

Article

The Value of Ethnographic Research for Sustainable Diet Interventions: Connecting Old and New Foodways in Trinidad

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Abstract: Recent policy and scholarly attention to traditional food has highlighted its importance for developing culturally-appropriate sustainable diet interventions. Yet most approaches to traditional food maintain an unhelpful dichotomy between traditional and modern foodways. Ethnographic research into the ways people experience and articulate the substitution of previously homegrown foods with modern industrial foods can uncover aspects of local food heritage that have been previously hidden or undermined. The central aim of this paper is to demonstrate the usefulness of ethnographic approaches for recent policy debates around the importance of tradition for sustainable diets. An ethnographic ontology, which takes cultural meanings and values of ultra-processed foods as well as so-called traditional foods seriously, can provide a more nuanced picture of food system transitions that can inform sustainable dietary interventions. A combination of ethnographic methods was used for this paper, including participant observation, photo elicitation, questionnaires and go-along/shop-along interviews with N = 200 research participants. Subsequent ‘armchair’ research revealed important insights about Afrodescendant and Indigenous food heritage in Trinidad and Tobago, indicating the need for future research in this area. In particular, the findings suggest that cultural values of ‘colour’ and ‘(local) flavour’ connect old and new foodways in Trinidad and Tobago. Values of colour and flavour, along with shared feelings elicited through the ethnographic research such as concerns about agrochemical use and nostalgia for household food production, can inform the development of culturally-appropriate sustainable diet interventions.



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1. Introduction

Studies of the everyday in modern life, of the changing character of such humble matters as food, viewed from the perspective of production and consumption, use and function, and concerned with the emergence and variation of meaning, might be one way to try to renovate a discipline now dangerously close to losing its purpose.

Sidney Mintz [1] (p. 102)

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) has recently identified ‘traditional food and culture’ as essential components of its agroecological approach to meeting the sustainable development goals by 2030 [2]. In parallel to recent work in the social sciences [3], the FAO identifies traditional food heritage as an important resource for sustainable food interventions. Yet the FAO’s approach tends to rely on an idealised notion of ‘traditional diets’ and their role in connecting sustainable food production to consumption: ‘The desire for connections between the growing and the eating may rely on tropes that do not reflect reality’ [2] (p. 2). As Caitlin Morgan and Amy Trubek [2] argue, the FAO’s approach to food traditions and culture is particularly unhelpful in postcolonial contexts, where anthropological research has demonstrated that traditional and modern foods are connected in complex and often unexpected ways (e.g., [1,4,5]).

As the ‘first modern and globalised area of the world’ [4–6], the Caribbean has long incorporated modern industrial foodways into everyday food practices. Yet this does not mean that traditional foodways have fallen by the wayside. As I found during my 2014 ethnographic fieldwork, the dramatic rise in ultra-processed food consumption in recent decades has not eradicated Indigenous, African, Asian, and other heritage foodways in Trinidad and Tobago.

This paper responds to the urgent need to develop culturally-appropriate sustainable diet interventions with and for people. It does so through a novel approach that answers Sidney Mintz’s call to rejuvenate the discipline of anthropology through a study of the uses, functions, and meanings of food. The paper is inspired by earlier anthropological work on consumption, which sought to overturn understandings of modernity and globalisation as homogenous forces that affect all people and places in the same ways (e.g., [4–11]). In contrast to such views, anthropologists (and later, human geographers) of consumption argued that globalisation and the revaluation of place-based identities through things like food are two sides of the same coin [4]. In line with this earlier literature (e.g., [4–11]), I argue that a relational approach to traditional and modern, old and new foodways is helpful for envisioning sustainable dietary interventions, as it actually mirrors the ways ordinary people make connections between these seemingly opposing domains.

During my research in Trinidad, meaningful connections between old and new foodways were evidenced in the values of colour and (local) flavour. Trinbagonians used these cultural values to describe their consumption of modern, ultra-processed foods as well as their traditional counterparts. For instance, when explaining their high consumption of tomato ketchup, research participants referred to the importance of ‘colouring a meal.’ A similar value of colour was used in reference to the preparation and use of traditional foods such as *roucou* (annatto; *Bixa orellana*), a red liquid food colouring made with ground annatto seeds. Ketchup is an industrial food with ingredients sourced and combined through resource-intensive processes (e.g., monocultures, long-distance transport, factory production, and waste); *roucou* is a sustainable food with a possible combined heritage in the ritual practices of Indigenous Taíno (Arawak) and Kalinago (Carib) peoples and the foodways of enslaved and free people of colour. As I argue, while the use of ketchup and *roucou* varied, their function was the same: to add colour to meals. Similarly, when describing the use of Maggi (or other branded) seasoning packets in meal preparation, research participants referred to the value of local flavour (or just flavour). This value was also used to describe the planting, preparation, and consumption of green seasoning, a homegrown blend of herbs and aromatic vegetables. While Maggi is a resource-intensive, ultra-processed food, green seasoning is often sourced from kitchen gardens. As with ketchup and *roucou*, the consumption of Maggi and green seasoning varied according to research participant, yet their function for all was the same: to give food flavour. As I argue, the cultural values of (local) flavour and colour provide the symbolic glue that connects modern industrial foodways and their traditional, more sustainable counterparts in Trinidad.

