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Understanding consumer behaviour: the social embeddedness of food practices

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Abstract

This paper aims at understanding the ways in which spatially connected socio-cultural and gendered practices of food production and preparation determine consumer behavior. Qualitative case studies were conducted in Nairobi and Berlin examining the change and persistence in consumption towards African indigenous vegetables and Swiss chard in urban areas. By focusing on those different varieties in distinct sociocultural and spatial settings differences, similarities and trends in consumer behavior are being identified. Finally, the article argues that consumption is deeply embedded in gender relations as well as individuals' ideas about sustainability, safety and quality of a product, which significantly affects everyday food practices.

Keywords: consumer behavior, sustainable livelihoods, food practices, gender relations, leafy vegetables

Introduction

In the course of globalization the role of local practices of food production and preparation gained increasingly importance. This trend of localization goes hand in hand with ‘moral’ shifts regarding lifestyle, household patterns, gender division of labor and consumers’ sense of social and ecological responsibility within society. These shifts are not only a result of exogenous factors such as food scandals that affect consumers’ perceptions and preferences, but rather an effect of endogenous societal changes that materialize in everyday practices of food production and preparation as well as eating. Referring to Polanyi’s concept of “social embeddedness” and Teherani-Krönner’s concept of “meal cultures” we argue that market trends and consumption habits are inextricably linked to gendered social arrangements and the moral context at local level.

The paper is divided into three parts: 1) The first part sets out the theoretical parameters for the analysis of consumption habits. Our aim is to contribute to economic analyses of consumer behavior by introducing concepts and approaches of other social sciences such as the sociology of markets, human ecology and feminist political economy. 2) The second part introduces two case studies which explore changes in the consumption of leafy vegetables in Berlin (Germany) and in Nairobi (Kenya) (in the case of Germany Swiss Chard and in the case of Kenya African indigenous vegetables such as African Nightshades). Field research has been conducted in the context of the research project HORTINLEA at Humboldt-University of Berlin. Factors that influence consumer behavior in regard to leafy vegetables are examined by applying qualitative methods of data collection (interviews and focus group discussions) and analysis (content analysis). The theoretical and methodological framework allows for analyzing meal cultures and eating practices which constitute – as we argue – consumers’ perceptions and identities in Germany and Kenya. Emphasis is put on socio-cultural factors, such as gender relations, place-based settings and initiatives, like so-called “Alternative Food Networks” (AFN) that influence moral assumptions and practices of food production, preparation and eating. 3) The third part of the paper presents and discusses first research results. Findings will prove that in both Kenya and Germany food habits and consumer’s preferences towards leafy vegetables are changing in urban areas. Moreover, research results suggest that AFN – particularly in Germany – play an important role in shaping new moral ideas about everyday food production, preparation and consumption as they attribute meaning to particular products, like leafy vegetables. The case of Germany shows that urban dwellers in Berlin contributed to the rediscovery of the ‘forgotten vegetable’ Swiss Chard and introduced

new forms of food practices. The case of Kenya shows that negative perceptions about African leafy vegetables are quite persistent and determined by gender arrangements of food production, preparation and eating at local level. A change in perceptions, however, is slowly induced by food campaigns and attempts to build AFN. The paper concludes by discussing the reasons for the changing consumption patterns in regard to leafy vegetables in Germany and Kenya.

Sustainable Livelihoods

Our research contributes on the one hand to changing consumption behavior and on the other hand to the research on sustainability. Sustainable consumption is a deeply gendered topic as consumption decisions and practices are activities performed by private households. Households are considered to be the spaces where relevant environmental changes can take place: In the liberal conception, simply put, the demand from households drives the offer for sustainable products (see PWC, 2010; Saunders, 2014). Yet the household is far from being a gender-neutral space. First of all, the private-public dichotomy divides social activities into two separate spheres imbued by separate norms and values. The public is considered to be the domain of rationality, autonomy and rigor, the private is seen as the space for emotions, relationships and softness (see e.g. Nelson, 2009). These norms are gendered in the sense that they are associated with masculinity (the public) and femininity (the private). This does not mean that the public realm is only animated by men and the private realm exclusively by women but the symbolic order of gender constructions creates social expectations toward these two spheres. Second, empirical research shows that consumption indeed is women's affair as women do most of the household and care work which creates the necessities of consumption—think of shopping for meals or for cleaning (see Budlender, 2010). Research on sustainable consumption then has to take into account that consumption decisions are largely gendered decisions, in the global North as well as in the global South (see Vinz, 2009; Miroso, 2014). A thorough analysis of alternative economic concepts aiming at sustainable modes of production and consumption shows that all too often the gendered implications of consumption are being neglected (Bauhardt, 2014). Consequently, it is highly questionable that these approaches contribute to more sustainable behavior.

