

Is Hunger Culture-Bound?

2019-06-06 05:00:15

By

Over the last decade, indigenous Marind communities in the rural district of Merauke, West Papua, have seen vast swaths of their forests and savannas razed to make way for monocrop oil palm plantations. These developments are promoted by the Indonesian government as part of efforts to achieve national self-sufficiency in basic commodities, including palm oil, sugar, and rice. On the ground, however, agribusiness expansion is undermining the local food and water security of Marind communities, who have traditionally relied on the forest for their subsistence.

Once-plentiful game, such as cassowaries, kangaroos, and wild pigs, have become difficult to encounter. Aquatic lifeforms, such as fish, crocodiles, and crustaceans, have become contaminated with chemicals and sludge from toxic pesticides and palm oil mill effluents. Edible fruit, nut, and seed-bearing trees are increasingly rare.

In recent years, these once-relied upon 'forest foods' have been increasingly replaced by processed foodstuffs – rice, instant noodles, and biscuits – that are either purchased by Marind from village kiosks or handed out for free by oil palm corporations as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility schemes. However, processed foods – or 'city foods', as Marind call them – are said to be bland, dry, and tasteless. As Evelina, a young Marind woman from Khalaoyam village, explained to me, 'These foods do not nourish the body. They do not taste of the land. They do not taste of the forest. They do not make you feel full. Instead, they make you more and more hungry.'^[1] During my fieldwork in rural Merauke, I found that like Evelina, many Marind associated the destruction of the forest and the arrival of monocrops with a pervasive and constant sensation of hunger. On the one hand, this hunger is visceral. Deforestation, water contamination, and biodiversity loss have resulted in widespread protein and micro-nutrient deficiencies, infant malnutrition, and food poisoning. On the other hand, for Marind, hunger is also more than just the desire to eat triggered by the lack of food. Rather, the experience of hunger provoked by the disappearance of nourishing 'forest foods' has significance that extends far beyond the quantitative measurements of calorific intake and nutritional value.

My fieldwork among indigenous Marind in Merauke made me reflect on hunger as a moral, affective, and sensory experience – one whose

significance transcends the need for physical nourishment. Hunger, for Marind, is more than just the result of a lack in food. Rather, hunger speaks to the devastating effects of environmental destruction on Marinds' affective and material relations to the forest and its diverse sentient organisms. Forgetting the taste of forest foods means forgetting the many myths, events, and encounters that historically connected the world of humans to that of kindred plants and animals. Hunger manifests in bodily ways the obliteration of the landscape in which multispecies pasts and relations are inscribed. Going hungry epitomizes the severance of these more-than-human socialities and the erosion of identities once achieved and affirmed through the consumption and exchange of forest-derived foodstuffs. As Pius, an elder from Bayau village told me, 'When I feel hungry, I remember the forest that has gone. I remember the animals that have died. I remember the trees that have been felled. My hunger makes me sad and lonely. To know my hunger, you must know the meaning of the forest. And for that reason, you cannot know my hunger.'

As I learned from my interlocutors, forest foods are "more than just food" for Marind. These foods, obtained through hunting, fishing, and gathering in the forest, derive from plants and animals with whom Marind entertain relations of kinship through shared descent from ancestral spirits, or *dema*. The relations of Marind to these 'grandparent' or 'sibling' species are anchored in principles of reciprocal exchange and care. Plants and animals grow to support their human kin by providing them with food and other resources. In return, humans offer respect and perform rituals as they encounter, hunt, gather, and consume kindred plants and animals in the forest. Marinds' own bodies, too, are a part of the multispecies food chain of the forest – when people die, their flesh decays to feed organisms in the sacred groves where bodies are buried. These exchanges are imbued with moral and affective meaning for Marind because they reaffirm Marind's ancestral relationships and reciprocal duties of care with and towards kindred plants and animals. Exchanges of flesh and fluids across species lines thus serve to commemorate and sustain the relations of humans to non-human lifeforms within the cosmology of the forest and endow forest foods with their nourishing qualities.

In addition to disrupting sacred relations of reciprocity, the disappearance of forest foods is often associated by Marind with adverse transformations in their bodily constitution. Village women, for instance, spoke of their breasts becoming dry and their skin sallow from the absence of sago. Men described how the scarcity of forest game had depleted their bodies of blood, fat, and muscle. Many community members noted a loss of "wetness" – a Marind concept that refers to bodily substances such as blood, sweat, muscle, and fat – in children whose bodies had become skinny and grey rather than glossy and taut. People described how the experience of hunger and of witnessing the hunger of others gave rise to

feelings of sadness, pity, and in particular, a pervasive sense of loneliness arising from a severed connection to the forest and its diverse lifeforms. For instance, villagers lamented the decline in collective hunting and foraging activities that had once sustained the relations of humans to non-humans within the sentient ecology of the forest. Women mourned the decimation of sago groves where they had once celebrated their role as mothers in the company of a plant whose fertile flesh and fluids, much like their own, had provided Marind children with nourishing sustenance. Many community members decried the fact that they had forgotten the taste of forest foods, along with the myths and stories of the species they once hunted, fished, and foraged. Marinds' plant and animal kin, too, were said to 'go hungry' because of oil palm's arrival. Wild pigs and cassowaries find nothing to eat in the arid and homogeneous environment of monocrops. Bamboo clusters and sago groves collapse as the soil is depleted of its minerals. Robbed of their water, nutrients, and symbiotes, species that once thrived in the company of humans wilt and starve. Marind thus conceive of and experience hunger as a multispecies phenomenon, one distributed across humans, plants and animals who once sustained each other through nourishing exchanges of flesh and fluids.

