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# Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

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## Do Purchases Motivated by Symbolic and Social Needs Undermine Food Sovereignty?

Jill Richardson

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## Abstract

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Food sovereignty is defined as “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” (Declaration of Nyéléni). While physical and economic needs such as secure land tenure and access to seeds must be met to achieve food sovereignty, there are also psychological needs at play. This paper examines the extent to which feelings that ones’ traditional foods and farming itself are “backwards,” “primitive,” or “low class” undermine food sovereignty by driving people to adopt purchased (often nutritionally inferior) foods.

## Journalistic Observations

The question stems from a series of trips I took as a journalist to research food sovereignty across the Global South. The places visited include: La Paz, Beni, and Oruro, Bolivia (2010); San Mariano, Isabela, Philippines (2011); La Paz, Cochabamba, and Santa Cruz, Bolivia (2011); and Nairobi, Thika, and Bondo District, Kenya (2012). Each trip included at least one stay with a local family for several days.

Due to the sensitive nature of topics like hunger, poverty, racism, and HIV status, some questions were difficult or impossible to ask of farmers directly. In these cases, interviews were conducted with local NGOs who work directly with the farmers. NGOs interviewed include:

- **Philippines:** Asian Peasant Coalition, an organization that works for peasants’ rights and food sovereignty, and Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP, Peasant Movement of the Philippines), which works for agrarian reform and peasants’ rights and against imperialism.
- **Bolivia:** Fundación PROINPA and Bolivian Forum on the Environment and Development (FOBOMADE). The former provides agricultural support to farmers focusing on native crops and crop varieties. The latter works more on a policy level to expand food sovereignty in Bolivia.
- **Kenya:** Grow Biointensive Agricultural Centre of Kenya (G-BIACK), Sustainable Agriculture Rural Development Initiative (SARDI), and Grow Strong. The former two train farmers in the Grow Biointensive method of agriculture in Thika, Kenya. The latter is a newly founded organization aiming to promote indigenous foods and community cooperation in Bondo District, Kenya.

Additionally, in Bolivia, Stephen Taranto, an agroecologist and founder of the tourism company La Paz on Foot, provided a tour of the La Paz foodshed.

The goals and scope of my travel did not allow for a formal first-person study of the question posed in this paper. Rather, I was seeking to learn anything and everything related to food sovereignty, how it might be achieved, current successes, and what barriers stood in the way of it.

I initiated my research planning to focus solely on concrete requirements of food sovereignty like land tenure and the role of the climate crisis. However, after observing numerous examples in disparate parts of the world in which people in the Global South perceived purchased food – often packaged, processed foods – as modern and desirable compared to homegrown, traditional foods, I realized that perceptions and symbolic or social needs also play a role in the quest for food sovereignty.

My observations do not rise to the level of a formal academic study that can definitely quantify and characterize attitudes about traditional foods vs. novel, purchased ones. However, as the number of anecdotes and examples built up, not just in one country or region but in every one I visited, I became aware that this is a subject deserving of further study.

This is most clear in my interactions with Amy Lint and Malaki Obado, founders of Grow Strong, an NGO in Bondo District, Nyanza Province, Kenya. Lint, an American, originally came to the area as an American Peace Corps worker in 2000. She and Obado, a local Kenyan man, married in 2005. They live on his family's homestead in a rural village and they participate in the farming operations of the family's four acres.

Lint fears that local traditions and knowledge are dying out as they are replaced with new foods and new practices. She and her husband planned to name Grow Strong's model farm "*Kienyeji*," a Swahili word meaning traditional but often used in a derogatory fashion to mean backwards or rustic. Nowadays, Lint says, a family might feel that serving cassava to a guest is too "*kienyeji*," so they will instead opt to serve them store-bought foods.

As a case in point, Lint mentioned her own mother-in-law, a Luo woman who has farmed in Bondo for four decades. When Lint's family returned to Kenya after a stint living abroad, her mother-in-law served the family white bread and margarine for breakfast. Lint asked for *uji*, a traditional fermented millet porridge, instead. Her mother-in-law complied by purchasing a store-bought *uji* mix and serving it for breakfast. Lint then specified that she wanted

homemade, fermented uji because it is nutritious. Only then did her mother-in-law provide uji made from fermented grains grown on her farm.

Associations of purchased foods with modernity might not be the underlying reason – or the only reason – for the family’s changing dietary habits. The family does not have running water and food preparation as well as washing the dishes is labor intensive and time-consuming. Eating a store-bought loaf of white bread with margarine and jam requires almost no preparation and generates fewer dirty dishes. However, Lint feels that perceptions of purchased foods as modern do play a role in changing dietary habits, as evidenced by her choice of the term *kienyeji* to name Grow Strong’s model farm.