Some clarifications concerning gender analysis and feminist sustainability research

When we call our approach a gender analysis we are not saying that men and women act differently or make different decisions in the same given situation. Although this might be true in some cases—e.g. men spend more money for eating outside the home, for alcohol and tobacco and for petrol, women consume more in terms of hygiene, health or clothing (see Johnsson-Latham, 2007)—we understand by gender analysis the focus on social reproduction. By social reproduction we mean the work which is necessary to procreate and sustain life. This work is performed overwhelmingly by women in private households without remuneration (Folbre, 1994; Budlender, 2010). In order to overcome the idea that this work is not labor but love some feminist economists have coined the term care economy (e.g. Donath, 2000; Folbre 2006). The care economy is foundational for any market and monetary exchange.

Care work comprises all activities taking care of dependant persons who cannot care for themselves.ⁱ The concept of care economy takes into account the care work as a whole, may it be performed as unpaid labor in private households or as underpaid wage labor in the labor market (see Folbre & Nelson, 2000; Razavi & Staab, 2010). Care work is time-consuming work which cannot be rationalized—it is effective just because it needs time. Care workers are highly accountable to care-receiving persons as these are heavily dependent on the quality of the services they need. Care work is often body-work, based on very personal and intimate necessities. Not only is care work overwhelmingly done by women all around the globe (Budlender, 2010) but it is also labeled feminine in the symbolic gender order (see Anderson, 2000; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2004). This is the main reason why care work is socially invisible and economically not valued or underestimated: Care is feminized and privatized, whereas masculinity is identified with autonomy and the public sphere is considered free from dependency and care.

Therefore, the gender perspective in sustainable consumption research is a perspective which takes into account the care necessities of all people and the care work performed by women. At this point gender analysis meets the debate around sustainability. Sustainability has to respect social, environmental and economic concerns—this is the base line for any scientific and popular discourse. Yet, what is less common knowledge about sustainability is the definition given by the core document on sustainability, the so-called Brundtland-Report „Our Common Future“ published in 1987 (WCED, 1987). This report which was foundational for the UN summit on environment and development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 makes the following well-known statement: “Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable—to ensure that

it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987, p. 8). This is the formula commonly shared in academic and popular contexts. The conditions for sustainable development defined by the Brundtland Commission are much less established: „Sustainable development seeks to meet the needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability to meet those of the future. Far from requiring the cessation of economic growth, it recognizes that the problems of poverty and underdevelopment cannot be solved unless we have a new era of growth in which developing countries play a large role and reap large benefits” (WCED 1987, p. 40).

At this point feminist scholars and activists from all over the world developed a perspective of their own (Harcourt, 1994; Braidotti *et al.*, 1994; Wichterich, 2004). They criticized the idea that development were dependant on economic growth—and indeed, why should the reason for unjust distribution of wealth, the uneven access to resources and the unequal distribution of environmental depletion be the starting point for better development? So the common sense notion of sustainability has been early replaced in feminist debates by the concept of sustainable livelihoods. Achieving sustainable livelihoods requires “increasing the capacity that people have to use resources to determine the shape of their own lives” (UNCED, 1991, p.15) which is a completely different understanding of sustainability. There is no idea about economic growth and wealth based on the market or on money. Resources are to be understood in a large sense of vital resources: natural resources like water, soil and air, social resources like time, leisure and social bonds, economic resources like provision and care.