The disappearance of forest foods and the arrival of processed foods also marks the introduction of the unknown into Marind culture. As Evelina put it, these foods do not taste of the land and forest because they come from faraway places and are produced by people – and made from plants and animals – that are foreign to Marind. Not only do these foods fail to satiate those who consume them – they also exacerbate their hunger. Children, for instance, clamour for more food within hours of eating instant noodles. Women described snacking on processed biscuits throughout the day, but always craving more. Young men also talked of having become 'addicted' to rice, which they would eat in copious amounts without feeling full. As Pius, a young man from Khalaoyam, described, 'When you eat from the forest, you can go without food for an entire day. But when you eat foods, you become even more hungry. The more you eat, the more you want to eat. This hunger never goes away.'

Anthropologists have long recognized the transformative function of food as a social binder and divider, and as a marker of one's social identity, status, and relations (see, for instance, Kahn, 1986; Munn, 1986; Young, 1971). Less attention, however, has been paid to hunger (and for that matter, satiety) as a culturally-shaped and embodied experience. In other words, whereas food and the beliefs and practices surrounding it are seen to be shaped by social norms and values, hunger is often assumed to be universal or biologically-determined (see Young, 1986, p. 111). Indeed, most studies of hunger and malnutrition within anthropology have been undertaken in the sub-field of nutritional anthropology, and from an

evolutionary or adaptive perspective. And while the causes and consequences of hunger and food scarcity have been extensively theorized by political economists, less attention has been paid to food insecurity as a localized and subjective experience, endowed with culturally significant meanings, emotions, and sensations for those subjects to its effects.

In his study of hunger in imperial and modern Britain, historian James Vernon argues that cultural histories of hunger matter 'not just because hunger hurts, but because how it has hurt has always been culturally and historically specific' (2007, p. 8). The culturally-shaped ways in which Marind sense and make sense of the pain of hunger opens a rich space for inter-disciplinary research on changing foodways and nutrition in an era of troubled local and global food systems. For instance, how might indigenous interpretations of the form, cause, and effects of hunger relate to, or diverge from, emergent findings in nutritional science? How can indigenous notions of health and wellbeing – physical, psychological, and social – inform nutritional policy and practice and contribute to the emergence of healthy food systems and environments? In what ways do diverse human societies conceptualize and define a 'good diet', and how such conceptions may change over space and time? And if food practices and values are culturally shaped and transmitted, to what extent is the experience of hunger, too, 'culture-bound'?

Addressing these questions will require developing inter-disciplinary approaches to food and nutrition that are culturally sensitive, locally specific, *and* scientifically informed – or what one might call a sub-field of 'ethno-nutrition'. Such approaches would attend to the sensory, emotional, and moral dimensions of hunger as lived experience. They would situate hunger within its geographically and historically divergent political, economic, and social contexts. They would examine how different foods – and the people, places, and practices these foods encompass – give rise to different kinds of hungers. Importantly, such approaches would take as their starting point the perspectives and experiences of those directly subjected to the deleterious effects of hunger – chronic, structural, and hidden – in designing and planning healthier food systems across local and global scales. Knowing each other's hungers, to return to Pius' words, may pave the way for the development of nutritional and dietary frameworks that account for the cultural values and norms of different human societies, along with the diverse ecologies that feed and sustain them.

Notes

[1] All names are pseudonyms.

Works Cited

Kahn, M. (1986). *Always Hungry, Never Greedy: Food and the Expression of Gender in a Melanesian Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Munn, N. D. (1986). *The Fame of Gawa: A Symbolic Study of Value Transformation in a Massim (Papua New Guinea) Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Vernon, J. (2007). *Hunger: A Modern History*. Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press.

Young, M. (1971). *Fighting with Food: Leadership, Value, and Social Control in a Massim Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Young, M. (1986). "The Worst Disease": The Cultural Definition of Hunger in Kalauna. In L. Manderson (Ed.), *Shared Wealth and Symbol: Food, Culture, and Society in Oceania and Southeast Asia* (pp. 111 – 126). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[Sophie Chao](#) is a Postdoctoral Research Associate at the University of Sydney's School of Philosophical and Historical Inquiry and the Charles Perkins Centre, and an Honorary Postdoctoral Fellow at Macquarie University. Her current research explores the nutritional and cultural impacts of agribusiness expansion on indigenous food-based socialities, identities, and ecologies in Indonesia. Sophie's academic research has appeared in top-ranking anthropological and inter-disciplinary journals including *Cultural Anthropology*, *Ethnos*, and *Environmental Humanities*. Her edited and co-edited volumes include *Conflict or Consent? The Palm Oil Sector at a Crossroads* (2013), *Diverse Paths to Justice: Legal Pluralism and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Southeast Asia* (2011), and *Oil Palm Expansion in Southeast Asia: Trends and Implications for Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples* (2011).

AMA citation

. Is Hunger Culture-Bound?. *Somatosphere*. . Available at: . Accessed June 6, 2019.

APA citation

. (). *Is Hunger Culture-Bound?*. Retrieved June 6, 2019, from Somatosphere Web site:

Chicago citation

. . Is Hunger Culture-Bound?. *Somatosphere*. (accessed June 6, 2019).

Harvard citation

, *Is Hunger Culture-Bound?*, Somatosphere. Retrieved June 6, 2019, from
<>

MLA citation

. "Is Hunger Culture-Bound?." . Somatosphere. Accessed 6 Jun. 2019.<>