Lint and Obado see the rapid changing of local farming methods and diets as so harmful to food sovereignty that they founded their NGO in response. Grow Strong aims to encourage locals to continue growing and consuming indigenous vegetables and other crops common to the area like sesame and pumpkin instead of abandoning them to focus on newly introduced crops that are less adapted to the local climate. Often, these newer crops are intended as cash crops, allowing farmers to then buy food from the store with their revenues instead of eating what they grow. Grow Strong has equipment to press sesame seeds for oil and they hope to help Bondo residents replace store-bought refined palm oil with locally grown sesame oil.

To corroborate Lint and Obado’s observations, I asked Samuel Nderitu of G-BLACK, based in the city of Thika in Kenya’s Central Province. Thika is geographically distant from Bondo and its ethnic majority is Kikuyu. The area is crowded, characterized by tiny farms, which are often less than an acre in size.

Nderitu reported that people think that shopping in the supermarket is “modern.” He adds that those wealthy enough to pay supermarket prices do so, saying, “The rich don’t want to be seen in the markets mingling with the farmers. They want readily available goods in the shelves, already packed.” Farmers, he says, are seen as “dirty.”

If only the rich can easily access packaged, processed foods such as those sold in supermarkets, then does that raise the prestige of those foods? Nderitu believes so. For example, he says, “People think eating white bread with margarine is modern... Farmers sell their healthy produce like sweet potatoes, eggs, cassava, etc, so they can buy white bread. They think eating cassava, sweet potatoes, etc, is backwards.” Another word people use to describe homegrown foods, he says, is “primitive.”

G-BLACK works to change this trend. They encourage farmers to eat the healthy food they grow and sell the excess.

On the other hand, during my stay in the county, many Kenyans expressed to me their love of their indigenous foods. For example, a wealthy scientist who I spoke to at the Kisumu Yacht Club, where he was a member, spoke of his love of *sukumawiki* (kale). When one visits the Nairobi slum of Kibera, kale is seen growing in the yards of many houses. But the reliance of the poor on kale does not appear to diminish its status among the middle class Kenyans I met.

Other middle class Kenyans I met described their preferences for indigenous foods like black nightshade, amaranth (*terere*), *Crotalaria brevidens* (known as *mitoo* in Luo), and *Cleome gynandra*. Thus, it appears that any preferences for processed, packaged foods are not entirely at the expense of affinity for locally grown, traditional foods, nor are traditional foods only eaten by the poor.

My experiences with this topic in Bolivia and the Philippines were less pronounced than the examples cited from Kenya. But observations, which are not in themselves conclusive, can lead to more factual findings if followed up with research. In poor barangays (Panninan and Alibadabad) in San Mariano, Isabela in the Philippines, I took note of children eating small packages of processed foods that appeared to be cookies or crackers and a young woman feeding a baby out of a bottle. Was she feeding the baby infant formula or breast milk? I cannot say. However, when I returned home, I looked into infant formula use in the Philippines.

As of 2007, half of Filipino babies were exclusively breastfed for less than one month, and by their fourth or fifth months of life, only 16 percent were still exclusively breastfed (UNICEF 2007). A study of infants under six months in Manila found a strong positive association between feeding babies infant formula and/or non-breastmilk supplements and the risk of hospitalization for infection (Hengstermann 2010).

In 2007, the cost of infant formula in the Philippines was \$50 per month and the minimum wage was less than \$200 per month (Conde 2007). So why did so many mothers choose costly infant formula over breastfeeding? One reason may be that formula companies advertise aggressively, promising women that their babies will be smarter if they are fed formula (Conde 2007). A study found that the two factors strongly associated with formula feeding of infants were self-reported advertising exposure and physician recommendations (Sobel 2011).

**Top Food Brands in Select Regions and Countries**

<u>Brand</u>	<u>Parent Company</u>	<u>World Rank*</u>	<u>Latin America*</u>	<u>Asia/Middle East*</u>	<u>Bolivia*</u>	<u>Philippines*</u>
Coca-Cola	Coca-Cola	1	1	15	2	15
Nescafe	Nestle	3	7	3	31	1
Pepsi	PepsiCo	4	8	26	27	
Maggi	Nestle	6	6	7	13	12
Knorr	Unilever	8	4	39		31
Tang	Mondelez International	15	5	38		19
Ajinomoto	Ajinomoto	19	34	10		5
Sprite	Coca-Cola	20	30	33	38	
Milo	Nestle	23		11		4
Fanta	Coca-Cola	28	12	46	29	
Yakult	Yakult	46		32		45

Source: <http://www.brandfootprint-ranking.com/brand-footprint-2013/regions/>, Accessed August 6, 2013. \* The ranking refers to the rank among all brands, not just food brands.

