest amount of female labor (planting, weeding, staggered harvests) are "expressed" quite seldom other than in folk riddles. Moreover, here as elsewhere, the names for these newly cultivated plants take Bantu radicals that designated older plants; corn is described as a new Vigna bean, potatoes like a new Coleus. The study of calendars, the names of months and activities on the land also aid in understanding the logic of diversification and of

<sup>20</sup> J.-P. Chrétien, "La crise écologique de l'Afrique orientale au début du XXe siècle: le cas de l'Imbo au Burundi entre 1890 et 1916", in Université de Burundi (ed.), *Questions sur la paysannerie au Burundi*, in publication.

<sup>21</sup> J.-P. Chrétien, "Les années de l'éleusine, du sorgho et du haricot dans l'ancien Burundi. Écologie et idéologie", *African Economic History*, 7, 1979, pp. 75-92; and "Le sorgho dans l'agriculture, la culture et l'histoire du Burundi", *Journal des africanistes*, 1982, 1-2, pp. 145-162.

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struggle against famine that attests to the success of these new plants, more quickly grown and more nutritious (especially the Phaseolus bean). Practically they provided the foundation for widespread acceptance of an early growing season, linked to the first rains, called *agatasi* (from September to January-March), that precedes the sowing of sorghum (December) and the two plantings called *impeshi* (providing harvests in June-July). The combined study of alimentary products and agricultural land, as expressed in a given language and culture, provides a series of indices that make it possible to reconstitute agrarian and alimentary evolution.<sup>22</sup>

### 3. *The processes of change*

The motives, agents and exact conditions for these major ancient changes, no doubt quite progressive and less spectacular than military conquests, will probably remain forever inaccessible to historical research. But we can attempt to reconstitute the processes from more recent examples of transformations and from the history of peasant groups over one or two centuries. Different factors can be highlighted in this respect.

Demographic pressure (emphasized in the work of the Danish agronomist Ester Boserup<sup>23</sup>) can result in an effort at intensification of crop rotation and land improvements (irrigation, terracing, fertilizing). The example cited often is that of the Ukara peninsula south of Lake Victoria, where the inhabitants developed an association of cattle-raising and agriculture, based on systematic use of dung as fertilizer, and then abandoning this effort as soon as they were able to occupy new land. But high population density can also lead to migrations or to a degradation of the environment and agrarian systems, as has been demonstrated by the geographer Paul Pélissier with the example of the Serer.<sup>24</sup>

Subsistence crises can be the specific occasion for adoption of

<sup>22</sup> G. Hulstaert, in *African Economic History*, 1979, already cited.

<sup>23</sup> E. Boserup, *Evolution agraire et pression démographique*, Paris, 1970.

<sup>24</sup> P. Pélissier, *Les paysans du Sénégal. Les civilisations agraires du Cayor à la Casamance*, Paris, 1966. J. Giri, *Le Sahel demain*, Paris, 1983.

new plant resources, discovered in neighboring regions during a period of temporary emigration. The initial success of cassava was due to the ready nourishment provided by what were called “granaries in the ground”. The success of corn was due to the early maturation of this grain. Prolonged droughts can lead to clearing land in more humid regions, for example on the highest plateaux in the region of the East African Great Lakes, which then led to the spread of new crops (the reason, in fact, for the success of “American” plants in this region), or even restructuring of the relationship between animal husbandry and agriculture (still using this regional example, the increasing role of vegetal proteins provided by the *Phaseolus* bean developed to the detriment of ancient forms of associating cattle raising and sorghum planting).<sup>25</sup> But these major ecological and demographic crises can also lead to a shock that produces no innovation.<sup>26</sup>

