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## Introduction

At first glance, the Central African nation of Gabon exemplifies France's continued hold on its former possessions. Libreville, the country's capital, is a product of colonial rule. It shows. Since independence the city has been transformed from a sleepy port of twenty thousand people in 1960 to a growing metropolis of half a million inhabitants. French soldiers and businessmen sip beers and whiskey in crowded air-conditioned bars. A flight into the city descends on a late colonial fantasy of modernization: a heap of modernist skyscrapers surrounded by dense rainforest. The conch-pink Presidential Palace, a masterpiece of early 1970s futuristic excess worthy of a science fiction epic, was designed by French architects and paid for by the flood of revenue coming from oil profits. Al-Hadj Omar Bongo Ondimba has held power since 1967, thanks in no small part to a coterie of French officials and businessmen.

Gabon is perhaps the most perfect example of neocolonialism on the entire continent. While liberation fighters and the French military waged a bitter war in Algeria, and Guinea's chief Sekou Touré espoused socialism and denounced De Gaulle, some Gabonese politicians lobbied unsuccessfully to create a national flag with a tiny *tricolore* in the upper left-hand corner.<sup>1</sup> Gabon's first president Léon Mba assured readers of the magazine *Réalités* in 1960 that only strong aid from *la patrie* would allow his country to survive.<sup>2</sup> The country's nation-

al riches—uranium, gold, timber, and petroleum—kept the French government’s presence firmly planted in Gabon. French conglomerate Elf-Total rapidly expanded oil production in the two decades following independence in 1960. After Mba’s death in 1967, old Africa hands in the French foreign ministry aided a young officer they knew as Albert-Bernard Bongo to take the reins of the government. He has never forgotten his friends in Paris and is regularly accused of illicitly showering money upon French politicians.<sup>3</sup>

It is not just at the summit of political power that foreign influence holds sway. France is the lingua franca of the country. No single African language has ever served to bind together this nation of more than twenty sizable ethnic communities. Living in Libreville is expensive for locals and newcomers. According to some standards, the city ranks with Tokyo and Paris for its high cost of living.<sup>4</sup> Almost nothing is made in the city: electronics from East Asia, metalware from India and China, cars from France and Japan, and cloth from West Africa. Even matches are shipped in from Cameroon. One recent study estimates that over two thirds of the country’s food is brought from outside Gabon.<sup>5</sup> The high prices and scarcity of locally produced food in Libreville bewilder residents and visitors alike. Ships and trucks deliver European imported fare and vegetables grown in Cameroon. West African immigrants berate Gabonese people for not growing enough food to feed themselves.

For some, appreciation of foreign tastes signifies wealth as well as dependence. Most sub-Saharan countries could only dream of having as many Internet kiosks, cell phones, and gleaming Mitsubishi SUVs as Gabon, which has one of the highest per capita incomes in Africa. Most of the oil money has not trickled down very far, but the profits allowed for a remaking of the city. Omar Bongo demolished numerous older buildings in favor of modernist architecture and imported luxuries. Such efforts to present Libreville as a modern city also appear in eating habits. European and wealthy African residents purchase croissants, imported sausages, and French wines in specialty downtown stores and supermarkets while manioc and plantains are scarce. The city’s prosperity is likewise displayed in the older neighborhoods flanking the city center, in Glass and Louis, where Cuban, Chinese, and “authentic Gabonese” restaurants compete for expatriate and wealthy African clients.

During my first visit to Gabon in 1998 I watched affluent Libreville schoolchildren snacking on French sausage, nodding along to Parisian rap songs playing through their headphones as they struggled with their backpacks stuffed with

textbooks published in France. I started to wonder how colonialism reshaped tastes and contributed to French hegemony in the country. Did cultural practices from the metropole make Gabon into a country that would not be able to stand on its own? At the beginning daily life in Libreville seemed to be perfect evidence for the critiques of Africans idealizing European culture, as in the work of Franz Fanon, Armah, and other nationalist writers.<sup>6</sup>

My naive ideas of European dominance in Gabon turned out to be insufferably inadequate to understanding how, what, and why Libreville people consume. From my concerns about changing everyday practices—especially in an area as vital to life as eating—emerged this study examining how Libreville residents came to eat and buy food as they do today. The histories behind their meals are testimonies to the panoply of economic and cultural links to Europe and the Gabonese interior. Townspeople created a style of living that embodied local concerns and Libreville's manifold international connections. City residents of distinction have preferred to buy rather than grow or catch their own food. This decision alternately puzzled and angered generations of urban planners determined to build a workforce willing to follow the dictates of employers and officials. The daily meals and shopping habits of urban Gabonese reflected a new sensibility that gradually spread into rural areas of Gabon. The culinary practices of Gabonese people emerged from a series of struggles and negotiations among townspeople, rural producers, European entrepreneurs, and the colonial state.

