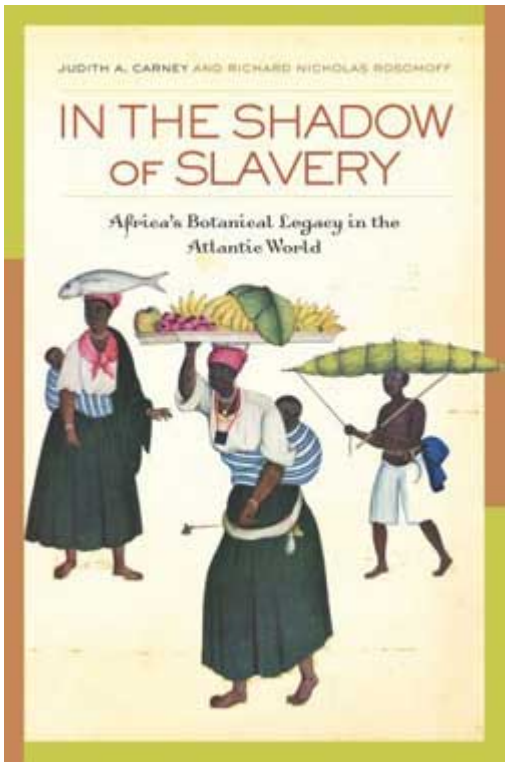
African Foods and the Making of the Americas



Some years ago during a hot “dry season” in West Africa, where I was living and conducting research, I received a series of letters from family members asking where they could send black-eyed peas for my New Years meal. I was born in Virginia, and Virginians must eat black-eyed peas on January 1 to have good fortune in the months to come. My family was both surprised and delighted when I wrote back that black-eyed peas were readily available in much of West Africa, the crop having been domesticated there.

That my family knew little about the origins of one of our prized dishes is understandable. Few people know the details of the numerous and important crop transfers from Africa to the Americas. And until Carney and Rosomoff’s delightful and Frederick Douglass Prize-winning book, no one had written a comprehensive overview of the degree to which Africans, as slaves, shaped American diets. Africans in the New World did so by selecting particular seeds and roots from their homelands, planting them, processing what they harvested, and preparing their bounty as food in a manner informed by knowledge handed down from generations past. What is to be gained from Carney and Rosomoff’s book is an appreciation of Africans as more than laborers who shaped our hemisphere’s history. In the stinking hulls of ships and under brutal conditions on plantations, Africans preserved particular sorts of knowledge that they drew on, applied, and bestowed upon their descendants. Americans, white, black, and brown, are heirs to that knowledge. Our culture is informed

by Africa, whether we all know it or not.

With evidence drawn from a fabulous array of sources and in readable prose, *In the Shadow of Slavery* takes readers on tours of African gardens throughout the Atlantic—from Guinea to Angola, and Virginia to Bahia. The book begins with a look at Africa's food history, follows African plants across the ocean, and then explores the ways that Africans and their descendants fostered them in American settings. It also considers American crops that were introduced to Africa (maize and cassava particularly). Food crops of African origin that made their way to the New World included yams, okra, hibiscus, tamarind, Guinea millet, watermelon, sorghum, and the oil palm. Other plants, like bananas, are of Asian origin but reached the Americas via Africa. In the era of Atlantic slavery, none of these crops was consumed often in Europe. These were not the commodities—sugar, cotton, and tobacco—over which most slaves labored many hours every day. But food crops were crucial to empire, since colonists, slave and free, had to eat.

The authors theorize that African food crops reached the Americas aboard slaving vessels. Ship captains bought a range of foodstuffs to feed their human cargo during long crossings of the Atlantic. What was not consumed often went with slaves, who, Carney and Rosomoff write, then had access to seeds and roots from their homelands that served as planting stock. Craving a taste of home—something to break the monotony of bland diets masters sometimes planned for them—African slaves applied knowledge that they possessed to grow some of their own food. In some cases, they planted crops from their homeland to stave off starvation. In places, African foods became staples of white colonial diets and essential parts of broad, regional cuisines.

Carney and Rosomoff focus primarily on two American settings—maroon (or runaway-slave) communities, and plantations. Drawing on a range of sources, they show how maroons adopted African farming techniques and crops in a great variety of places and integrated African foods into their diets and religious traditions. Cuban maroon communities, for example, presented offerings of black-eyed peas, okra, and jute mallow to deities of African origin. Likewise, rice, grown in parts of West Africa, was used by Surinam's maroons to honor ancestors.

If maroons maintained African foodways, so too did slaves held in bondage. In the early years of American colonization, Carney and Rosomoff point out, white colonists knew little about tropical agriculture and, therefore, often struggled to feed themselves, ultimately depending on their slaves, who were expert cultivators of tropical lands.