The interest of African cultivators in vegetable resources as such, in the advantages of different varieties (resistance to drought or to parasites, ease of storage, time of maturation, alimentary quality) is especially keen, in contrast to the hesitancy demonstrated with regard to agricultural innovations. In short, in a certain manner they manifested more curiosity for the biological than for the mechanical. Contemporary agronomical experiments, in colonial technical stations or those set up by development experts, encounter the indifference of the rural sector except in this respect; the package of proposed innovations is “broken down”, as has been said, and this or that variety of corn or rice is adopted almost spontaneously while all other modifications are met only with disinterest.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> J.-P. Chrétien, “Nouvelles hypothèses sur les origines du Burundi”, in L. Nduricimpa & C. Guillet (eds.), *L'arbre-mémoire*, Paris, 1984, pp. 11-52. E. I. Steinhart, *Food Production in Pre-Colonial Ankole*, paper presented to the IUAES, Amsterdam, 1981. A. O. Anacleto & D. K. Ndagala, “The Cattle Complex in the ancient West Lake Kingdoms”, in C.C.B. (ed.), *La civilisation ancienne des peuples des grands lacs*, Paris, 1981, pp. 148-159.

<sup>26</sup> M. Chastanet, already cited.

<sup>27</sup> B. Jewsiewicki & J.-P. Chrétien (eds.), *Ambiguïtés de l'innovation. Sociétés rurales et technologies en Afrique centrale et occidentale au XXe siècle*, Québec, 1984: introduction by J.-P. Chrétien, pp. 1-24; example of Burundi by J. Gahama, pp. 55-82; example of Zaire by Mbaya Mudimba, pp. 83-98.



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Concern for productivity, with the greatest economy of labor, wins out in general over the research into yield per acre that obsesses contemporary agronomy except, precisely, in situations of demographic pressure. This effort at time-saving encourages extensive methods, as is made clear by studies in rural geography, but it can also lead to the adoption of crops that develop more quickly, providing more time for other craft or trade activities. Not to be forgotten, likewise, are savings of time in culinary preparation (feminine labor *par excellence*), which explains the success of rice over millet, especially in modern cities.<sup>28</sup>

Finally political factors should be examined without prejudices. Too often emphasis has been placed on the predator nature of former States, described as aristocratic superstructures for slave-trading or “dependent” social formations. Several recent historical studies of kingdoms in the Great Lakes region make it possible to question this interpretation. Certain economic activities, particularly trade, seem to have developed only peripherally, away from a too-strong pressure of the royal courts. On the other hand, the areas of peace thus formed (particularly as protection against external threats, such as that of merchants coming from Zanzibar), the regulatory role of sovereigns with regard to the agricultural calendar (by reason of their ritual functions) and encouragement for the creation of surpluses or supplementary production that can imply regular activities (but ultimately more modest than those of modern States or those typical of western feudalism) must also be taken into account in the development and diversification of crops.<sup>29</sup>

In any case, we cannot separate the study of alimentary transformations from an overall analysis of these demographic, economic, political and social contexts.

<sup>28</sup> T. Ndoye & M. M'Baye, “Du mil au riz”, *Courrier de l'UNESCO*, special issue on “Alimentation and Agriculture”, May 1987, pp. 8-9.

<sup>29</sup> See D. W. Cohen, “Food Production and Food Exchange in the Pre-colonial Lakes Plateau Region”, in R. I. Rotberg (ed.), *Imperialism, Colonialism and Hunger: East and Central Africa*, Lexington, 1983, pp. 1-18. E. Mworoha (ed.), *Histoire du Burundi des origines à la fin du XIXe siècle*, Paris, 1987, (Chap. 8 “Économie et société au XIXe siècle” by C. Thibon, pp. 165-186). J.-P. Chrétien, “Agronomie, consommation et travail ...”, already cited. A. Nsanze, *Les bases économiques des pouvoirs au Burundi de 1875 à 1920*, thesis, Paris, 1987.