Ethnographic understandings of the ways people connect old and new foodways are valuable as they can inform the messaging of public health (e.g., sustainable diet) interventions. At the end of this paper, I provide two brief examples of sustainable diet interventions that draw from the research findings and suggest the need for future heritage research in this area. As I argue, new and innovative possibilities for the use of heritage in sustainable diet interventions can be envisioned if one steps back from polarising narratives that either demonise modern industrial foods or idealise traditional sustainable foods, in order to make room for cultural values and meanings that have withstood the test of time.

2. Methods/Methodology

Ethnographic research prioritises the ways people attribute meaning to things like food. An ethnographic standpoint takes the cultural dimensions of food seriously, enabling the researcher or practitioner to take a non-judgemental stance towards food consumption

behaviours that are ostensibly unfavourable to human and other ecologies. Data collection for this research was premised on a suspension of disbelief that tomato ketchup and Maggi products were bad for people and planet. This involved a decisive move away from public health and environmental or climate science ontologies of food and agriculture, which deductively reduce food consumption behaviours to their level of risk to bodies and environments. Instead, the research was predicated on what I call an ethnographic ontology of food, which focused on the ways ultra-processed foods, in all their systemic complexity, entered into peoples' everyday lives through processes of meaning making, use and function. Given my overall interest in sustainability and health, the deleterious effects of ultra-processed foods to human and other ecologies were not entirely outside the framing of the research. Yet the question of what ultra-processed food *is*—the ontological basis for the research—was considered a matter for empirical inquiry rather than a priori understanding.

This process of ethnographic discovery was iterative as well as inductive, and it took time. The majority of ethnographic data was collected over a period of six weeks in the summer months of 2014. Data from 2014 was supplemented by ethnographic data already collected over a period of four years (2009–2013) living and working in Trinidad and Tobago. In all phases of the research, I followed university guidelines for research ethics and integrity, including verbal communication of the research aims and objectives, verbal or written consent from each of the participants, anonymity, and sharing the research findings (e.g., this paper) to key research participants and facilitators.

The ethnographic ontology described above was achieved through a combination of different methods, including participant observation, food diaries, questionnaires and 'shop-along' [12] (pp. 616–618), 'go-along' [13], and participatory photo elicitation interviews. During the 2014 research, I was invited to live with an Afro-Trinbagonian family with whom I shopped, prepared, cooked, and ate meals. For this period, I engaged in participant observation of food consumption behaviours, collected weekly food diaries, and spent time sitting and chatting with the heads of the household, a woman and man in their sixties. These were the parents and grandparents of the younger people in the extended household: two men in their thirties, three women in their thirties, and three children aged five, seven and eleven. Outside the household, I conducted $N = 150$ questionnaires with people of various ages and ethnicities encountered over a number of trips to the local mall. After sharing information about the research and obtaining verbal consent, I asked each questionnaire participant to answer the following question: What do you think is the most 'Trini' (Trinbagonian) meal? Depending on their answer, I followed up with further questions such as: What makes this meal Trini? Would you consider this to be 'good' food? Why or why not? I made a tally of the meals mentioned most frequently. About one-third of the interviewees cited global franchises such as Kentucky Fried Chicken or Subway sandwiches as their Trini meal. Another third named Indo-Trinbagonian roti as their Trini meal. A final third referred to pelau rice, a one-pot dish (explained below), as the meal they most identify with Trinidad and Tobago.

As I lived in an Afro-Trinbagonian household for the main ethnographic research, the information shared in this paper centers on Afro-Trinbagonian stories and oral histories of food. These include experiences and memories of the many participants who identified pelau rice as their Trini meal. One of my participants explained how she prepares this dish as such: 'You put oil in the pot: hot, hot, hot! Then, you put the brown sugar [in] until it is brown caramel; put in the chicken until [it is] cooked, then put in the rice, pumpkin, other vegetables, pigeon peas . . . I just put everything in the pot one time: the seasoning [Maggi Flavour D'Pot seasoning pack, see Figure 1, below], Golden Ray [margarine], coconut milk, ketchup. Then water.' Pelau rice was a favourite meal in the house where I was staying. I had shopped for, prepared, cooked, and eaten pelau rice frequently with this family and others during my time in Trinidad and Tobago. Some of the ingredients of this dish are shown below in Figure 1.



Figure 1. The interviewee who took this picture later lamented, ‘I forgot the sugar!’ Sugar is used in this dish to brown the meat. (Image credit: author’s own).

Towards the middle of the fieldwork period, I began to conduct participatory photo elicitation interviews. These were carried out with supermarket workers ($N = 22$) from across four large Massy supermarket chains in Northeast, Northwest, Central and South Trinidad. Participants of the photo elicitation research were recruited by the supermarket managers of each supermarket. They were self-identified women and men of Indian, African or Dougla (mixed Indian and African) descent, mostly in the 30–55 age range (with one in their 20s). The participatory photo elicitation research was carried out with the help of a research assistant and amateur photographer, Jason Renwick.

Informed by consumption data from the questionnaires, food diaries and household participant observation, the participatory photo elicitation research involved individual shop-along interviews followed by photo elicitation interviews with each supermarket worker. Lasting about an hour and a half each, these research encounters began with an overview of the ethical protocols of the research and then a brief discussion with the participant about their favourite foods and meals, carried out in the workers’ lunchroom. Having already conducted the questionnaires, I was not surprised to find that most (but not all, see Figure 2) of the chosen meals were either roti or pelau rice.



Figure 2. A still life image of ingredients used to make a Trinidadian lasagne. This dish was prepared by the participant only on special occasions such as birthdays and Christmas. (Image credit: author’s own).

