

Lack of Food Harms the Body; Lack of Food Harms the Soul

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I was less than one year old when I first participated in my culture. I did not attend any Vodou rituals or speak Kréyol particularly early. No—I started to eat solid food. For me and other Haitians (both living in the U.S. and Haiti), it is unbelievably challenging to hold on to the parts of our culture that are intangible. Like many deeply spiritual cultures, Haitian culture emphasizes a connection to the earth in a way that is unprecedented to the Westernized mind. One of the earliest cultural practices was subsistence farming; adults and children alike bathe in the rivers; even our creation story involves humans being crafted from clay and tasked with maintaining a balance between people and nature, according to Haitian journalist Vadim Dambreville. Even that has been stripped away—since the early 1900s, foreign occupation has harmed local ecosystems and, by extension, the Haitian spirit. Customs were lost, freedom was stifled, and Haiti’s attempt to hold onto true sovereignty failed. One of the precious few things Haitians are left with is food, but even that hardly holds true. In an era where, according to the World Food Programme, “Nearly 50 percent of Haiti’s population, or a record 4.97 million people, have food insecurity,” accessing food at all is a struggle, and it is ultimately even more challenging to access rich cultural foods. Lack of access to these cultural foods is a significant issue in the global south due to colonization and the subsequent era of neo-colonialism. While there are obvious physical consequences of food deprivation, the psychological difficulties and loss of cultural connection that accompany food insecurity cannot be understated. For Haitians, food justice means providing access to reliable, clean food through infrastructure development, sustainable farming practices, and education while also limiting foreign intervention unless it is explicitly requested.

To understand why food is especially crucial to practicing Haitian culture, one must first become familiar with Haitian history and one dish in particular: soup joumou. In a Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) video about soup joumou, host Tank Bell describes the Haitian revolution. She explains that in 1791, enslaved Africans in the French Colony of Saint Domingue rose up and led the world’s first successful slave revolt. These enslaved people finally gained freedom in 1803, marking January 1st, 1804, as Haitian Independence Day (Bell). Every year on this date, Haitians prepare soup joumou. According to Bell, “The beloved Haitian Independence Day soup is decadent by design. Its slow simmered broth is made with choice bits of marinated meat, a delicate squash puree, and finished with a mélange of spices and vegetables.” Because of how decadent the dish was, enslaved people were often required to make it for their masters before the revolution, but enslaved people themselves were banned from eating it. Now, eating soup joumou is not only an act of rebellion—it symbolizes hard-won freedom and represents Haiti’s rich heritage. Despite this, the Haitian Independence Day tradition can only continue to be implemented if solutions can be found for the issues that currently hinder food justice.

One of the most crucial aspects of food justice for Haitians is access to clean food and, by extension, clean drinking water, which Haiti sorely lacks. According to the World Health

Organization (WHO), a Haitian cholera outbreak began on Oct. 2, 2022, and is ongoing as of April 2024. Cholera is a water-borne illness that is often caused by poor wastewater management. It causes gastrointestinal symptoms that increase strain on water infrastructure, creating the perfect conditions to turn a few cases into a national emergency, which is precisely what has occurred in Haiti. Cholera also disproportionately affects the most vulnerable members of the population, such as children and the immunocompromised. According to NPR, Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital city, is one of the largest cities in the world without a central sewage system: a situation that I and many other people in the global north would find completely unimaginable. In fact, in all of Haiti, there is one wastewater treatment facility—an open-air sewage treatment plant an hour away from Port-au-Prince. Still, it does not supply clean drinking water; instead, it processes some human waste to prevent it from contaminating existing groundwater. These difficulties alone devastate any attempts to revitalize the Haitian food production industry. In a country where there is already an active cholera outbreak, contaminated drinking water results in contaminated crops, further contributing to the cholera epidemic. It also lowers the working adult population, further compounding existing issues. In the context of cultural foods, lack of access to clean drinking water means that what precious little water is given to civilians must be used to prepare foods that are the most nutrient-dense or filling. For example, many Haitians are forced to make *mayi moulen*, a glorified cornmeal dish, rather than foods promoting connectedness. It is the same brutal replacement that colonialism always perpetuates—sickness and death instead of culture and connection. Still, if the opening of one sewage treatment plant reduced the amount of water contamination in Haiti, constructing additional wastewater facilities that treat waste and produce clean water is likely the only reliable solution for this issue. While opening more water treatment facilities is crucial to combatting food injustice, it is only the starting point for such solutions.

Teaching Haitians farming practices is another critical step in bringing them the ability to prepare their cultural foods and eventually achieve food justice. One of the more specific resources that would be particularly beneficial to Haitian farmers would be the use of heritage seeds. Indigenous seeds, also known as heritage seeds, would be helpful because they require less complicated production chains, ultimately reducing overhead farming costs. According to Vandana Shiva, an Indian scholar and environmental activist, chemicals do not offer the solution. Shiva argues, “It was not that native crop varieties were low yielding inherently. The problem with indigenous seeds was that they could not be used to consume high doses of chemicals... The new seeds thus became central to breaking out of nature's limits and cycles” (28). Essentially, Shiva describes the “Green Revolution” of the 1900s, where seeds were genetically engineered to rely more on pesticides and chemical fertilizers. Nearly all seeds grown in the aftermath of the Green Revolution have been chemically engineered to a similar effect, producing the modern misconception that heritage or indigenous crops have inferior yields when, in all actuality, they require different practices. While learning older agriculture practices may be more complicated, it is necessary because Haiti lacks the money and infrastructure to manufacture the chemicals necessary for post-Green Revolution crops. Consistently importing those chemicals would also require money that the Haitian government does not have, ultimately recreating the cycle of dependency that Haitians must avoid in their struggle for liberation. While these farming practices will give Haiti greater sovereignty, they will also make traditional Haitian food significantly more accessible.