### III. PARADOXES OF COLONIAL CONTACTS

The colonial period coincided with an expansion of relations of all kinds at a world-wide level, and it was thus linked to numerous innovations. But by its nature (political, economic and cultural dominance), it also set into play forces and reactions that became factors for inhibition or even, as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz has pointed out with regard to Java, factors for “involution”.<sup>30</sup>

#### 1. *The misunderstanding of colonial descriptions*

Apart from exceptions, only quite late do we encounter a real interest in African agricultural methods on the part of colonial observers. Alimentation was the subject of ethnological studies that often were more concerned with determining beliefs and symbols than with analyzing its composition and functions. Generally the whole of production and consumption is placed under the convenient heading of “self-subsistence”. In the articles by J. P. Chauveau on the Ivory Coast cited earlier, the reductive, and even caricatured, nature of this model is well illustrated and criticized: predatory agriculture (the *Raubwirtschaft* of German authors), without initiative, splintered and rigidly set in quasi-natural ethno-geographic structures, where the exchanges and strategies described above are eliminated. Not only are “supplementary” crops overlooked, but in certain cases even fundamental products such as the Phaseolus bean, the basis of the diet in Burundi and Rwanda, which was not dealt with by a single article in fifty years of publication of the *Bulletin agricole du Congo belge* (from 1909 to 1959). This blindness can be explained culturally (looking down on the “natives”) or economically (the selection of products worthy of being made profitable and leading the lists of the successes of “development”). One can even wonder if the alimentation of Africans described in this context is not based essentially on the definition of the “rations” given to porters or to laborers in work sites or the ports, namely a simplified diet for “migrants”. In 1909

<sup>30</sup> C. Geertz, *Agricultural Involution. The Process of Ecological Change in Indonesia*, Berkeley, 1963.

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in Leopoldville, for example, the monthly ration of a laborer was defined as 45 kg. of cassava meal (called *chikwange*) or 15 kg. of rice, accompanied by 1 kg. of salt and a litre of palm oil.<sup>31</sup> Colonial practice reflected this contradiction between an “opening” to the world and a reductive framework.

### *2. Innovations imported in the twentieth century: successes and failures in the struggle against famine*

Modernizations gradually introduced since the beginning of this century, particularly in the transportation and shipping sector, has obviously contributed to the elimination of certain zones of malnutrition, but not in as immediate and radical a manner as has often been thought. The first decades of the twentieth century, an extension of the period of the 1880's and 1890's in this respect, were marked, to the contrary, by a number of climatic and public health catastrophes, and, in certain regions of Africa at least (in the east and center in particular), by clear demographic decline and a veritable ecological crisis.<sup>32</sup> In fact, just as in Europe with the question of urban “pauperism” in the middle of the nineteenth century, in contemporary Africa it was only around the 1930's that governments became concerned with rural misery brought about by the brutality and inconsistencies of the early colonial economy. Everywhere, with the English, the Belgians and the French (without mentioning Brazil at the same period), studies of malnutrition were abundant at that time, *kwashiorkor* was rediscovered and medical programs set up.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> J.-P. Peemans, *Diffusion du progrès et convergence des prix. Congo-Belgique 1900-1960*, Louvain, 1968.

<sup>32</sup> H. Kjekshus, *Ecology Control and Economic Development in East African History*, London, 1977. C. Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Afrique noire. Permanences et ruptures*, Paris, 1985, J.-P. Chrétien, “Démographie et écologie en Afrique orientale à la fin du XIXe siècle, une crise exceptionnelle?”, *Cahiers d'études africaines*, in publication.

<sup>33</sup> J.-L. Vellut, “La misère rurale dans l'expérience coloniale du Zaïre, du Rwanda et du Burundi. Crises de subsistance et insuffisances alimentaires dans les possessions coloniales de la Belgique, ca. 1900-1960,” paper presented to the 1983 Boston conference of the *African Studies Association*.