After our initial discussion, the research participant and I went to the supermarket floor to ‘shop’ for the items needed to prepare their favourite meal. Although simulated (and, therefore, cost-free), these shop-along interviews resembled participants’ own experiences

of acquiring foods in a supermarket. By recreating the familiar, mundane practice of shopping [14], even if just at their workplace (where some participants did shop for their groceries), the shop-along method reversed at least some power dynamics between the interviewer and the interviewee. For instance, the participant-selected food products steered the conversation away from direct lines of questioning and towards a free-flowing discussion about these products led by the research participant. As Sofie Joosse and Matilda Marshall [12] (p. 612) argue, the use of food (or other items) as ‘association objects’ [12] (p. 612) ‘may encourage the participant to be more of a co-researcher and not only an informant answering questions’.

Having eased into the research situation by shopping together, the research participant and I then returned to the lunchroom with their basket of groceries. This was, by far, the most interesting part of the research encounter since the presence of Jason with his professional camera, the laptop and the ‘set’ where the food items would be arranged and photographed, sparked the interest of other supermarket workers who happened to be using the lunchroom for their break. Using the lunchroom space for the interview made the research participatory in an unexpected way, as the food stories shared by the photo elicitation participant encouraged others in the lunchroom to agree or disagree with the participants’ portrayal of a product and their memories associated with it. The research was participatory in a more obvious sense, too, since the participants took their own photographs of their food products, which were arranged as a still life in front of a white backdrop (as in Figures 1 and 2, above). Participants used small digital cameras which they took home with them after the interview as a gift for participating in the research.

After Jason and the participant took photographs of the participant’s still life, the participant’s photo was uploaded onto a tablet. While Jason returned the food items to the shop floor, the participant and I sat together for about forty-five minutes to discuss their still life photo of food products displayed on the tablet (see Figure 3). At this point, the photograph itself became an intermediary between interviewer and interviewee, facilitating a dialogue about the food products but *also* about the foodways they had replaced. The photos evoked individual and collective memories of traditional and modern foodways shared by the participant and, at times, corroborated or negated by the ad hoc group of workers who happened to be in the lunchroom at the time. As Douglas Harper [15] (p. 13) argues, photographs or other images elicit different kinds of information than words alone because the part of the brain used to decipher visual stimuli is older and more deeply embedded in human consciousness than the part of the brain used to decipher verbal prompts. In this case, the photographs enabled people to share personal memories of nutritional and agricultural change in Trinidad. In eliciting personal stories of food system change, the photos unveiled cultural values of consumption, some of which tied the modern foods in the picture to the traditional foods they had replaced.



Figure 3. A photo elicitation interview. (Image credit: Jason Renwick, with participant’s permission to use).

In the next part of the paper, I outline the findings of the ethnographic research. The results section demonstrate how participants used the cultural values of (local) flavour and colour to establish meaningful connections between old and new foodways in Trinidad and Tobago. Before elaborating on these cultural values, I introduce some ethnographic vignettes that demonstrate the ubiquity of tomato ketchup and Maggi seasoning in everyday Trinbagonian life.

3. Results

‘Consumption activity is the joint production, with fellow consumers, of a universe of values’.

Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood [16] (p. 67)

A Trinbagonian nutritionist once explained to me why people in his country eat so much tomato ketchup: ‘They just don’t like it dry. They say, “Oh gawsh, you trying to choke me!”’ The man had worked as a consultant nutritionist for several health authorities in Trinidad. During the fieldwork period, I arranged for us to meet for a go-along interview in a large supermarket located in a mall. Our conversation was free-flowing and soon centered on how Trinbagonians consumed food products that he picked up and commented on. ‘In Trinidad, we don’t know anything about discretion, we don’t pay attention to serving size, we just open it up, cut it [the stick of Golden Ray margarine] in half, and put it in. . . . We have a high affinity for sugar and salt. Nestlé is the main brand. . . . Trinis love ketchup’ (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. A colourful pizza in Trinidad (Image credit: Ms. Marva Newton).

During another interview conducted as part of the participatory photo elicitation research, a fifty-something year old woman described how she prepares different dishes in a meal. She emphasized her profligate use of Maggi’s Flavour D’Pot (see Figure 5, below): ‘Flavour D’Pot goes with everything. The macaroni pie. You stewing chicken, you making soups, rice, it goes with everything. You use one pack per dish. You might have several dishes in one meal’. The serving size of Flavour D’Pot is 2.5 g, one quarter of a 10 g packet. If one 10 g packet is used in each dish, and if a meal for four people consists of four dishes, then each person eating this meal would be consuming four times the serving size of Maggi seasoning.



Figure 5. Maggi's Flavour D'Pot, Pigtail Flavour Powder (Image credit: author's own).

The purpose of sharing the above images and descriptions of food consumption in Trinidad is not to make a judgement on the eating practices of some Trinbagonians, nor is it to dwell on the high levels of sugar in ketchup and salt and MSG in Maggi and their detrimental environmental impacts. The purpose of including the narratives and photographs above, rather, is to provide a glimpse of the ubiquity of these ultra-processed food products in Trinidad and to bring the reader closer to an understanding of the ways in which they are consumed. As I will show in the next two sub-sections, industrial food products, such as Maggi seasonings, are valued for their ability to give local flavour to food. A similar cultural value of flavour was associated with the traditional green seasoning used in Trinidad and Tobago, which was, and still is in some cases, harvested from kitchen gardens. Tomato ketchup was important to Trinbagonians for its role in giving colour to foods like pizza and pelau rice. The cultural value of colour was also associated with *roucou*, a red food colouring made from ground annatto seeds. Ethnographic data presented in the following subsections suggests that both green seasoning and *roucou* are heritage foods in Trinidad and Tobago; both reflect the foodways of Indigenous and Afrodescendant people, particularly women, who have passed down sustainable agrifood practices from generation to generation. The research also uncovers key motivational factors for changing consumer behaviours in Trinidad, including concerns about agro-industrial chemicals and nostalgia for food traditions that persist, if not in present-day practices, then in the childhood memories of the research participants.

