The Journey of Saltfish across the Atlantic to the West Indies and its Movement through the Culinary Landscape of Trinidad and Tobago

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Abstract: The movement of food is intimately linked to humans; foodways would not be the phenomena that they are if this were not so. In the first instance there is the transfer of food from one geographic location to another, which is almost always directly correlated to human migration. Particular to the physical movement of food, this paper highlights the journey of saltfish across the Atlantic to the West Indies, specific to its introduction to the African enslaved population during colonial rule. Following the bodily movement of an item of food, there is its ideological journey through varying communal, cultural and socio-economic spaces and groups. In this regard, focus is given to colonial ideologies and the ways in which these affected the post-colonial attitudes toward, and consumption patterns of saltfish. Further to this, the paper will examine the changes in attitudes, ideologies and socio-economics which have served to propel saltfish upward through class groups. Wherein, saltfish has been re-branded to the point where it is virtually inaccessible to that group to which it was first aligned.

A somewhat paradoxical reality of the human condition is that it is subject to two constants; change and movement. And these phenomena, be they incremental or immediate, forced, restricted or free, form an integral part of our lives, and as just as they act upon us, so too are they influenced and acted upon by social beings with and without agency. Tracing the movement of humans through particular time periods and across specific regions,—whether that movement be for purposes of survival, trade, exploration or exploitation—allows us to examine the effect we have upon what is considered edible, and what is deemed food. Additionally, it offers insight into the ways in which humans within a given context determine who consumes what is deemed food and what is considered as simply edible.

It is in regard to these questions that consideration is given to the impetus behind the proliferation of saltfish across the Atlantic and into the colonies of the "New World" specifically the West Indies. Consideration is also given to the ways in which saltfish subsequently settled and resettled within the Trinbagonian foodscape, where it has undergone a series of rebranding, in addition to accompanying moves through social groups. That is to say, during colonial enslavement saltfish was branded as "slave" food, as the enslaved were the main consumers of saltfish at the time. Following this, during the postcolonial period this stigmatization lingered, however, without an enslaved population to which saltfish could be associated; saltfish was rebranded as "poor people" food.

However, as humans go, so too goes food, and contemporary food culture and economics have in no short form contributed to a third rebranding of saltfish; removing it from the "poor people" and re-categorizing it as a "traditional" food. Consequently, saltfish, a food grudgingly fed to the enslaved, now offers a destigmatized consumption experience. One of the effects of this is the reduction of access to those people to whom it was originally associated.

King Cod

The Atlantic Cod is an omnivorous, hardy and fecund, fish impervious to disease and cold. It is a fish that is built to survive. The Atlantic Cod or Gadus Morhua is contemporarily located within the class of fish known as "whitefish", a fisheries term for several species of demersal fish with fins. These fish live and feed in the demersal zone, that is, the sea floor or lake bed; in short, they are bottom feeders. The bottom feeding Gadus Morhua is a greedy fish that will eat anything. It can be found in the icy waters of the North Atlantic, from Cape Hatteras, North Carolina to Greenland, and from Iceland to the Barents Sea. Cod are often large and heavy and measure up to 1.2m or 4ft long and can weigh as much as 40 kg or approximately 88lbs (Lee 2019). It has a lifespan of approximately twenty years but is extremely easy to catch and once caught they can simply be hauled up as the cod does not fight for its freedom.

The fat and oil content of demersal fish is very low, ranging from one to four percent (1–4%). The Atlantic Cod has virtually no fat, clocking in at about 0.3%. With its dense, flaky white flesh, which consists of more than 80% water, the cod does however have an unusually high protein content for a fish, measuring more than eighteen percent (18%). Cod is an ideal fish in more ways than one, albeit a fish that tastes adequate at best, bland at worst in its fresh state. But one can argue that is it the cod's bland taste quality that lends itself to the elevation in taste that occurs when it is it salted. The process of drying evaporates a significant quantity of the cod's water content, leaving behind a concentrated protein product—dried cod presents with almost eighty percent (80%) protein, making it a veritable superfood (Lee 2019).