What data exists to show whether food sovereignty can be threatened when purchased, processed foods are perceived to fill symbolic needs that traditional foods do not? Let's begin by examining some basic concepts of marketing.

**Symbolic Needs**

People – or, in the language of marketers, consumers – do not act purely based on rational decision making to satisfy functional needs. They also make consumption choices to satisfy social needs or symbolic needs. A product that meets social needs might “represent consumers to other people, expressing membership in a social class or other group, or transmitting some other message about the consumer’s social relations” (Foxall 1998, p. 168). Products that satisfy symbolic needs “express both to other people and to the consumers themselves something about themselves, telling them what the consumer believes or what he/she is like” (Foxall 1998, p. 168).

Ann Vileisis points out how marketers sold Americans on cake mixes only after they understood how baking a cake fulfilled a woman’s symbolic needs. General Mills initially created a cake mix

that instructed consumers to “just add water” but it met with lackluster sales. Through interviews with hundreds of women, researchers found that many did not follow instructions, adding milk or eggs. When the cake did not turn out well, the women stopped buying the cake mix. Women told researchers they experienced baking a cake as “an emotional ‘act of love,’ so the richer, the better... More than other convenience foods, cake mix elicited feelings of guilt and inadequacy in those who used them because many women believed that using mixes was a sign of poor homemaking” (Vileisis 2007, pp. 196-197).

The solution? Reformulate the mix so that the homemaker must add an egg. Although it was a small change, it was significant enough to make the woman feel as if she was contributing something to the cake, thus breaking through the guilt of using a mix. After the change was made, sales skyrocketed.

The concept can be used in reverse, as well: when a product is viewed as a symbol of certain traits or values, then consumers of that product may fall within a specific psychographic profile. Heineken beer, for example, is advertised as a premium beer consumed by trendy, successful, popular people. “There's a slang term that could sum up Heineken drinkers: posers. These self-assured people believe they are exceptional, get low scores on modesty and high scores on self-esteem. They love their brand badges - a role the distinctive green glass bottle may play - and in fact, this group is attracted to luxury products in general” (Bulik 2009).

In another example, an analysis of junk food marketing aimed at U.S. children concluded, “children are being persuaded to eat particular foods, not on the basis of their tastiness, or other benefits, but because of their place in a social matrix of meaning. As this process expands, branded (i.e. junk) food comes to occupy an increasingly central position in children’s sense of identity, their relationships to other children and adults, and the construction of meaning and value that structures their lives” (Schor 2007, p. 16). Specifically, the foods were marketed as being “cool.” Often, commercials portrayed anti-adult themes, with foods giving children independence and an escape from the restrictions placed upon them from adults (including, of course, adults’ restrictions on children’s junk food consumption).

Significantly, the study adds, “These dynamics are operating alongside the more widely recognized physiological processes such as sugar habituation.” It also notes how symbolic marketing targets mothers too, as they “tap into the symbolic association of food with maternal love and concern, associating giving food with caring for a child, making a warm, emotional connection, or providing nutritious substances” (Schor 2007, p. 17).



Across the world, in a school in Durban, South Africa, another study found strikingly similar results. Teenage students specifically told researchers that their food choices were, in part, driven by “coolness” and fitting in: “Some learners said that there was a stigma attached to bringing in leftover food from home, particularly if it was traditional food they would normally eat with their grandparents” (p. 476). They also noted that junk foods purchased at school were a status symbol and contributed to popularity among one’s peers.

The concept of symbolic and social needs was also applied in a study of consumer behavior among poor housewives in the Sapopemba neighborhood of São Paulo, Brazil. It found that the poor are often willing to pay more for brand name products, noting, “Designer labels are a symbol of status and integration in society. As they buy a branded product, poor people feel as if they belong to the society and are not excluded” and “It is a kind of differentiation from extremely poor people, who cannot afford these products” (Barki and Parente 2010, p. 14).

Using qualitative and quantitative research techniques, they found that many low-income housewives in Brazil chose higher-priced supermarkets over lower-priced ones. The study concluded “the choice of the preferred supermarket was not a rational decision based on pricing... but on a compromise of satisfying economic, social, and psychological needs, in which the perception of being respected and recognized plays a major role” (Barki and Parente 2010, p. 17).

Barki and Parente cited the housewives’ “low self-image” and “inferiority complex” in their dislike of the discount stores, which they felt reflected a “lack of respect for their dignity.” On the contrary, the higher priced store “raised the feelings of customers’ belongingness and recognition” (Barki and Parente 2010, p. 17). Even if corporations selling consumer goods marketed to the middle class may not consciously target the poor by offering them dignity and a feeling of inclusion in the middle class through the purchase of a soda or instant coffee, they might do so all the same.