3.1. (Local) Flavour

Ethnographic researchers are interested in cultural meanings of consumption, but so too are food corporations. Indeed, multinational corporations such as Maggi conduct their own kind of consumer research to develop culturally-appropriate branding. The prevalence of this kind of corporate-sponsored research is partly the reason why many people in Trinidad and Tobago and elsewhere (see: <https://theworld.org/2012/06/immigrants-maggi-seasoning> (accessed on 10 January 2023)) consider Maggi to be a local product. When explaining why he included Maggi products in his still life photo, a research participant in his forties emphasized the importance of Maggi seasoning for his own family traditions: 'Growing up as a little boy, it [Maggi] became a family tradition. They just know [how] to make the pot taste good. . . . I always use the Maggi. . . . I never really check where Maggi come from. I think it's a Trini make you know.' Like KFC and Subway, the Maggi brand has so successfully incorporated Trinidadian foodways into its branding that at least some Trinbagonians identify this as a local product.

Another day during the fieldwork period when I visited a church facility that caters for visiting members of international congregations, I asked if I could take pictures of the ingredients in the larder (see Figure 6). I soon discovered that, unlike the many household larders I had seen in Trinidad, this kitchen contained no Maggi products. Noting my surprise, my friend explained that meals prepared in this kitchen were not for Trin-

bagonians; instead, the cooks prepared ‘mostly foreign foods, mushroom chicken, pasta, burritos. . . . They don’t really go for the local foods, the local flavour.’ In explaining the reason for the absence of Maggi, my friend assumed it was a local product, repeatedly associating Maggi with the ‘local spices, the local flavour.’



Figure 6. The church facility larder (Image credit: author’s own).

The value of (local) flavour was again attributed to Maggi one Sunday when I helped the three women of the Afro-Trinbagonian household to prepare a meal. This was a special Father’s Day meal of stewed chicken, macaroni pie, ground provisions (tubers, in this case eddo or taro, a tuber native to Africa), potato salad, green salad, and callaloo (a one-pot dish of West African origin, typically made with greens (e.g., dasheen leaves), okra, pumpkin, onions, spring onions, coconut milk, peppers (hot and sweet), thyme and garlic). As we started the preparations for the callaloo, I asked why Danielle’s callaloo is considered better than her sister Sara’s. A few days earlier, I had overheard a light-hearted discussion about who makes the best callaloo in the family, after which everyone agreed that Danielle had ‘the best sweet hand of the family [she was the best cook in the family].’ Danielle explained: ‘My callaloo is the best since I like to put more spices in it. I put [Maggi’s] Flavour d’Pot Crab Spice’. Sara had pre-empted this conversation with the comment: ‘Danielle says her callaloo is better than mine, she say she have a secret ingredient that gives it flavour.’ Stories such as these demonstrate that Maggi products are very influential in Trinidadian evaluations of ‘good’ food, with many evaluating the best Trini food in terms of its flavour.

Yet the value of (local) flavour was also used in reference to homegrown green seasoning. A research participant in his fifties told me that: ‘Young people today think they are cooking [when they] use the Maggi seasonings. . . . But that [is] not cooking. You need to go back to the natural flavour, the green seasoning.’ Research participants such as this preferred one type of seasoning over the other, but some participants admitted to using both types of seasoning: ‘Grandmother would make her own [green] seasoning from the kitchen garden but still use the Maggi.’ One participant claimed that Trinis love homemade green seasoning so much that expats insist on taking a suitcase full back with them when they leave Trinidad and Tobago. As he explained, when family members come from Miami, New York, Toronto, or London, ‘the women get together and make massive amounts of green seasoning for the relatives to take home with them. . . . This way they get to take home the local seasoning, the local flavour.’

What is green seasoning? Green seasoning may be an African diasporic adaptation of the green sauce of medieval European cookery, brought to the Caribbean by the British. Both green seasoning and the earlier green sauce are comprised of a blend of garlic, parsley, thyme, and other green herbs [17]. A Trinbagonian friend of mine recently shared his

recipe, which includes a blend of herbs and vegetables grown in the Caribbean, but native to continents from across the globe: chives (pronounced ‘cive’ (*Allium schoenoprasum*), Europe and Asia); thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*, Europe); garlic (*Allium sativum*, Asia); celery leaves (*Apium graveolens*, Europe); scotch bonnet peppers (*Capsicum chinense*, Americas); pimiento peppers (*Capsicum annuum*, Americas); oregano (*Origanum vulgare*, Europe); culantro (called chadon/shado beni in the Caribbean, *Eryngium foetidum*, Americas); parlsey (*Petroselinum crispum*, Europe) and rosemary (*Salvia rosmarinus*, Europe). In addition to the above ingredients, some Trinbagonians add carrots (*Daucus carota*, Asia), scallions (or spring onions; *Allium fistulosum*, Asia), and tomatoes (*Solanum lycopersicum*, Americas) to their green seasoning. Interestingly, for health reasons, my friend (in his sixties) now adds ground annatto or *roucou* seeds to his green seasoning: ‘I believe that *roucou* helps to control my blood sugar and puts a little pep in my step’. The addition of ground annatto seeds to green seasoning, which I had not heard of from other research participants, gives his green seasoning a reddish colour (Figure 7). It is interesting to compare his with the typical colour of green seasoning, shown below in Figure 8.