The preparation of *quality* salted cod for consumption is relatively simple as the bones are easy to separate from the flesh, making preparation and consumption almost effortless. Thus, it was a food appropriate for long journeys and less than stellar kitchens. These factors contributed meaningfully to the prolific manner in which salted cod moved across the globe. Noteworthy is the fact that as voraciously as the cod eats, so too has it been eaten, as there stands not a single food culture, group or society into which salted cod has been introduced that has rejected it or failed to iconize it in some way. From Jack Agüeros' poem, *Psalm for Bacalao*, to the Mighty Sparrow's calypso, *Saltfish*, salted cod has been venerated in one form or another.

Fish Tales and Folk Tales: The Basques

It goes without saying that there are many other groups and cultures that feature more prominently in regard to the movement of saltfish than the Basques. There are the Greeks, the Portuguese, the British, even the Canadians and Americans, to name a few. However, the Basques are a meaningful starting point for a number of reasons. First and most pointedly is the fact that they facilitated and enabled the physical moment of the harbinger of the prolific trade in humans across the Atlantic and their eventual enslavement in West Indian colonies; Christopher Columbus. In addition to having built the ships for Columbus, it is said the Basques, a seafaring, cod loving people who were among some of the first to reach the Western Hemisphere, also sailed with him into this "New World."

Second, the Basques' ingenious decision to add salt to the cure; such a simple ingredient, such a simple act, yet so consequential. Gastronomically, the addition of salt to the cure sublimely transforms the G*adus Morhua;* strategically, it greatly improved upon its seafaring capabilities, allowing it to remain unspoilt for longer, more extended journeys. Therefore, we begin with the Basques and a legend staring a medieval fisherman, a charismatic family, and an articulate fish. The story, *The Fisherman and His Sons* begins,

> Like many others in the world, there was a fisherman who lived with his wife. One day he was fishing and caught a fine fish—at that time all the animals and everything used to speak—and the fish said to him, 'Spare my life! Spare my life! I will give you all that you shall desire.' (Webster 2011)

The folktale, which can be found in the short story anthology, *Basques Legends*, has obviously been orated numerous times over the years and survived numerous generations. It goes on to tell the reader about the inherent wisdom of taking advice from and being kindly to fish and demonstrates the prominence cod would come to play in the Basques identity. Its infinite beauty is the fact that it centers within this identity a fish never found in Basques or even Spanish waters.

The Basques, who are much characterized by their language, are a South-western European group Indigenous to the region between France and Spain, near the Pyrenees Mountains and the Bay of Biscay. They straddle parts of north-central Spain and south-western France in an eponymously named region called Basques Country or *Euskal Herria;* they are "a people between people" (Basque Museum & Cultural Center 2018). It is this sentiment, a people between people, which mirrors so closely the postcolonial experience of many West Indians that influenced the decision to begin the journey of saltfish across the seas with the Basques.

It is true that the Basques were not the first to pull cod out the waters. That honor belongs to the Vikings, who centuries earlier had done so to fill their ship's stores with cod cured via a process of air drying for their travels from Norway to Iceland to Greenland and Canada. Indications of the Vikings' route is realised through the littering of cod tales they left behind, "[…] Egil's Saga […] reports that in 875, Thorfold Kveldufsson brought a supply of stockfish to Iceland from Heldeland in central Norway. It is also said that Leif Erikson took a supply with him to Newfoundland in c.1001" (Lee 2019). Notwithstanding the all-encompassing spread of the Vikings, the Basques, who could travel even farther still had the upper hand, in that, the Basques had salt (Kurlansky 1997).

The paths of the Basques and the Vikings crossed at the Adour River, and it was during that encounter that a cultural exchange occurred; an exchange that would occasion the proliferation of both the process of salting the cure, and salted cod itself across the seas. For the Vikings "salting of meat was a difficult form of preservation due to the fact that there were no natural occurrences of salt in Viking lands" (Glendalough 2008). Consequently, the Basque salt-based curing technique offered the Vikings a more resilient product. Further to this, and thanks to the Basques, this salt curing practice "was soon introduced to other seafaring peoples throughout Europe, including the English, the Portuguese and the Neapolitans" (Lee 2019).