Social and economic solutions, chosen generally from a paternalistic perspective, implied measures of constraint. The perverse effects of obligatory agricultural production, whether aimed at the alimentary security of rural areas or the supply of urban centers, are well known. In the Ivory Coast, for example, rice production was blocked around 1905 in Baulé country by prohibitions that the French were quick to attribute to the obscurantist influence of “fetishists”, whereas (as J. P. Chauveau has demonstrated in the article already cited a number of times here) it was in fact a matter of resistance to obligatory consignments, with the people preferring to develop their banana production that fell outside the quotas. Cassava, an obligatory product and subject to requisition, underwent the same discredit in the Belgian Congo.<sup>34</sup>

The negative social atmosphere thus created around certain works of agricultural development, or even alimentary innovations, only grew worse when efforts, proposed or imposed, led to agronomical errors. The historical inventory of groping attempts in tropical agronomy is still to be drawn up. It should be extended to include recent years as well. In particular the “modern” model of monoculture, relatively intensive and mechanized, which does not take into account the fragility of some soils and climatic instability that should have caused reflection on the wisdom of certain associated polycultures, has led to several celebrated failures, an important example of which being the systematic development of corn in central Tanzania under the pressure of international organizations. The severe famine of 1974-1975, which seriously contributed to weakening the policies of so-called Ujamaa villages, led literally to rediscovery of the benefits of sorghum.<sup>35</sup> Ancient peasant groups, it would seem, introduced new plants into the panoply of their production with greater prudence, in contrast to the fantasy of homogeneous space that marks both authoritarian planning and agro-business.<sup>36</sup>

On the other hand, “monetarization” of the rural world, by

<sup>34</sup> See Chauveau and Hulstaert, already cited. Also B. Jewsiewicki, “African Peasants and Totalitarian Colonial Society in the Belgian Congo, 1917-1960”, in M. Klein (ed.), *Peasants in Africa*, Los Angeles, 1980, pp. 47-75.

<sup>35</sup> B. Joinet, *Tanzanie. Manger d'abord*, Paris, 1981.

<sup>36</sup> J. Tricart, “Quelques réflexions écogéographiques sur le développement rural”, in ORSTOM, *Le développement rural en questions*, Paris, 1984, pp. 1-14.

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extending and encouraging already-existing regional trade or by creating new commerce, resulted in initiatives in colonial management that were too often under-estimated, despite official speeches on “opening up to the market”. Development of rice in the west of the Ivory Coast, especially following the two World Wars, boosted by temporarily more liberal policies with regard to prices, illustrates this process, which contrasts with the difficulties noted earlier in Baulé country at the beginning of the century. Market gardening developed by peasants in the region surrounding Costermansville (the present-day city of Bukavu) in eastern Zaïre also shows us to what extent a rural population, otherwise quite reticent before a long list of administrative obligations, can take agricultural initiatives when they correspond to its interests.<sup>37</sup>

One crucial handicap to improvement of living conditions (including that of diet) in the African rural milieu consists in the historical association of “modernization” and constraint that characterized colonial administration and often, after that, administration by the States that resulted from Independence.

### *3. The ambiguities of innovation*

Independently of the style of the colonial period and the awkward administration just described, “modernity” as such has its own ambiguities, as soon as the quality of nutrition is examined. Moreover, the question is not unique to African societies.

The individualism encouraged by money, urban careers, migratory movements, demographic pressures and various crises often leads to disruption of community practices in the cultivation of the land as well as in convivial customs. Jean-Yves Marchal<sup>38</sup> has described the contemporary disorganization of a region in northern Burkina and how, in this context, garden plants highly appreciated in older alimentation, such as certain vegetables (of the sorrel

<sup>37</sup> C. Bashizi, “Pouvoirs publics, plantations européennes et réactions paysannes au Sud-Kivu (1920-1960),” in Jewsiewicki & Chrétien, *Ambiguïtés de l'innovation*, Québec, 1976, pp. 125-146.

<sup>38</sup> J.-Y. Marchal, “La dérouté d'un système vivrier au Burkina”, *Études rurales*, 99-100, 1985, pp. 265-280.

family) or gumbo, have declined. Generally speaking, agricultural diversity has receded before the trend to extensive monoculture of white sorghum, caused by a search for more rapid earnings. In general, while reports multiply on malnutrition and the need for supplements of vitamins and minerals, and the insufficient consumption of fruits and vegetables in Africa is deplored, food linked to gardening and gathering of earlier times is being forgotten. The botanist Jacques Miège wrote not long ago:<sup>39</sup>

“I have recently been able to note that, unfortunately, in certain areas of western Africa, this incomparable available wealth is being reduced, either through destruction (deterioration of plant life) or because use of these plants is being lost and will ultimately be forgotten. Inventories have been made, but frequently they are only partial or incomplete; alimentary geography still has many gaps.”