Figure 7. ‘Green’ seasoning with added *roucou* (Image credit: Mr Phillip Murray).



Figure 8. Store-bought green seasoning, which is the same colour as homemade green seasoning. (Image credit: ‘File: FOOD Green Seasoning Supermarket.jpg’ by Grueslayer is licensed under CC By-SA 4.0).

Despite the availability of store-bought versions (see Figure 8 above), many Trinbagonians I met were partial to homemade green seasoning grown in one’s kitchen garden, and the value of (local) flavour was often used to justify this preference. When discussing their use of green seasoning, some research participants, particularly older people, expressed concern about the adverse health effects of Maggi and similar powdered seasonings. The

father and grandfather of the Afro-Trinbagonian household where I was staying claimed that ‘the only person who is not using Maggi is my wife’. Health fears about the ingredients of ultra-processed foods such as Maggi, as well as the cost-effectiveness of growing one’s own food, are central themes that arose during the ethnographic research:

Grandmother would make her own green seasoning. . . . If you have your own garden, you saving some pennies . . . and well when you are making your own seasoning, you know what you are putting in it, unlike this stuff [she points to Maggi seasoning powder] (research participant in her fifties).

[When I was growing up] we used coconut from the tree. The [hot] pepper sauce my mother would have made, we didn’t have to buy [it]. Pimiento, celery, cive [chive], okro [okra], we would grow it in the yard. We never used all purpose seasoning packets, we used our own fresh green seasoning. . . . Now, most people don[’t] cook and they would use fast food, like KFC and them thing. And you don[’t] know what goes in it, not all of it is good for the health (research participant in her forties).

The above statements reveal Trinbagonians’ deep concerns about the health effects of ultra-processed foods such as Maggi. Like the Pacific region, which shares similar plantation legacies [18], in the second half of the twentieth century, the Caribbean region became a global hot spot for nutrition-related non-communicable diseases such as type two diabetes, heart disease and some types of cancer. Stories shared during the ethnographic research demonstrate the lived experiences of this rapid nutrition transition, but also living memories of the agrarian changes that have accompanied it. Ethnographic data such as this can elicit different stories of nutrition and agrarian transition than typical accounts of food systems change.

Things [are] better, but [I am] missing long time days. It’s not like you can just go to a garden and pick the stuff. . . . And we became more dependent on this kind of stuff [points to Maggi]. Health-wise it may be a little bad. Chemicals and stuff. We never used to use chemicals, we used plain fertilizer alone—we used to go and cutlass our garden, weed it, we didn’t use the herbicide. . . . Before, you would make your own fertilizers, with orange peels, skin from the mango, any little scraps of anything. . . . It was other things, back then. . . . [Before] we weren’t using any chemicals to get ripe faster. . . . back then, it grows on the tree, it ripe[ns], and when it [is] ripe, you eat it (research participant in her forties).

We used to plant a lot of garden. We never buy stuff. . . . We used to plant pumpkin, bodi [green beans], carilli [bitter melon], cabbage, green peas, corn, [scotch bonnet] pepper, pimiento [pepper], melongene [aubergine], and all the green seasoning. Only salt and those basic things we bought. We planted a lot of ground provisions as well, eddos [taro]. . . . We sold it at Marabella market. . . . And then the place that we used to plant was taken away. . . . I don’t know what the story went but somebody bought it and they tell my family they can’t plant there anymore. . . . You hearing a lot of things like he going to put houses on it to sell, we going to build a factory. . . . When the land was taken, you couldn’t plant anymore so we just had a kitchen garden (research participant in her forties).

While the political economy of agrarian change in Trinidad and Tobago is outside the scope of this paper (this topic is partly covered in other papers by this author, see: [18–21]), it is clear from the ethnographic research that local experiences of agrifood system change have been ambivalent at best. In the first quote above, the woman begins the discussion with the statement that ‘things are better’, in reference to the convenience of using ultra-processed foods such as Maggi. Yet this statement is followed by nostalgic reminiscence of a time when the food she eats was *not* produced with industrial chemicals. In the second quote above, a woman remembers the time when her family had enough land to produce a range of vegetables and herbs, selling some at the farmers’ market. Then, when the state

land allocated to her family was purchased, they could not ‘plant there anymore’. Expressed whilst looking at their still life photos of food products, these nostalgic reminiscences shed light on past foodways in Trinidad when agroecological practices such as the production and use of organic fertilizers and biopesticides were a part of everyday life.