The Basques, armed with this curing method and Viking shipbuilding techniques, became veritable *kings* of the trade in cod. As a consequence, by the year 1000, they had greatly expanded their international reach and markets for salted cod, stretching as far from the cod's original northern habitat as possible all the way to Newfoundland. Newfoundland, one of the most easterly provinces of Canada, was the location of a fertile fishing source. However, it was not until the arrival of Jacques Cartier and John Cabot, who each claimed parts of Newfoundland for France and England respectfully, that anyone was aware of how embedded the Basques were into the environment.

> […] Cabot found land, […]. It was a vast rocky coastline that was ideal for salting and drying fish, by a sea that was teeming with cod. Cabot reported on the cod as evidence of the wealth of this new land […]. Thirty-seven years later, Jacques Cartier arrived, […] on the Gaspe′ Peninsula, […]. He also noted the presence of 1,000 Basques fishing vessels. But the Basques, wanting to keep a good secret, had never claimed it for anyone. (Kurlansky 1997)

The Basques, who were leaders in the cod trade by this time, were shown to be exceptionally savvy by these accounts; they knew how to, and which parts of a good thing to keep secret. “The Basques didn’t go around planting flags. They just made money and weren’t really interested in anything else.” (Kurlansky 1997)

Edible but Not Food: Saltfish as “Slave Food”

There are many things within the scope of the earth’s flora and fauna that are edible. As we move across the earth’s surface encountering these things we humans transform and move them out of the category of edible, to that of food. Food has a symbolic power capable of defining both the collective and the individual, of dividing or linking closely together (R. Kenji Tierney and Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney 2012). For each culture, and those groups existing within that culture, there are often formulated historically, although these may change over time, that govern the ways in which categories of inclusion and exclusion are created around the idea of what can, is, and should be considered food.

These ideologies—embedded with assumptions based on associations made between the eater and what is to be eaten—serve to move a *thing* from being viewed as just edible to being seen as acceptable and worthy of being eaten, thereby being recognised as food. Within this paradigm, meaning is allocated, lines are drawn, groups are separated groups and status is established. In the case of saltfish this was achieved through the use of grades of quality. Though saltfish grades may have originally been established for economic purposes, they would eventually come to be used to delineate the classes of persons who consumed the very same thing. Higher grades were denoted food while lower grades were simply edible.

To demonstrate this point, the grades of saltfish were as follows; the first and highest grade of saltfish was known as “merchantable.” This grade of saltfish was known for its thick flesh which was yellow or golden in color. It was lightly salted and therefore not too dry. This grade was deemed perfect for the “delicate” palates of the European market. The merchantable grade was further separated into two categories: Merchantable Prime, which was the highest quality and Merchantable Number Two (Higgins 2007; Newfoundland & Labrador Heritage 1997).

After this was the second-best grade of saltfish known as “Madeira.” This saltfish grade offered a saltfish with much thinner flesh than the merchantable grade, and of course of a lesser quality. This grade was found to be suitable for the Brazil market. The final and lowest grade of saltfish was called “West India,” as this was its principal market. This grade of saltfish was particularly dry, heavily salted and tough, and often had poor coloring. West India grade comprised of broken discards from poorly cured saltfish and other throwaway material (Collier 2011; Newfoundland & Labrador Heritage 1997), essentially offal, edible but not considered food.

Sugar is Sweet, but Salt is Sweeter

The capitalist enterprise that was colonial enslavement is said to have transformed saltfish from a “valuable commodity to an economic sensation” (Kurlansky 1997). This is due in large part to the fact that the colonial system in the West Indies produced “almost no food” (ibid); aside from housing, land was reserved for the production of economic goods. Allocating land for the express purpose of feeding the forced labour was simply not an option or consideration. Kurlansky details this as follows:

> To keep working under the tropical sun, the slaves needed salt and protein. But plantation owners did not want to waste any valuable sugar planting space on growing food for the hundreds of thousands of Africans who were being brought to each small Caribbean island. The Caribbean produced almost no food. At first [the enslaved] were fed salted beef from England, but New England colonies soon saw the opportunity for salt cod as cheap, salted nutrition.
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> For salt cod merchants, the great advantage of this new trade was that it was a low-end market. Cured cod can be a very demanding product. Badly split fish, the wrong weather conditions during drying, too much salt, too little salt, bad handling—a long list of factors resulted in fish that was not acceptable to the discerning Mediterranean market. The West Indies presented a growing market for the rejects, for anything that was cheap. In fact, West India was the commercial name for the lowest quality salt cod. (80–81)

This is an excellent example of ways in which ideology, class and economics intersect with the movement of food. The enslaved had to be fed, and this had to be achieved while turning a profit. This required economic dexterity and cunning, which resulted in, and facilitated the triangular movement of food and humans “linking cod to enslavement” (Kennedy 2020). The British West Indies, one of the principal markets outside of Europe for Newfoundland saltfish exporters, at the time comprised of Barbados, British Guiana, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and Trinidad. Together these islands accounted for imports of saltfish in quantities ranging from 12,700,000 kg to 17,600,000 kg per annum over the period 1810 – 1833 (Collier 2011).

It is understood that this figure for the total demand for saltfish was not simply a matter of feeding the enslaved, as most colonials also had a taste for salted cod, albeit of a higher grade and quality. However, as a consequence of the prominence of the purpose of the import, specifically the West India grade – that is feeding the enslaved – this rich protein source, venerated in European spaces, came to be viewed in the colonies of the West Indies as “slave” food.

Salted, Stinky, Sweet

As a child nothing made more sense than getting into the shopping mother had done on a Saturday morning. Saturday was market day; the day to replenish the fresh produce, meat, fish, ground provisions and cured meats that would be consumed over the coming week. The market bags left on the kitchen floor were a chorus of smells, and the wonderful stink of the saltfish sang some of the highest notes. Its siren song tempted, "unwrap me" it sang sweetly, and you would. You would then struggle to rip off a piece of the tough cure. And having succeeded, you would jab it into your mouth, and immediately fall to your doom. I am you; and I fell for it every Saturday, and every time, I would all but pass out from the assault of the copious amount of salt that rested like clusters of diamonds on the paltry sliver of saltfish my magnificent efforts had won me. I knew it wasn't a good idea, I knew that it would be the same excessively salty taste every time. It did not matter; because that was it, that was the magic, that the salty sweetness would be the same each and every time.

Notwithstanding the process of creolisation, much of the food culture within the Caribbean region came along with the historical experience of this forced movement of humans (Morgan 2021). As mentioned, cod in its fresh state is pleasant enough; however, it is the addition of salt that transformed it from a bland edible fish to an exceptional food. To be fully enjoyed however, saltfish must first be restored, and once this has been properly done through a process of soaking and boiling or the application of hot water, it presents a "flaky flesh that is far superior and preferred to other protein sources" (Kurlansky 1997).

As such, saltfish stands as the centerpiece of many national and emotionally significant dishes of West Indian countries, and holds a significant place in the food memories of many. For Jamaica *ackee* and *saltfish* as their national meal; for Grenada fish cakes and 'oo-tea for breakfast on Christmas morning. "For Vincentians saltfish cakes and cod fish salad hits the spot. For St. Lucians saltfish accra is good anytime. For Barbados cou-cou and saltfish, their national dish, is good to the last drop" *(Philadelphia Tribune 2018)*. For Trinidad and Tobago, it is *bake* and *buljol* with a hot cup of cocoa on a rainy morning in Trinidad and Tobago; saltfish reigns supreme.

However, the consumption of saltfish was for a long time relegated to an extremely private affair, scorned in public as much as it was loved in private. To eat it or be connected to it in any way was to be associated with a certain economic class; a fate to be avoided at all costs. As a result, prior to the late 90s early 2000s saltfish was for the most part, available only in the established open air markets, a space typically the province of lower economic groups. In this way the categorization of saltfish as "poor people food" was denoted by association with a specific space.