During the Rio+20 follow-up process the debate about sustainability came up again on the forefront of the political stage, now with an openly admitted focus on “green growth” (UN, 2012; OECD 2013). From a feminist perspective, the mainstream concept of sustainability has again been scrutinized against the background of sustainable livelihoods—and the assessment is once again and not surprisingly very critical about the outcomes (see Harcourt, 2012; Wichterich, 2012; Bauhardt 2013).

Our research is situated in this analytical context of feminist approaches to sustainable livelihoods and feminist economics. The feminist claims for sustainable livelihoods and the gender analysis of consumption can be linked in a productive way. The framework of our approach to consumption behavior is a feminist understanding of sustainable consumption. We understand consumption as a gendered practice of caring and sustaining life. Food practices are first and foremost caring and life sustaining practices, not only in the material sense of purchasing and preparing comestible goods. Food practices are embedded in social and cultural

settings which are deeply gendered: As unspectacular everyday activities they are feminized and privatized, as long as no or low market interventions are implied they are economically invisible and they remain unseen in the mainstream sustainability discourse as they do not contribute to ideas of “green growth”. Our research aims at unraveling the links between sustainable livelihoods, consumption and gender by analyzing the social embeddedness of food practices in two very distinct social, economic and cultural contexts, in Germany and in Kenya.

Discourses on the contemporary food system and social change

The current discourse about risks deriving from modern and global food chains is one of the most discussed topics in the food industry as well as in food consumer research. The implication of incidences such as food scandals, genetically modified organisms in food or the decline of food variety influences consumers’ perception and preferences. Mistrust towards global food chains – from production, transportation, distribution to waste management – is an effect which is caused by consumers’ feeling that food production lacks transparency and food companies as well as supermarket chains give priority to profit over food quality and safety. This perception about the food industry affects consumers’ preferences and behavior which is not only guided by logic of cost minimization but also by ideas about food quality, nutrition, ethical eating and sustainability. These ideas are a result of everyday practices of food production, preparation and eating which are shaped by gender relations and societal relations to nature within specific socio-cultural and spatial settings. Thus, we are interested in investigating the question of how consumer behavior is socially embedded. In this course we will firstly discuss characteristics and problems of our current food system and secondly examine how such developments affect consumer behavior.

Today we can draw from the full culinary source: any kind of food is almost everywhere available and even if we can’t find a particular product in the supermarket, an internet delivery could send the good around the globe in a short time. This spatiotemporal shift (Dicken, 1992; Werlen, 2000) is evident in the fact that it is possible nowadays to buy products from far away: avocados are imported from Israel, asparagus from Spain or meat from Denmark. And it’s not just about the production origin of a commodity, a change also occurred in the spread of typical dishes and kitchens from all over the world. Especially in urbanized areas the consumer has the free choice if he or she wants to eat Japanese Sushi,

Italian Pizza or the Swedish Köttbullar – be it in countries of the Global North such as Germany or in countries of the Global South such as Kenya. To use the words of Lechner:

“More people now enjoy more food from more places than ever before, a larger portion of producers serve distant customers, rules and institutions with global reach manage much food production, and as the world becomes a single market more consumers can taste nearly anything from nearly anywhere” (Lechner, 2009, p. 17).

Those “anytime-anywhere-availability” and the global circulation of goods, is deeply connected to facts associated with globalization. Globalization restructured the production market, heightened consumers awareness and influences meal patterns.

But how does globalization influence consumer culture concretely? The spread of different cuisines and products all over the world diversifies on the one hand consumers’ meal habits; on the other hand it tends to suppress local meal cultures. Further it intensifies consumers’ perception that the global food system is impenetrable and separated from their consumption. This interlinking between global and local is explained by Werlen as follows (2000, p. 23): “Despite the most humans spend their daily routine just in a local context, the most daily living conditions are embedded in global processes. Local and global are closely interrelated. Global processes are expressed in the local and at the same time they are an expression of the local.” (trans. by M.B.).