This book follows the formation of contemporary Libreville diets as part of a larger transformation of urban and rural areas of the Gabon Estuary. The region has undergone a series of major economic changes since the mid-nineteenth century. These shifts have left their mark on the physical environment of the city. Thanks to the demands of timber camp owners, piles of stray *oukoumé* logs more than twelve feet long lie strewn along Libreville's beaches. European enterprises, besides leaving their debris on the shore, also influenced what and how townspeople ate as well as how rural people farmed, fished, and sold food. So did earlier visits by Europeans seeking slaves for the Americas, because inhabitants of the Gabon Estuary had sold captives to passing vessels on and off since the sixteenth century.

### Food Supply and City Struggles

“Each alimentary custom makes up a miniscule crossroads of histories,” Michel

de Certeau and Luce Giard have noted, in which various levels of historical change make themselves felt in a repertoire of daily practices.<sup>7</sup> While changes in eating and food supply in Libreville took place in a context radically different than the French setting of de Certeau and Giard, their emphasis on the creativity of individuals knowledgeable in the science of “doing-cooking” fits well into African cities. The same maneuvering and borrowing took place in African city kitchens.<sup>8</sup> However, as Elias Mandala has recently and rightly declared in a provocative essay, “to become an expert on food in the world’s most underdeveloped continent, one does not need to know much about food; one has to learn about such matters as the ‘political economy’ of its disappearance.”<sup>9</sup> Few scholars of Africa have tried to examine foodways and food supply except in times of crisis.<sup>10</sup>

A calamity of consumption striking some residents of Gabon has attracted much public attention in America and Europe in the last decade, but its victims are not human. Ecologist J. Michael Fay and his sponsors in *National Geographic* have celebrated Fay as a heroic ecologist marching through “untamed” Gabon trying to stop the wholesale slaughter of animals.<sup>11</sup> Journalist Derek Peterson’s exposé *Eating Apes* dissects the connections between the ravenous hunger of timber camp workers for meat, the insouciance of Africans to the plight of endangered species, and the complicity he feels some conservation programs have in feeding the continued slaughter of animals. His trip to Gabon included a stop at the fly-ridden stalls of the Lalala market of Libreville, where market women hawked elephant trunks and gorilla hands. Peterson advocates outside interference—to save the apes, one must be willing to criticize and change African cultural practices. His diagnosis of the disaster is not one that excuses Africans or Europeans but rather, in his words, “a Western capitalized exploitation culture that has lately careened in total collision with a traditional African hunting culture.”<sup>12</sup>

Peterson must be lauded for his audacity, but his train wreck analogy, no matter how appealing it may be to environmentalists, does not explain how Gabonese people eat as they do today. One must look at an issue that rarely surfaces in popular discussions of animals and Gabon: colonialism. This book is an exploration of how European and African eating habits intersected and borrowed from one another. Changing food habits in Libreville epitomize a dramatic process whereby the expansion of the world economy transformed tastes in Africa in the last two centuries. From Dakar to Tonga, food tastes

have been radically altered due to shifts in economic production and cultural flows.<sup>13</sup> Besides the introduction of new ingredients to diets, the expanded role of food as a commodity and the uneven development of wage labor have changed what and how people eat. Such statements are hardly news for scholars interested in the impact of colonialism in Africa. Jack Goody, in his overview of changing food tastes in Ghana, has briefly explored the impact of industrial mass-produced imports on eating habits.<sup>14</sup> Jane Guyer noted the flexibility and fluidity of food supply organization in Yaoundé, far from it being a static system, producers and the colonial state created a series of contested configurations to ensure profits for farmers and food for urban workers.<sup>15</sup> On a more pessimistic note, Richard Franke, among others, presents the violence and exploitation of colonial rule as the root cause of famines and malnutrition in the Third World.<sup>16</sup>