Thus, we have several examples of foods filling symbolic and social needs and marketers exploiting this phenomenon to sell products, including in the Global South. Both examples from the Global South are taken from urban areas, and the latter one focuses specifically on the poor. But to what extent are food corporations actually seeking their business? And are they aiming to make their products available to the poor and/or market them as fulfilling symbolic needs such as those expressed above (dignity, membership in the middle class, status, etc)? And does their reach extend into rural areas as well as urban ones?

### Base of the Pyramid Strategy

With many global markets nearing saturation, multinational corporations are increasingly looking to the “Base of the Pyramid” (BOP) (Prahalad and Hart 2002). This is based on the idea that in the Global South, the poorest segment of the population accounts for 50 percent of the purchasing power (Guesalaga 2008). The world’s four billion poorest people are seen as “untapped potential” for multinational corporations (Prahalad and Hammond 2002, p. 5) and the largest remaining global market frontier (Nakata 2010).

The strategy rests on the notion that the poor actually often buy “luxury goods” such as televisions or phones and, additionally, the poor often pay higher prices for drinking water and food than middle class customers, providing an opportunity for multinational corporations to use economies of scale to offer them what they need at lower prices than they currently pay (Prahalad and Hammond 2002).

While this strategy may be employed, as suggested above, to offer the poor superior products at lower prices to satisfy their functional needs, it may also be used to sell them items that are unnecessary or even harmful to them (junk food, harmful agricultural inputs). As we have seen, symbolic needs such as dignity, respect, and aspirations to feel included in the middle class (or to differentiate oneself from the extreme poor) can play a role in consumption decisions.

Prahalad and Hammond urge companies not to overlook rural areas: “While the rural poor are naturally harder to reach, they also represent a large untapped opportunity for companies... The crucial barrier to doing business in rural regions is distribution access, not lack of buying power” (Prahalad and Hammond 2002, p. 50).

On the other hand, a white paper on African consumers written a full decade later still urges corporations to focus on urban areas, as consumers are easier to reach in cities and per capita incomes of urban Africans are 80 percent higher than those of countries as a whole (Hattingh 2012).

Urbanization is seen as a factor influencing changing diets for a number of reasons, but a study of The Gambia found that urbanization altered *rural* diets (Prentice 2006). As the country urbanized, city dwellers sent home more money in remittances to rural villages. The increased money available to rural Gambians resulted in a change in goods sold in village shops. One of the foods that became common in villages as a result is vegetable oil.

Another area to examine is the role of young people in the Global South. Africa, in particular, has the world’s youngest and fastest growing population, with half of all Africans under age 20

(Hattingh 2012). For corporations seeking to penetrate markets in Africa, this is seen as a good thing, as urban Africans ages 16-34 surveyed in 15 major cities in 10 African countries represent 53 percent of income. Furthermore, the young are more likely than their elders to search for information online, to seek branded products that reflect the right image, and to report being the one of the first people they know to try new things.

Given the high percentage of Africans, particularly young Africans, who report brand loyalty in the grocery sector, the Hattingh study advises corporations, “Getting brands into a consumer’s initial consideration set is even more important in emerging markets such as Africa than elsewhere” (Hattingh 2012, p. 11).

### Conclusion

My discussion of this topic provides more questions than answers. We cannot conclude from data presented here that the poor view purchased, processed foods as a symbol of modernity and membership in the middle class and that this is undermining food sovereignty in the Global South. What we can conclude is that some multinational corporations view the Global South, including the poor in the Global South, as an untapped market. The extent to which they are succeeding in penetrating these markets and reaching beyond the middle class and urban areas is up for debate. We can also find evidence of changing dietary habits in many parts of the Global South – for example, among the teens surveyed in Durban, South Africa.

Last, we can conclude that around the world, some foods are purchased, prepared, or eaten, at least in part, to fill symbolic and social needs such as being “cool,” feeling dignified, or expressing love. This can even be observed in peasant societies in ways that are consistent with promoting food sovereignty, like when Lint and Obado’s family slaughtered a chicken and served it for dinner to welcome me as a guest.

Since at least the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, corporations have learned how to understand and exploit consumers’ symbolic and social needs and their fulfillment with food. This can be a mechanism to increase sales of foods by corporations in the Global South in the future, if it is not a current strategy already. Activists and academics should consider the role of culture, marketing, and social and symbolic needs as they work toward promoting food sovereignty throughout the world.

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# FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES

## Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

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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

[Jill Richardson](#) is a freelance writer based in San Diego. She is the author of *Recipe for America: Why Our Food System is Broken and What We Can Do To Fix It*.