Of course in many places Indians served as the first slaves of whites, and everywhere in the Americas, colonists learned a great deal from Indian neighbors. These are important topics that Carney and Rosomoff largely ignore and their inclusion could have added a great deal to the book. But all historians make choices about how to limit the subject matter, and Carney and

Rosomoff (wisely, I think) keep the focus squarely on the actions of Africans and their descendants. Nonetheless, it should be remembered that in the Western Hemisphere, colonial regimes appropriated knowledge from two groups they subjugated—Africans and Indians.

Once plantations were established throughout the Americas, African traditions continued to shape slave diets. It was common in many plantation societies for slaves to receive from their masters a plot of land and a small amount of time on weekends to work it. On these plots, slaves often planted items that were distinctly African. Hence, when a French observer saw Bambara groundnuts, sesame, and guinea squash among other things growing on a slave provision ground in the Caribbean, he called it what it was—"*une petite Guinée*." And when it came time for preparing food from the harvest, African slaves created dishes that bore similarities to those from their homelands. Thus, plantains were often picked green and boiled before consumption, and meat and vegetables were often cooked together and served as sauces over rice or another starch. Carney and Rosomoff show that Africa's botanical legacy in the Americas is manifold and can even be found in the African-derived words used today for a great variety of foods. "Gumbo," for example, is from a Bantu-language word for okra.

While most of the crops slaves brought with them from Africa never became commodities exported from the Americas, rice did. To long-standing debates about whether or not African knowledge was important for the development of rice production in the Carolina colony, Carney and Rosomoff bring some fascinating new data. They argue that Africans already familiar with rice "were able to adapt its cultivation to the diverse and favorable growing conditions of the Carolina lowcountry" (151). Though I think Carney and Rosomoff are right, here they fail to make one important point. In the period rice was introduced to the lowcountry, most Africans in the region were from non-rice producing parts of their continent. Comparatively few were Upper Guineans, who possessed detailed knowledge of rice agriculture. Most were Angolans, who knew nothing about rice before they stepped foot on Carolina's shores. Evidence that Upper Guineans were a minority among slaves in Carolina when rice was first cultivated there in the late seventeenth century does not undermine the argument that Upper Guineans first planted the grain. Nor has anyone convincingly refuted the argument that Upper Guineans, who arrived in large numbers after the mid-eighteenth century, applied paddy-rice technologies to plantation agriculture in Carolina.

However, by failing to examine closely the Old World regional origins of Carolina's slave population—or the Old World origins of slave populations in other parts the Americas—Carney and Rosomoff miss the opportunity to detail how the cultural knowledge of *particular* African groups became generalized in the New World, ultimately emerging as "African" or "Negro." Thus, on Carolina plantations, slaves with a wide range of ancestral backgrounds internalized an *Upper Guinean* view of rice as *the* food of choice. At the same time, they learned and adapted Upper Guinean rice farming techniques, making them their own. In Carolina, rice knowledge quickly became "Africanized," as blacks,

regardless of their origins, made rice a food that was part of a broadly defined *African* culture rather than a more narrowly defined *Upper Guinean* one.

Food is, of course, a "cultural marker." It serves as an indication of self, a sign of who people think they are. Like dress, language, and many other things, food choices can distinguish one group of people from another. For me, what is fascinating about "African plants," "African farming practices," and "African cuisines" is that few plants, farming practices, and cuisines were known by all blacks shipped to the Western Hemisphere. Yet through their daily interactions with one another on plantations, Yoruba, Mandinka, Balanta, Wolof, Igbo, Akan, Kongo and people from many other widely scattered ethnic groups began to see plants, farming practices, and foods that had been known in only a few of their homelands as broadly African or black. When they defined their food as "African," they were declaring themselves part of one, unified culture rooted across the ocean. Black slaves "invented" this culture when brought together in a vast array of New World settings. And to be sure, it was a culture that was constructed over shared food bowls after long, hard days of labor. When looked at this way, Africa was as much created in the Americas as it was recreated.

Though I have criticisms of *In the Shadow of Slavery*, they are small indeed. This is a wonderful book, one I will recommend to colleagues, friends, and family alike. To be sure, when I sit down to enjoy okra, which I bought at the farmers' market, I will, thanks to Carney and Rosomoff, entertain my children with the story of how Africans domesticated the crop in their continent's forest-savanna ecotone and later as slaves in the Americas selected it for provision grounds. I will explain the derivation of the word and will make sure they know that the choices Africans made hundreds of years ago about what constitutes good food have shaped our meals in the present. Maybe next time I'm in Africa, they'll rest easy knowing that I'm able to eat foods that are in many ways quite familiar here at home.

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