References in the quotes above to the mothers and grandmothers who planted kitchen gardens also highlight the key role of women in the sustainable cultivation and preparation of foods such as green seasoning. Both Indo-Trinidadians [22] (p. 250) and Afro-Trinidadians plant(ed) kitchen gardens, and this practice has largely been the domain of women’s work. From the era of slavery, when African and Afrodescendant children and adults faced malnourishment due to scanty plantation rations [23,24], enslaved and free women in Trinidad, Tobago, and other areas of the Caribbean planted food to supplement their diets. Judith Carney argues that the labour-intensive work of women was central to the survival of enslaved households: ‘Through the plants they cultivated in their kitchen gardens and their role in the household as cooks, women made critical contributions to the survival of their loved ones’ [25] (p. 131). In fact, enslaved and free women of colour cultivated their kitchen gardens with some of the very same herbs and vegetables included in the green seasoning recipes cited above, such as: carrots, celery, hot and sweet peppers, chives and thyme [26] (p. 22). In their small kitchen gardens (usually less than 2000 m²) [26] (p. 16) and larger provision grounds (marginal plots of land often nearby plantation grounds), Afrodescendant peoples of the Caribbean ingeniously combined old and new food crops from Africa (e.g., okra, bitter melon, taro), Europe (e.g., celery, thyme, parsley), Asia (e.g., garlic, chives) and the Americas (e.g., *roucou*, peppers, pumpkin, corn, culantro). They did so by drawing from the agricultural heritage of their ancestors in West and Central Africa:

The practices of mixed cropping, inter-cropping, and inter-culture of trees and vegetables presented a picture of sufficient confusion to have the slaves’ agricultural methods dismissed as being backward and inefficient. The origins of many of these practices were in the slaves’ ancestral homelands of west and central Africa and, hence, the product of several thousand years of agricultural experimentation (Innis 1961: 19). Trials and testing were continuously undertaken in the provision grounds, where the possibilities for new combinations of mixed cropping were enhanced as cultigens of the New World, Europe, and South-east Asia were added to those from Africa [26] (p. 17).

Although the subsistence practices of enslaved households were dismissed by European colonisers as backward, in contemporary times these practices have been recognised as sustainable and climate resilient (e.g., [27,28]). Moreover, this kind of household food production has been linked to an increase in the consumption of diverse, nutrient-rich foods (for a case study of Nepal, see: [29]). The nutritional and ecological importance of traditional food practices is increasingly recognised by policymakers, practitioners and scholars. Yet initiatives that seek to reinvigorate traditional foodways often lack cultural, historical, and geographical specificity [2] and are often underpinned by simplistic binaries between traditional and modern foods, eclipsing the culturally meaningful connections people make between these domains. For instance, while invaluable in many ways, public health nutrition research that relies on population health data can obscure sociocultural, political, economic, and historical factors [30] (p. 347), resulting in superficial or linear accounts of ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ foods that obscure deeper, place-based experiences and understandings of different kinds of foods and their relationalities.

In this sub-section of the paper, I have shown how the cultural value of (local) flavour provides the symbolic glue that connects modern industrial foods such as Maggi seasoning powders to traditional foods such as green seasoning. I have also shown how research participants’ stories about Maggi products uncovered deep concerns about the health effects of industrial agro-chemicals and feelings of nostalgia for past (and in some cases, enduring) foodways. The next sub-section uncovers colour as an additional value, revealing how

this, too, can provide culturally meaningful ways to reconnect modern consumers with the traditional foodways of their ancestors.

3.2. Colour

While walking along the aisles of a Trinidadian supermarket, I was surprised to find a whole section dedicated to tomato ketchup with a wide range of products, both local and international (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Jars and packets of ketchup in a Trinidadian supermarket. Some are imported; some are manufactured nationally, largely with imported ingredients. (Image credit: author's own).

As the nutritionist cited earlier affirmed: ‘Trinis love ketchup’. When describing their profligate use of the stuff, research participants explained that the primary function of ketchup was to give colour to food.

We use [ketchup] for everything: stewing meat, fried chicken, pelau. We’ll love it in a pelau, it goes with anything. Stews, fried food, pizza . . . You used to make your own ketchup with this thing called *roucou*—it’s like a vegetable—and you done ketchup to give colour to things. *Colour is important*. The meat have to be real dark. It’s like a perception: if it is not dark, it [is] not cooked (research participant in her thirties).

From the early stages of the ethnographic research, colour emerged as an important value in Trinbagonian foodways:

I don’t know, I like to cook with *colour*. Remember people eat with their eyes. When you see something, you like it. It captures your interest in wanting to eat it (research participant in her thirties).

I make Trini rice: I use food colouring to colour it red, green and white. *Colour is important*. I don’t like to cook white rice, just white rice alone. I just add saffron. It is something that inspire me, that give me some inspiration. . . . Trinis like pretty thing. And when you make a dish like that, it just show up the food. Everyone says ‘who make that?’ And people seeing it and want to eat it (research participant in his thirties).

The statements above reflect the central value of colour in the foodways of Trinidad and Tobago. In the second quote, this value, and forms of identification that go along with it (‘Trinis like pretty thing’), are attributed to the use of food colouring and saffron. In this section of the paper, I show how research participants attributed the same value of colour to tomato ketchup and *roucou*. As participants explained, *roucou* is a kind of traditional ketchup. Although Trinis’ use of it varies, *roucou* has the same function as ultra-processed ketchup: to colour food (see Figure 10).



Figure 10. Homemade *roucou* (Image credit: Ms Marva Newton).

The participant cited above referred to *roucou* as a vegetable, but it is actually the seeds of a fruit pod from the achiote (evergreen) shrub native to the Americas (*Bixa orellana*; Figure 11).



Figure 11. Annatto fruits growing on an achiote shrub. (Image credit: Phillip Murray).

The annatto pod and seeds (Figure 12) are known by many names. The name '*roucou*' is a French adaptation of the Tupí-Guaraní word, *urukú* or *rucú* [31] (p. 35). The French name—*roucou*—may have become widespread in late eighteenth-century Trinidad, when significant numbers of French people settled on the island, joining the Indigenous, Afrodescendant, and Spanish populations who already lived there.