In recent years the issue of regionalization goes hand in hand with globalization. Consumers feeling to be disconnected to growing, processing and distribution of food increased and affected their consciousness, amplified by various food scandals over the past few years. In the system of those risks and uncertainties consumers recollect to criteria of food which are visible and tangible. One form of such a recollection is reflected by the increasing interest in regional or local products. For example, “about 40% of Spanish consumers are concerned about the origin of the products that they buy” (Frewer *et al.*, 2010, p. 282; Guerro *et al.*, 1998). In buying products and knowing its origin, the consumer has a chance to get back a part of his or her connection to food. Further, the consumer makes a decision not continuing with “business as usual” and buys and eats *alternative* food products.

“The descriptor ‘alternative’ is often used to signal oppositional or radical dimensions, such as aspirations to ‘reclaim’ ownership of food production, ‘re-connect’ consumers with producers through shorter supply chains, ‘resist’ global capitalism, solve problems of social exclusion and ecological degradation and restore access to healthy food as a human right rather than a commodity” (Kneafsey, 2010, p. 179).

That the trend of place-based products arrived to take its place at the middle of society can be observed by the introduction of certain certifications for example the Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) certificate or the Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) (Weiss, 2007, p. 189). Certification gives the consumer the opportunity to encounter the non-transparency of the food industry and make a choice which corresponds with their moral ideals.

Another issue that concerns consumers is the emergence of genetically modified food. While many decision makers in the food industry highlight positive effects and potentials, the consumers remain skeptical towards the application of genetic modification (Grunert *et al.*, 2000, p. 1). On the one hand genetic modified products are designed to stay fresh longer or to have a better resistance against pesticides; on the other hand this raises the question whether it is ethically acceptable to modify characteristics of animals or plants which are naturally constituted? Another fact supports the criticism: The widespread use of genetically modified crops in agriculture vanish diversity, which means likewise the loss of particular tastes, shapes and appearances just as the loss of cultural assets and traditions of cultivation or processing skills of producers. The *Figure 1* shows a sharp decline of variety by choosing ten crops.

