The Power of Rejection

Colonial Practices of Not-eating in Sub-Saharan Africa

This paper analyses, reconstructs, and presents how food and dining cultures are linked to the establishment, implementation, and legacies of power within a colonial setting. Food cultures were inherent to imperial endeavours and intricately connected to white habits of not-eating. Colonial empires were sites that did not only see colonisers adapt to local cuisines – they resembled culinary playgrounds marked by imbalanced power relations that both propelled foreign foods into Europe and caused racially biased rejections of the same.

By juxtaposing white food and dining cultures with those of sub-Saharan Africa the aim is to show how rejecting indigenous foods and dishes represented European political and cultural elitism within the colonies. Culinary rejection was applied as a means of segregation. Food played an integral part of (re-)enforcing whiteness amongst Europeans in Africa and the exclusion of indigenous foods was more than a matter of likes and dislikes.

Food history and whiteness studies offer a marginalised but vital angle on everyday colonial lives: They highlight the intimate yet separate spheres of black and white in Africa where colonisers and colonised shared many intimate spaces, yet white colonial identities were nurtured by artificially separating from the colonised during meal times.

The paper’s point of departure are visual and written ego-documents by Belgian, German, and Swedish men and women who whilst in Central Africa practiced a supposedly more civilised dining culture and turned eating into a daily renewed status symbol. By combining whiteness studies with food, colonial, and visual history I provide a more refined understanding of imperial realities as practised by European colonisers in Africa and show that food history is intrinsically tied to the research on colonial identities and post-colonial theories.