Figure 12. The *roucou* seeds (Image credit: ‘raw annatto (red lipstick stain)’ by April Rinne is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0).

As with its nomenclature, the different uses of *roucou* are linked to the Indigenous heritage of Central and South America, including the Caribbean. Indigenous peoples, such as the Arawak (Taíno) and Carib (Kalinago) peoples of Trinidad, used *roucou* (or *urukú* or *rucú*) as a body, face, or hair paint. It was also used for hunting, as medicine, in life cycle ceremonies, to ward off evil spirits, and as a paint for pottery and other forms of art [31] (p. 41). Indigenous peoples also used annatto seeds as a food colouring, in line with present-day uses of *roucou* in Trinidad and other places. Cultivated all over the tropical world, today annatto is used to dye foods such as Red Leicester cheese.

In 1566, Spanish Catholic missionary, Diego de Landa, described the achiote shrub he encountered in the Yucatan peninsula as a ‘tree bearing spiny pods, like chestnuts, but not so large or so rough; they open ripe and contain small seeds which both Spaniards and Indians use to colour their condiments, as one does with saffron; the colour is marked and stains a great deal’ [31] (p. 33). The research participants’ memories of *roucou* align with de Landa’s, so many centuries later:

Long time [ago] they use[d] *roucou*: it’s a tree with a pod, they have little red seeds, instead of the ketchup they used the *roucou*. Well, they put more chemicals in the ketchup now, you know. Roucou is more creole, creole . . . it tastes local. Some people don’t have the trees any more so they won’t make the *roucou* (research participant in his forties).

Roucou doesn’t need anything to it. Get the pod—it is hairy on the outside—but inside you have the seeds. You put them in boiling water. You let it stand and then you rough it up a bit to put the colour and then you bottle that (research participant in her fifties).

As with other statements included in this paper, the above comments were made not in reference to traditional foods—in this case, *roucou*—but to the modern foods that had replaced them. It was not to a picture of the achiote bush that the participants referred, but to one of tomato ketchup and other ingredients chosen for their meals (Figure 13). Their stories were captured in research that took Trini understandings and meanings of ultra-processed foods seriously, rather than dismiss them as unhealthy or irrelevant to the goal of improving diets and making them more sustainable.



In telling their stories about *roucou*, research participants again evoked nostalgia for past foodways and reflected on concerns about the health effects of industrial foods:

Ethnographic research into the ways people experience and articulate the substitution of traditional foods for ultra-processed foods can uncover aspects of local food heritage that have been previously hidden or undermined. In this case, the ethnographic research revealed aspects of Afrodescendant and Indigenous food heritage that are unique to the Caribbean. While they may have drawn from recipes for British green sauce to prepare their green seasoning (enslaved cooks were, of course, responsible for cooking meals for European colonisers on plantations), in the case of *roucou*, Africans and Afrodescendants seem to have drawn from the food heritage of Indigenous peoples. There may also be direct links to West Africa. As Maureen Warner-Lewis, Trinbagonian professor emerita of Afro-Caribbean heritage, argues, the use of *roucou* as a meat colouring resembles a similar food practice in West Africa, where instead of annatto, palm oil was used to colour meat.

([32]; my emphasis)

The findings relayed above contribute to a growing literature on the ingenuity of enslaved and free Africans in adapting their foodways to new and hostile environments of

the Americas (e.g., [33–37]). My argument here is that *both* traditional and modern foods are tied to the ongoing ‘culinary inventiveness’ [34] of Afrodescendant peoples, past and present. While annatto, and ketchup may be very different foods, both have been valued by Afro-Trinbagonians for the very same reason: to give food colour. The foods have changed, but their value-based function has stayed the same. It follows that the consumption of ultra-processed foods may not signify a break from the past, as implied by strict separations between traditional and modern foods. Indeed, the substitution of modern for traditional foods can actually reflect symbolic continuity.

The ethnographic findings relayed here demonstrate the ways in which modern, global commodities can be appropriated in ways that fit with people’s ‘own history’ [4] (p. 7). In anthropologist Daniel Miller’s terms, both Maggi seasonings and tomato ketchup have come to ‘objectify’ [5] being Trini and ‘doing’ Trini consumption. Participants’ stories about these modern products revealed substantive details about the everyday lives, memories, and experiences of people in Trinidad and Tobago whose foodways have shifted dramatically since the oil boom period of the 1970s and 1980s [5,19]. Shared feelings, such as nostalgia for homegrown and home-prepared foods and concerns about the use of industrial agro-chemicals, enabled research participants to explain such momentous agrifood system transitions in their own, culturally nuanced ways. Disconnections that ruptured food production from consumption in Trinidad and Tobago were reconnected by participants through cultural values of colour and (local) flavour. The continued importance of such food values despite cataclysmic agrarian and nutritional change demonstrates that industrial capitalism is always embedded in everyday processes of meaning-making. Indeed, as human geographer Ian Cook has argued: ‘Capitalism is not a monolithic cultural economic system but is, rather, multiple, fragmented, dynamic, locally diverse and hybrid and peppered with creative possibilities for achieving the . . . unexpected’ [38] (p. 312).

In the final part of the paper, below, I pull the ethnographic threads together to outline two ideas for public health nutrition interventions that make use of both modern and traditional cultures of consumption in Trinidad and Tobago.