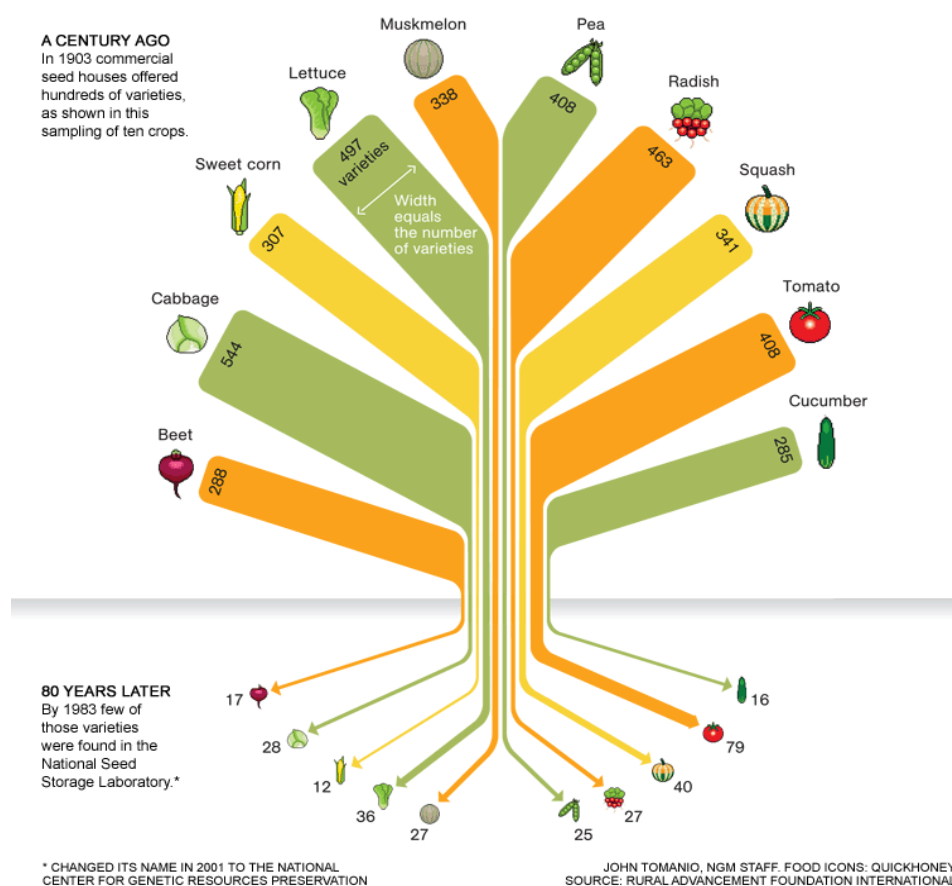


Figure 1 Our Dwindling Food Variety (Siebert, 2011)

Just to mention one example: In the year 1903 existed 544 species of cabbage, whereas this number shrank to 28 in 80 years. As Charles Siebert (2011) notes:

“In the United States an estimated 90 percent of our historic fruit and vegetable varieties have vanished. Of the 7,000 apple varieties that were grown in the 1800s, fewer than a hundred remain. In the Philippines thousands of varieties of rice once thrived; now only up to a hundred are grown there. In China 90 percent of the wheat varieties cultivated just a century ago have disappeared.”

Likewise, in Kenya many species of African indigenous vegetables (AIVs)ⁱⁱ disappeared due to the introduction of exotic vegetables by the colonial rulers (i.e. cabbage and tomatoes) (Abukutsa-Onyango, 2010). Awareness for the diversity of AIVs has been raised in the last two decades by many non-governmental actors, such as Bioversity International, that engage in biodiversity conservation. In fact, Bioversity International ran a program on AIVs between 1996 and 2004 for documenting and conserving the genetic diversity of leafy vegetables in Kenya. The idea was to conserve biodiversity by supporting AIV producers and fostering market demand for a high variety of AIVs and thereby to improve livelihoods in Kenya (Gotor & Irungu, 2010). These activities are guided by the idea that diversity contributes to food security, and that it supports local self-reliance and ensures stability from a social, ecological and economic viewpoint (cf. Gray, 1999; Veteto, 2008, p. 122). Likewise there is a need to conserve certain old or so called *heirloom varieties*ⁱⁱⁱ because they have a better adaptability to climate and soil and in comparison to high-yield crops they often contain genes, which are not found in those (Goldenetz & Halvorson, 2008, p. 111).

Indeed, heirloom vegetables and fruits have become popular recently, driven by consumers who appreciate products that are located in space and time and are engaged to discover and preserve the uniqueness, the flavor and the history of heirloom varieties. An important issue is also to preserve the cultivating knowledge, the skills of growing and care or in the clearest terms by Charles Siebert (2011):

“Still, storing seeds in banks to bail us out of future calamities is only a halfway measure. Equally worthy of saving is the hard-earned wisdom of the world's farmers, generations of whom crafted the seeds and breeds we now so covet. Perhaps the most precious and endangered resource is the knowledge stored in farmers' minds.”

Plant geneticist Maleku Worede sees the need to contextualize the local knowledge with science knowledge and calls it “farmers science” (Siebert, 2011) – however, without taking into account women as farmers and their knowledge about plants and vegetable cultivation. In

fact, most of the literature is gender blind and regards the domain of production as delinked from the domain of social reproduction and care. As a consequence, local practices of food preparation and cooking as well as meal patterns and their contribution to consumption habits remain invisible. For understanding the trend of relocalization of food and sustainable consumption it is necessary to pay attention to the domain of social reproduction and the gendered practices of food preparation and meal cultures which significantly shape symbolic meanings of those heirloom plants, as well as the “biography of a crop”. This contextualization is pivotal for maintaining biodiversity, local food practices and thus, sustainable livelihoods.

In the face of these arguments – the disconnection between consumer and producer, the unsustainable use of natural resources, food scandals, genetic modified food or the loss of crop variety and knowledge about food production and preparation – the given overview illustrates how the current industrialized food system and (new) ways of food provisioning and thus societal change are interwoven. As we argue further in the following sections, consumption and food habits are deeply embedded in social arrangements at both household and societal level.