The story of how Libreville residents obtained food and the effects of French governance on their daily struggles to feed themselves offer insights on the colonial urban experience in Africa. This study, through the subject of food, examines a question central to recent historiography of colonial Africa: how and why did colonized people come to consume European goods and incorporate foreign consumption patterns into their own lives? This question elicits a variety of answers particularly in our present age of genetically modified foods and fast food restaurants mushrooming across the globe. One possible response is the replacement of local culinary styles by the inexorable spread of American or European imports. Half a century ago, some Europeans predicted the death of local practices in Africa under the onslaught of modernity. Novelist Doris Lessing, in a grotesque turn of parody, captures such rhetoric in a conversation between white Communists lolling in a Rhodesian bar during World War II. "I predict," one of her characters declares as he mourns the supposed demise of the local countryside, "that in fifty years all this fine country we see stretching before us . . . will be covered by semi-detached houses filled with well-clothed black workers."<sup>17</sup> Lessing's cocktail-swilling revolutionary does not bother to speculate on what these African laborers might eat, but one might suspect kidneys and shepherd's pie rather than mealie meal would grace their tables.

Obviously such a future has not come to pass. In Gabon, manioc and plantains rather than French fries and beef remain common parts of meals. Instead of the elimination of local consumption practices, a messy process of appro-

priation and borrowing took place among African communities and fractured European groups in eating styles, dress, and drinking. While such complexity does not lend itself to simple models that extol European over supposedly backward African forms of consumption, or heroic consumers fighting Western cultural imperialism, the manifold ways Africans consumed commodities have inspired scholars in the last decade to reexamine the colonial encounter.<sup>18</sup> A shift in Africanist research during the last decade has produced works considering various material practices such as alcohol consumption, health and medicine, dress, and hygiene as aspects of mediated cultural contact and divisions under European administration.<sup>19</sup> Consumption of European clothes and the adoption of European hygiene patterns did not necessarily mean a surrender of “African” cultural practices. Instead Africans strove to remake identities and to challenge binary oppositions favored by European rulers. These works put into question narrow boundaries and rigid divisions between supposedly separate African and European cultural practices.<sup>20</sup>

Food has not received much attention in this genre of literature, although a few scholars have explored food consumption as a cultural practice that reveals a wide breadth of contested social meanings.<sup>21</sup> The attention shown by American and European cultural critics exploring gender roles, class anxieties, and ethnic identities articulated in food preparation and consumption has not been shared by Africanists.<sup>22</sup> An older generation of scholarship, firmly tied to underdevelopment theory, paid more attention to food supply, particularly in areas where famines repeatedly devastated rural communities. Challenging paradigms that blamed African agricultural techniques and environmental factors as the cause of food shortages, Michael Watts and Mike Davis have pointed out the important role of cash crops, capitalist development, and wage labor demands in hindering food production and the ability of workers to buy their sustenance.<sup>23</sup> Economist Amartya Sen’s argument that rather than absolute want, the inability of communities to exchange labor or money to obtain food led to starvation among certain groups has informed researched on African famines.<sup>24</sup> Historians have traced the impact of wage labor and increased social stratification on food supply and how this led to famine among impoverished groups.<sup>25</sup> Recent work by Susanne Friedberg and Karola Elwert-Kretschmer has started to move beyond the paradigm of want in examining the rise of imported foods in West African cities.<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately Karen Coen Flynn and Elias Mandala’s major new contributions to understanding hunger and food

in Africa were published after I finished this manuscript, but their outstanding work speaks to how food consumption offers tremendous possibilities for scholars scrutinizing African societies.<sup>27</sup>

This study seeks to tie together issues of cultural and economic change related to food consumption. The task is not easy. Cameroonian historian Achille Mbembe has criticized proponents of “negotiated colonialism” for overemphasizing the prowess of colonial subjects in challenging oppressive policies fostered by European rulers.<sup>28</sup> Mbembe suggests that historians may need to review their understanding of colonial domination; rather than positing the colonial state as “weak,” he contends that force and indoctrination did play a major role in shaping African societies. Ironically, this attitude fits well with earlier works on food supply that tend to focus on the imposition of capitalist demands and European political power. Rather than relegating Africans simply to the status of victims of colonial force and duplicity, though, historians might use Mbembe’s intervention to reexamine negotiation more carefully.