4. Discussion

As I have emphasised throughout this paper, ethnographic research offers a unique, people-centered ontology for understanding how food systems change is experienced and understood on the ground. In Section 3, I explained how the values of (local) flavor and colour, as well as consumer concerns about health and feelings of nostalgia for traditional, homegrown foods, are important themes that emerged from the ethnographic research. In this final section, I argue that these themes provide interesting and potentially effective ways of framing sustainable diet interventions in Trinidad and Tobago. Both of the examples provided below are aimed at public education through the use of infomercials. However, the ethnographic research findings could be used to inform all kinds of public health nutrition interventions in Trinidad and Tobago and potentially across the Caribbean.

4.1. Intervention 1

This proposed infomercial begins with a Trinbagonian grandmother in her kitchen garden collecting herbs for her green seasoning and then bringing them into her kitchen. Upon reaching her kitchen, she turns to the camera and says: ‘I’m making green seasoning for my grandchildren to take to Miami.’ A thought bubble appears on the screen with a moving image of her grandchildren, who are elated to receive her gift of green seasoning. The grandmother continues: ‘My green seasoning has the *local* flavour. If you have your own garden, you saving some pennies. And, well, when you are making your own seasoning, you know what you are putting in it, unlike this stuff.’ She holds up a package of Maggi seasoning (or a generic equivalent).

At this point, a brief educational video begins, which explains the cultural heritage of kitchen gardens in the Caribbean and why they are good for people and planet. Specific references are made to the sustainable agricultural practices of one’s ancestors as well

as the health benefits of particular ingredients used in homemade green seasoning. The video draws out key government messages, such as the need to grow your own food, but the central emphasis is on the need to revalue and rekindle green seasoning and related practices of kitchen gardening as part of the cultural heritage of Trinidad and Tobago.

After the educational video, the scene returns to the grandmother's kitchen, where her daughter is now cooking. Her daughter says, 'Mum, you don't need to make the fresh green seasoning, they have Maggi in the US as well. It has the local flavour too. Our family in Miami can use Maggi's Flavour D'Pot instead, so don't bother yourself with making green seasoning. Look, I'm using Maggi in my pelau rice right now.'

As the grandmother looks up, a thought bubble reappears with her grandchildren in Miami. One of the grandchildren is holding grandmother's green seasoning and another is holding Maggi's Flavour D'Pot seasoning. As the grandchildren look from one type of seasoning to the other, a voiceover says: 'Which one has the local flavour, does Maggi have the local flavour?' The response to this question is a resounding *steups* from the grandmother and her grandchildren, a common gesture of disapproval in Trinidad and Tobago made by sucking one's teeth.

4.2. Intervention 2

This proposed infomercial begins with a middle-aged Trinbagonian man, Norman, putting loads of ketchup on his pizza. A thought bubble appears while Norman looks up: 'Why am I putting so much ketchup on my pizza?'

Another image of the man appears so that the screen is split between the two Normans. They talk to each other about the importance of colour for the appearance of their food. 'Colour is important. Remember people eat with their eyes. When you see something with colour, you like it. It captures your interest in wanting to eat it. That's why I'm putting ketchup on my pizza'. The conversation between the two Normans ends with the question: 'But ketchup hasn't always been around. How did granny colour her food?'

The screen now shifts to silent images of Norman's grandmother picking annatto from her kitchen garden, boiling the seeds/seeds, and preparing *roucou*. After a few moments, a voice-over explains why *roucou*, the natural ketchup, is a superfood. The health benefits of *roucou* are referred to as well as its heritage in Indigenous and African foodways. This brief educational clip ends with an emphasis on the importance of revaluing and reclaiming *roucou* as a heritage food of Trinidad and Tobago that is good for the health of people and the planet.

The scene returns to Norman with his pizza. He looks at it, makes a face to indicate that he rejects it, and walks away.

In this final part of the paper, I demonstrated how ethnographic research findings can be utilised to develop culturally-appropriate sustainable diet interventions. I refrained from providing too much detail, however, for such interventions would have to be co-developed with local people and communities with plenty of time for testing and reworking, e.g., through focus groups. As these examples show, cultural values of colour and (local) flavour, along with shared feelings elicited through the ethnographic research such as health concerns, can inform the development of place-based nutrition interventions in Trinidad and Tobago.

5. Conclusions

Food traditions are not fixed, but involve shifting meanings, values and processes. For this reason, food *traditions* and industrial food *transitions* need to be understood in relation to each other. This paper contributes to the work of policymakers and others who seek to rekindle traditional food as a resource for sustainable, healthy and equitable food interventions. While policymakers tend to disconnect traditional and modern foods, ethnographic research can reveal them as connected in interesting and potentially useful ways. In the research presented in this paper, incompatibilities between traditional and modern, or homegrown and industrial foods, were resolved in everyday life through the

maintenance of values such as (local) flavour and colour. While many of the research participants lamented their deleterious health effects, or relayed nostalgic memories of farming, gardening or cooking from scratch, their reasonings for consuming ultra-processed foods were *also* grounded in the cultural values of flavor and colour. Taking shared values of ultra-processed food consumption seriously can not only reveal place-based experiences of food system change, but also uncover cultural connections people make between traditional and modern foodways. In this case, the values of flavor and colour have enabled Trinbagonians to establish cultural continuity in the face of violence and disjuncture, to maintain place-based meanings in spite of nutritional and agroecological homogenisation.

The ethnographic research findings presented here are important because they can be used to co-develop culturally-appropriate approaches to sustainable diet interventions that blend traditional and modern, old and new foodways. By associating modern foods with traditional foods, the two cultural values identified here may be used to connect younger generations in Trinidad and Tobago to a food heritage that is not only healthy and sustainable but also rooted in cultural identity and belonging.

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