The social embeddedness of food habits

Drawing on Karls Polanyi’s (2001, 2nd edition) concept of embeddedness, we argue that the economy and economic activities, such as consumption behavior, have to be regarded as “immersed in social relations, i.e., it cannot be a separate, autonomous sphere vis-a-vis society as a whole” (Machado, 2011, p. 119). Polanyi distinguishes between a formalistic and a substantive meaning of economy. A formalistic meaning of economy reduces consumption behavior to rational, cost-minimizing or utility maximizing behavior of free and socially unbound individuals. Studies drawing on this formalistic notion of the economy regard consumption as a price-driven exercise which has strong male connotation. A substantive approach to the study of consumption, however, grasps food consumption as a social practice, that means, as a practice that is inseparably connected to everyday practices of food preparation, cooking and meal habits. These practices are – as Little, Ilberry and Watts (2009, p. 206) emphasize – deeply gendered and situated in power dynamics within households and the wider society. In a nutshell, consumption habits are embedded in hierarchical gender

relations that determine the way how social reproduction and care is organized and, thus, what kind of food and which preparation practices are preferred.

The concept of Meal Cultures by Parto Teherani-Krönner (2014) – to which we refer in the research project HORTINLEA in which context the field work for this paper was conducted - reveals the complexity of consumer behavior by taking into account these preferences in food consumption and preparation, which are influenced by various factors such as infrastructure facilities, local knowledge, environmental conditions, division of labour or the symbolic meaning of food. The concept places the meal in the forefront, therewith it pays attention to all steps and conditions that are needed in order to eat and share a meal and thus it extends the analytical horizon of consumption studies. By working with this concept in theory and practice the diversity of meal cultures becomes visible. The concept is intended to be more aware of sociocultural, gendered, ecological and place-based settings and offers the chance to unravel consumer behavior holistically.

Closely related to this is the assumption, that people define themselves with food and reversely food contributes to individual identity. As Claude Fischler (1988) rightly observes: “Food is central to our sense of identity. The way any given human group eats helps it assert its diversity, hierarchy and organisation, but also, at the same time, both its oneness and the otherness of whoever eats differently”. According this view, food is not just the consumption of nutrients; moreover it embodies individual’s position in society, moral standpoints, affections or aversions. “Our food choices, like various other cultural expressions and practices, offer insights on how we present ourselves, shape our identity, define our membership and express our distance from others” (Koc & Welsh, 2002, p. 46). The possibility of individualization by food is currently expressed in many kinds of alternative ways of consumption for example veganism, vegetarianism or locavorism as well as by new ways of organizing food production and processing. This shift in consumption to a more sustainable, local-based and transparent supply system reflects the re-embedding of eating practices in localized social contexts as well as consumers seek to gain an active role in food production and provisioning. This societal change to a more self-determined consumption which reflects one’s own moral principles changed significantly everyday eating practices.

Case studies Berlin and Nairobi: Research Methodology

To examine the social embeddedness of food related practices our paper attempts to understand the ongoing change more clearly by applying qualitative methods of data collection (interviews and focus group discussions) and analysis (content analysis).

To gain specific perspective, consumer behavior in urban areas towards leafy vegetables (in the case of Germany *Swiss chard* and in the case of Kenya African indigenous vegetables such as *African nightshades*) will be analyzed. In order to understand consumers' change or persistence in decision-making, we need to study the transformation from an "out of fashion vegetable" to a vegetable that is revalued. In this view, we follow Grunert *et al.* argument, that "food products are markers of social situations" (Grunert, *et al.*, 2010, p. 211).

To explain the social situation we aim to identify (1) determining factors of consumption by interviewing households and actors (like AFN) engaged in production and consumption of leafy vegetables in Berlin and Nairobi, (2) trends in consumption of Swiss chard and AIVs by interviewing employees of differently categorized grocery stores in Berlin and Nairobi: conventional supermarkets, organic supermarkets and open-air-markets. Further findings concerning Swiss chard from the conducted interviews with the AFNs were analyzed.