Today, saltfish can be accessed in one of two spaces; first, it remains in the established open-air markets, which includes meat shops and small fruit and ground provision vendors. Second, it can be purchased in supermarkets and supermarket type stores which includes membership shopping stores like PriceSmart (Sam's Club), and small grocery stores. As is obvious, these spaces are vastly dissimilar, as are the grades of saltfish on offer in each space.

The saltfish offered in the supermarkets and the markets are imported from Canada or the United States of America. The grade of saltfish offered in the supermarket resembles the description given for the merchantable grade of saltfish; the water content is higher, and it is only lightly salted. The main difference between the merchantable traded during colonial periods and the contemporary supermarket saltfish is the colour, in that the latter is strikingly white. Supermarket saltfish also offers options, bone-in or boneless, with or without skin, and most recently pre-shredded. The delicate nature of the supermarket saltfish also makes preparation a much less labour intensive process, unlike the saltfish offered in the open-air markets.

Another point of departure between the saltfish offered in these divergent spaces is packaging. Supermarket saltfish is prepackaged in branded clear plastic packaging, whereas, saltfish on offer at the market has no packaging at all. Older market vendors may still brandish wooden saltfish boxes, but these are only for display. Market saltfish usually sits strikingly naked, piled high in front of the vendor. There are rare instances of market grade saltfish being stocked in the supermarket. However, the stock is limited, and is usually "displayed" separate and apart from the more delicate saltfish described.

Despite the fact that the grade of salt-fish on offer in the open-air market today may be far improved from that of the West India grade of the colonial period, it in no way matches the perfectly packaged Pollock offered in supermarkets. Notably, as a consequence of overfishing of cod, saltfish is made using mostly Pollock, with shark also being substituted as the fish that has been salted. Taking all of these factors into consideration, it is interesting that the retail prices of saltfish in both spaces are almost identically expensive. Saltfish prices can range anywhere from $25.00 to $40.00TT (GBP2.75–4.39; USD3.71–5.93) for weights from as little as 400 grams up to a 450 grams. To some this may not seem economically devastating or prohibitive. However, when thought is given to the fact that restored saltfish is usually significantly reduced as a consequence of the removal of waste such as bones, skin and such, it becomes apparent that saltfish is fast becoming an out of reach delicacy.

In addition to the economic push factors that the appearance of saltfish in supermarkets has had on its price, other influences have further propelled it out of the reach of lower economic groups. First, saltfish based dishes have become fashionable. As local foodie culture has embarked upon a re-discovery of the "traditional", saltfish has been ideologically rebranded and now forms a significant part of an *authentic* Trinbagonian food identity. Now, saltfish recipes can be found in the local culinary bible the *Naparima Girls Cookbook;* "how-to" YouTube foodie videos abound, and family recipes are shared online. The place of saltfish as an integral part of Trinbagonian culinary identity has been solidified.

Second, and in regard to spatial association, saltfish has been ideologically re-moved from the markets and re-located to the supermarkets, spaces of convenience and acceptability. This move into "acceptable spaces" has transformed saltfish from being just edible to now being acceptable and accepted as food. In combination, these allow for a wider range of individuals and groups to consume saltfish, easily, freely, proudly even, without the stigma of its post-emancipation association with "poor people."

From Edible Thing to Food

Historically, enslaved populations have more often than not, taken the offal with which they were fed and elevated it to culinary sensations. Within the context of Trinidad and Tobago, the food culture is rife with instances of these. Take for example souse, a highly seasoned light broth served cold. It's made using one of a variety of the following offal type base ingredients: pig's feet, cow's heel, chicken feet, or cow's skin. Some of these ingredients also form the base of soups upon which many an eatery has built its success; like going to market, Saturdays are for soups.

Once an edible thing has been in this way rebranded, reshaped and relocated to the category of food, they are almost always—incrementally or instantly—re-moved from the reach of the initial consumer of that thing. The symbolism of the edible thing is reimagined and new ideologies are presented, it is no longer "your thing" it is now "our food". Today, saltfish no longer sings as loudly as it once smelled when purchased from the market. The once pungent odor that would alert all to the fact that it was being restored by boiling has been significantly reduced. Its beautifully fragrant, salty sweetness has been domesticated; it is after all, food now.

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