Recent approaches that highlight the negotiation of cultural terms and older considerations of colonial poverty are together needed to grasp the causes of Libreville’s dependence on foreign foods and the low productivity of Estuary agriculture. An angry Mpongwe man in the 1880s penned the title of this book, asserting that he had the right to eat the same foods and at the same prices as his American missionary employers. His ordinary struggle is part of the development of tastes that takes center stage here. The wealthy disdained agriculture out of concern for social status; the very poor increasingly could not harness the labor and land necessary to feed themselves. Performances of identity through consumption and the changing economy led to the evolution of the culinary repertoire of the city. In particular the advantages of some Libreville townspeople over rural producers in shaping policies and organizing food supply gives an example of negotiation in which cultural capital led to material benefits for an urban minority. During repeated changes in politics and the economy, townspeople managed to protect their lifestyle by ensuring their access to food.

Libreville residents used strategies to protect food entitlement for material and cultural motivations. Historian Sara Berry has illustrated the complicated nature of struggles to gain access to labor, land, and markets in various parts of colonial Africa. I concur with her that “culture, power and material resources are of equal importance, acting in mutually constructive ways to shape the course

of economic and social change.”<sup>29</sup> Food consumption proved to be another area in which various African rural and urban groups along with European companies and the colonial state vied for favorable terms. While officials had more force at their disposal to influence these bargains, townspeople used creative strategies to sway administrators. Food supply required many compromises. Although occasionally different members of these networks found themselves at cross purposes, participants in food supply networks negotiated to make compromises that do not fit into simple divisions of resistance and collaboration. Steven Kaplan, a historian of Parisian food supply, has made a statement that can apply to African cities as well as their European counterparts: “Far from articulating a steep hierarchy of rigorously discrete and unbridgeable strata, [the supply of bread to Paris] forged curious bonds of mutual dependence even as it reinforced cleavages within the structure.”<sup>30</sup>

Mbembe reminds us of the unequal terms of negotiation, in which some Africans could bargain with foreign authorities much more effectively than others could. Townspeople in Libreville proved far more capable of safeguarding their interests than did rural farmers and fishermen. Libreville residents managed to avoid farming and fishing despite radically changing economic and social conditions. However, such a victory did not always constitute a heroic example of “resistance.” As the storied careers of Omar Bongo and his predecessor Léon Mba demonstrate, the skill with which some Gabonese dealt with colonial officials and private companies did not always result in challenges to European authority. Furthermore, decisions made by the colonial government and urban Africans also hampered agricultural production. While the discovery of oil in the 1950s has been blamed for Gabon’s food crises and high cost of living, this study delineates a long heritage of agricultural neglect and outright incompetence by the French colonial state. The exorbitant cost of daily life in Libreville is in large part a testament to colonial policies and bargains made between a small class of urban Africans and the French government. And as the blackened carcasses of monkeys and antelope on sale in Libreville today suggest, humans are not the only victims of this heritage.

Diana Wylie rightly remarks that the richness of food as a subject of historical inquiry is problematic for historians in need of clearly defined subjects.<sup>31</sup> Research possibilities may be endless, but the patience of readers is not boundless. I therefore exclude certain issues often brought up with food. Unlike in British colonies, French agricultural experts did little to construct

notions of malnutrition and hunger.<sup>32</sup> While I decipher some social meanings broadly articulated in food consumption related to race and status, close readings of food preparation and eating as means of exploring cultural logics or constructions of gender are not on the table.<sup>33</sup> One must search elsewhere for African equivalents of Pierre Bourdieu's attempt to link class attitudes closely with food consumption.<sup>34</sup> Neither is this study a comprehensive examination of changing food patterns throughout Gabon. Although I laud efforts to construct national and regional histories of food and manners in the tradition of Ferdinand Braudel, I can make no claim of comprehensive overviews in the present work.<sup>35</sup> All these subjects deserve attention, but my framework does not permit it here.

Another issue worthy of more attention than I can supply is a thorough review of environmental factors that may have hindered agriculture in the Estuary region. Libreville developed as an enclave dependent for its food supply on a large region rather than its immediate surroundings. How much did ecological issues play a role in hindering food production? To my knowledge practically no work has examined ecological issues linked to food supply in the Estuary despite a wealth of ecological research in rainforest regions in the Gabonese interior. While chapter 2 gives a basic overview of climate and topography of the region, I recognize the possibility that environmental factors may have shaped the food supply question more dramatically than this work suggests.