The re-embedding of eating practices: Alternative Food Networks in Berlin

In the recent years there has been a striking growth in new forms of food supply, which enable the consumer to participate in food production and processing, intensifies the connection between consumer and farmer, strengthens local economy and "respatialize[s] and resocialize[s] food production, distributions and consumption" (Jarosz, 2008, p. 231), mostly on a community level but with followers all over the world. Examples of such consumer-driven networks include gardening projects, food coops and corps, food sharing initiatives, community supported agriculture or even online-based food cooperatives such as *mundraum.org*, which map publically available fruits. All these initiatives are characterized by a sense of community, a principle of sharing and an active interest in food production and processing procedures, in line with the motto "from farm to fork".

A growing body of scientific literature about Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) is published, guided by the question how to theorize it in linguistic terms and to conceptualize an approach that captures individuals actions linked to new moral ideas about food production, preparation

and consumption. Different kind of approaches and labeling were used: alternative food networks (Allen *et al.*, 2003; Renting *et al.*, 2003; Goodman, 2004; Ilbery & Maye, 2005), food chain localisation (Tregear, 2011), short food supply chains (Renting *et al.*, 2003) or local food systems (Hinrichs, 2000; Karner, 2010). However, a clear definition of what the AFNs are is still missing. We attend to the perspective from Renting *et al.* (2003, p. 394), he defines AFNs “as newly emerging networks of producers, consumers and other actors that embody alternatives to the more standardized industrial mode of food supply”. The problematic issue about the labeling as “alternative” food networks is the dualistic character of being as either a *conventional* or *alternative* food system. This binarity causes a narrow definition in itself, which does not describe the complexity, diversity nor dynamics and shifts of such networks. In this respect or study is highly sensitive to the strength of relations, social arrangements and processes of transformations.

Findings of the literature research and analysis of the interviews show that such kind of networks play a major role for consumers in Berlin, firstly in the search for high-quality products and secondly in consumers renewed interest in experience food production by themselves. The compiled data demonstrates that consumption is highly socially and ecologically embedded. When it comes to food decision-making quality is an eminently criteria for choosing a product. Since AFNs are keen to offer a transparent and participatory link along all processes in the food chain consumers rely on and trust them. To speak more accurately, such networks shorten the food chain, a fact that constitutes their success. To give an example: An initiator of an urban gardening project in Berlin we interviewed, said that his project operates in the way, that there is no “chain”, there is just the consumer which produces his own food. Another organic farmer, whose complete yield is sold by small-scale shops in Berlin, stated that the farm supplies the shops twice per week and the consumers yawning for their products: they go to the shop exactly the days the new deliveries come in. This proves, that the alliance between producer and consumer, the knowing about production and the farm behind it, is a consuming argument that significantly affects consumer behavior. The interviews revealed that there exists an unbroken demand for such produced products (in the case of the farmer) respectively the parcels of land for gardening (in the case of the urban gardening project). Both - the farmer who delivers the vegetables to the city as well as the initiator of the urban gardening project – reported that they cannot cover the huge demand with the land of resources they own. Other reasons why products produced by AFNs are

readily consumed is firstly that the consumer does actively want to support such networks and secondly consumers perceive these products as healthier, tastier and better in quality.

Further, the field research revealed that the urban setting provides an ideal breeding ground for such food practices and simultaneously meal cultures. So the city itself - with its urban density, scarcity of agricultural land as well as lack of knowledge about cultivation practices and the absence of 'natural' processes in general - can be seen as one driver for a change in consumption patterns. Consequently, urban, self-produced agriculture can ensure consumers demand for food quality and can contribute to sustainable consumption. That means that eating is embedded in place-based settings, which effects consumers' perceptions, preferences and thus everyday practices.

Changes in consumption: The case Swiss chard

Vegetables and fruits that were commonly eaten in the past are making a comeback to our kitchens. The term 'forgotten vegetables' or 'old vegetables' have become catchwords that title the trend to rediscover vegetables that were not widely consumed for a long time. One of those old fashioned vegetables which gained popularity again is Swiss chard (scientific name *Beta vulgaris*), also known as spinach-chard or silverbeet. Because of the appearance one could assume that Swiss chard is related to spinach since both have almost the same texture and taste but Swiss chard belongs to the family of sugar beet, fodder beet and red beet.