Currently, Haitian families who can afford to make soup joumou make enough to feed dozens because rampant poverty prevents many families from preparing the dish themselves (Bell). The inability of families to prepare the dish on their own is a particularly devastating blow in a culture so heavily steeped in pride. Some of my earliest childhood memories are lessons at my mother's feet, listening to her proud recollection of the history she had both learned and lived through. Often, these stories centered around feelings of reciprocity in the community. This experience is now denied to the many food-insecure Haitians who cannot provide the dish of freedom to their own families. More robust agricultural practices solve this problem entirely. Squash and spices, two key ingredients in soup joumou, come from crops well suited to the tropical climate of the island nation. Livestock can easily be raised on Haiti's vast, rolling hills, with a diet supplemented by locally grown grain. Essentially, with the assistance of improved agricultural techniques and a return to some ancient practices that require little initial investment, Haitians will not only be able to cling to survival; they will thrive by participating in their rich culinary heritage.

While improving access to clean food through improved water infrastructure and agricultural education are two obvious steps toward food justice in Haiti, one of the most controversial and potentially beneficial ways to improve food justice and independence is to stop foreign governments' attempts to prop up the Haitian economy. Currently, Haitians rely almost entirely on the international community, specifically the United States government, for their survival. This dependence has resulted in Haiti's status as a neo-colony, which, according to the Encyclopedia Britannica, is a politically independent nation directly controlled by a more powerful country (Roy & Labrador; Halperin). Haiti receives an overwhelming amount of aid from the United States and provides inexpensive luxury tropical goods and textiles in return ("FACT SHEET: U.S. Assistance to Haiti"). Dependence on the U.S. is detrimental to Haiti in a plethora of ways, one of which is described by Thomas Sowell, an African American economist who once said, "You're transferring the wealth that has been created, but you're not transferring the ability to create that wealth," in the context of foreign aid. Essentially, Sowell believes that providing foreign aid stunts the growth of economically disadvantaged countries because it throws temporary money at them rather than generating industry. When Haitians consume less rice, for example, they are able to produce enough through the agriculture sector, so no rice needs to be imported for day-to-day consumption. However, in recent years, as Haitians began to consume cheaper food products, and more Haitians shifted to producing cash crops such as luxury tropical fruits to meet the demand of global north countries, the import of rice skyrocketed ("Haiti — Country Commercial Guide"). If it was previously possible for Haitians to self-sufficiently produce food before, changing the economically stifling relationship between Haiti and the United States could make it possible again.

Still, a reasonably compelling argument exists that Haiti is inherently politically unstable and thus remains dependent on foreign aid. In the 220 years that Haiti has been a sovereign state, there has been rapid government turnover, and even the type of government has fluctuated a dizzying number of times ("List of Haitian Heads of State"). According to a New York Times article from March 2024, many of Haiti's current problems stem from gangs overtaking large swaths of the country (Robles). Considering these factors, it is not difficult to wonder if people place too much blame on other countries rather than focusing on internal conflicts—none of these points are necessarily incorrect. I cannot definitively say that Haiti would have been better off without U.S. influence, but history proves that U.S. intervention in other countries is nearly exclusively

detrimental. Vietnam, Cuba, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria—each country was not necessarily thriving before the U.S. intervened, but they certainly suffered in the aftermath.

Ultimately, through reclaiming food production, water sanitation, and sovereignty, Haitians can achieve not only food justice but justice overall. Food is integral to developing a sense of identity—our experiences with cultural foods predate memory. The experiences that we do remember are even more consequential. Some of my fondest childhood memories are centered around Haitian Independence Day celebrations with the rich, complex flavor of soup joumou or the slightly sweet, savory, herbal flavor of diri ak pwa and sos pwa over white rice—rice and beans and a unique Haitian blended bean soup full of rich seasoning and fresh coconut, respectively. I spent long hours in the kitchen, helping my mother cook these dishes. All of these simple staples have become luxuries for those members of the Haitian diaspora who still live in our ancestral homeland. Hunger is devastating to any population but as citizens of a country that has struggled at every point in its history, losing access to a dish representative of hope and freedom is an unimaginable burden. Restoring access to soup joumou and other cultural foods could restore some of this hope and help usher in a new era. There are still issues with plans to build a robust food industry in Haiti. However, if more people encourage non-government organizations to try to alleviate the injustices that Haitians suffer, these gaps can be bridged. Haitian history started with enslaved people overcoming insurmountable odds, prompting abolition movements across Latin America; if history repeats itself, Haiti can lead the way to liberation for Latin American neo-colonies.

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