With this litany of caveats noted, the central focus of this study is the slow evolution of changing food consumption and supply patterns in colonial Libreville. Chapter 1 is a general review of Libreville history from its beginnings as an Atlantic entrepôt through its slow growth in the colonial era. The social and environmental context of food consumption in the age of Atlantic slavery is the subject of chapter 2. Free people, from hosting European slave traders with lavish meals to worrying about what slaves might have slipped into their meals, linked eating and farming to the institution of slavery. Food production, especially agriculture, came to be seen as labor fit only for slaves and free women, and the growth of a wage economy meant that prosperous townspeople had more lucrative options than mere farming could allow.

Chapter 3 examines how Libreville culinary and consumption patterns altered as French forces invaded much of Central Africa in the age of high imperialism between 1880 and 1914. The late nineteenth century brought a new set of players to the complicated trade and agricultural networks of the Gabon Estuary.

The arrival of Fang-speaking clans and waves of foreign immigrants, ranging from unlucky Vietnamese convicts to Liberian manual laborers, brought new foods and new demands on Libreville's food supply. Townspeople adapted to the situation in ways that furthered the development of an urban lifestyle keeping respectable people away from long hours spent cultivating, hunting, or catching food. While Fang villages managed to sate Libreville's appetite until 1914, World War I and its immediate aftermath shook Gabon to its foundations. Famine and shortages tore apart Estuary villages and helped fuel an urban protest movement led by Libreville residents to fight the efforts of colonial officials and timber companies to monopolize control over the town's food supply. Chapter 4 scrutinizes the environmental and political calamities that rural producers endured and the relative success of urban residents in guarding their entitlements. Townspeople demonstrated their versatility by employing disparate means, from intimidating Africans with supernatural talismans to cajoling French human rights organizations, to protect their access to food from state interference.

The next three chapters address how townspeople interacted with goods, programs, and practices brought by Europeans and Americans into the Gabon Estuary. Chapter 5 explores how foreign foods made their way into Libreville stomachs. The inadequacy of the town's local sources of food made rations an important part of diets in the Gabon Estuary region and a cause of strife between Africans and Europeans struggling to define the worth of goods and labor. Bread, rice, canned goods, and beef also became part of a broad effort by missionaries and employers to remake Libreville society by changing the parameters of daily life. Technological and communications changes allowed foreign foods by the mid-twentieth century to become an integral part of Libreville meals.

Chapter 6 discusses urban growth and colonial policies between the Great Depression and independence. Officials might repeatedly curse the supposed laziness of Africans in the Gabon Estuary, but state interventions in local society did little to encourage agriculture or to enable farmers. State programs neglected to alleviate Libreville's position, isolated from the rest of the colony, and rarely allowed farmers from more productive parts of Gabon to ship food to Libreville. Experts on Gabon today bemoan how little Gabonese bureaucrats have done to aid farmers, to the point that one analyst has argued: "Gabon's development strategy in recent decades therefore looks in many ways like a sophisticated conspiracy against agriculture"; but French agricultural poli-

cies were rife with mismanagement.<sup>36</sup> As is the case today, imports proved to be an easier solution than radical methods to assist food production. Finally, the roots of the Gabonese state's tepid interest in closing the bush meat supply came in the twilight of empire, as politicians and villagers alike asserted their rights to guns and game.

Chapter 7 is an overview of European food consumption patterns in Libreville during the colonial period; the present-day segregation of town cuisine into "European" and "African" categories is a fairly recent development. Although nineteenth-century Western residents of the town adopted local eating habits and social beliefs associated with food consumption, as revealed in poison fears and rumors, political and technological advances in the colonial state and the world economy allowed Europeans to live a more segregated lifestyle. Foreign eating patterns were a barometer of racial identities and colonial power that provide a way to chart the relative strengths and weaknesses of Europeans asserting their cultural superiority over others in town.

One of my goals is to open the door to further work on food consumption as a means of reviewing the impact of colonialism on everyday life in a colonial context. It is hard to imagine a more personal or vital practice than eating, yet scholars of Africa have been slow to grasp the opportunities for looking at food as a nexus of race, gender, class, and economic transformations. Another motivation is far more mundane. From my initial stay in Libreville in 1998 through my last visit in 2004, friends and strangers alike lamented the high prices that burdened them in the city. I only hope that my work can illuminate discussion on Libreville's high cost of living, even if it offers no clear solutions.