And already in 1954, L. Palès remarked:<sup>40</sup>

“As soon as one moves to the practical sphere, European recipes undergo modifications. An African alimentary product is subjected to a European cooking method, or *vice-versa*. Ultimately the result is a compromise between European cuisine and African cuisine, apparently without either one having gained anything from such combinations. Indeed for these dishes the only element retained is products of local origin or imported goods, consumed by the Europeans. Specifically African products—lalo, sorrel from Guinea, gumbo, nenetu, etc., important sources of many organic or mineral elements of great nutritional value—are systematically disappearing from these recipes. In doing this Africans are pleased with themselves. They have broken with ancestral customs and believe that in this way they can affirm their achievement of a more modern way of life, whereas they have only taken on its appearances.”

In fact, beyond this somewhat moralizing language, the situations are complex, changing and contradictory. If one observes the

<sup>39</sup> J. Miège, already cited.

<sup>40</sup> L. Palès, *L'alimentation en A.O.F. Milieux, enquêtes, techniques, rations*, Dakar, 1954.

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evolution of cooking in Burundi over the past thirty years, one can indeed note the decline in gathered fruits and vegetables and the decline of sorghum meal in favor of rice, but also the spread of eggs and of fish from Lake Tanganyika, thanks to the disappearance of ancient taboos, and increased use of palm oil, according to the model already existing on the banks of the lake at the end of the last century. These transformations were first of all apparent in the urban milieu, among “intermediaries of culture” (teachers, catechists, administrative aides, but also drivers, shopkeepers and simple “boys”). The evolution of alimentation in these new social categories, relatively urbanized and relatively “acculturated” (a term that has come to take the place of “developed”), merits attention, for the socio-cultural implications of this evolution are particularly clear. We have already mentioned the ease of preparation of rice, which can aid in the emancipation of women. But other implicit connotations should not be forgotten. Some foods (bread) and drinks (industrial beer or wine, in addition to other alcoholic beverages) are more “prestigious” than others, stamped with the mark of modernity, just as formerly a grain or a tuber could symbolize the solidarity of a community, with the difference that these social inequalities are today creating a greater degree of separation in diets. A comparison of the nutritional qualities of older beers made of millet or sorghum with modern brewery beers would also be helpful for appreciating the distortions that have developed between “progress” and improvement. The feeding of children also requires attention from this point of view. We are aware of the polemics that arose around the use of powdered milk. An analysis should be made of the age for weaning and the manner in which the transition from milk to solid food is accomplished. Jean Ritchie<sup>41</sup> cites the example of deterioration in this respect among the Kikuyu in half a century; in earlier times infants were weaned rather late and received a mixture of arrow-root, chopped liver, goat fat and green vegetables, where today they suffer from protein calory deficiencies during the period of weaning, which now takes place earlier.

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<sup>41</sup> J. Ritchie, *Étutions la nutrition*, FAO, Rome, 1968.

Placing African alimentation in a historical perspective thus supposes a questioning of many divisions pre-established in time and space. It requires surveys making use of extremely varied sources of information, beginning with an intimate knowledge of the society in question, of its land and its meals, of its world view and its language. At stake is to be able, without preconceived ideas, to understand the dynamics and the hindrances involved, both ancient and contemporary. Such research is required to be multidisciplinary, with the hope of aiding in the effort to bring together and to compare the centuries-old tradition of peasants and the most advanced research of the natural sciences.<sup>42</sup>

Jean-Pierre Chrétien  
(*Centre de recherches africaines*  
*C.N.R.S., Paris I*)

<sup>42</sup> *La dimension culturelle du développement rural et la coopération internationale*, Bujumbura seminar, December 1981.