The first varieties can be traced back to Mediterranean region, to Sicily. Even the ancient Greeks had different types of Swiss chard; they called the vegetable "teutlion" (Achtner-Theiss & Kumm, 2007, p. 93). During the Middle Ages refined Swiss chard was very common in central Europe and at the turn of the century Swiss chard was in Germany more popular than spinach (Lexikon Huettenhilfe, n.d.). In the 20th century it lost its popularity in Germany, whereas in other countries such as Italy, France or Spain it was an all-time favorite (Lexikon Huettenhilfe, n.d.). We argue that one reason for those divergent developments in different regions could be the good reputation of spinach in the 19th century as a vegetable with high iron content, a fact that was disapproved by later nutritionists (Drösser, 1997). For many years, Swiss chard was long over shaded by spinach but in the meanwhile – as our results reveal - it emerges from the shade.

The interviews with employees of different grocery stores in Berlin show that consumption patterns regarding Swiss chard changed and this change goes hand in hand with consumers

shifting preferences that were mentioned earlier. Especially four characteristics make the vegetable so popular again: first of all the fact that Swiss Chard is one of those old vegetables which currently get attention, secondly the colorful appearance which attracts consumers, thirdly the simple cultivating conditions Swiss Chard offers the new and mostly less experienced farming generation and fourthly the sensitivity of the vegetable, which means long supply activities (e.g. transportation) reduce its quality. So a high-quality Swiss chard requires short food chains and, as we concluded in the section before, consumers increasingly prefer this type of production and distribution. The online Garden Planner *growveg.com* introduces Swiss chard as the “Rainbow Colors for Your Plate”. The new popularity seems to be easily explainable by other factors that can be confirmed by our study as well:

“Swiss Chard is probably the most underappreciated of all vegetables. It is vitamin rich and nutritious and one of the easiest of all vegetables to grow. A prolific grower with a long cropping season, it tolerates poor soil and inattention. Chard is a cool weather vegetable and will withstand a mild frost. It also puts up with dry weather well, and will give you tasty spinach type leaves for up to 12 months from a single sowing. It is a good choice for the beginner or busy gardener.” (Seedaholic, n.d.)

Interviewed employees stated that Swiss chard is almost always available even in all three categorized markets (conventional supermarkets, organic supermarkets and open-air-markets). If Swiss chard is out of season it is ordered from other countries. Differences can be detected in the purchase offer in terms of the variety: While conventional supermarkets offer mostly just white leafy vegetables, organic supermarkets and open air markets purchase colorful varieties and often more than one color at a time. Nevertheless, with our collected data we cannot completely trace back changes in time. Whereas the employees of the (super)markets were unable to assess the change over time, farmers stated that the demand for Swiss chard increased in the period from three to five years ago. Further, a lack of knowledge about preparation methods can be identified as a barrier of consumption. Farmers as well as employees reported that consumers ask for specific recipes or techniques of preparation, thus consumers are thirsty for knowledge about meal preparation.

Summarizing the above, it can be noted that Swiss chard is an example that underlines that each crop has its own biography which is influenced by consumers preferences: at certain times and in certain areas it's well known and much liked and some stages later it's out of fashion. From a sociologist point of view the interesting question is how those shifts of ups and downs are embedded in omnipresent economic trends, social contexts and attributions of

meaning. Swiss chard benefits from the reversion to heirloom species in general as well as the growing request of consumers for healthy and well-produced food in particular. This is underpinned by consumers' inquisitiveness about cultivation in their own garden, assisted by the whole craft food scene which is popping up, a scene that demands special ingredients that are self produced and self prepared. However, in the overall picture it has to be acknowledged that cultivating and eating Swiss chard, or even other so called heirloom vegetables, can be seen as a technique of distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). We herewith assume that Swiss chard is cropped by gardening elite, consumers who do not cultivate it, because they need to fulfill nutritional needs. Mostly these unique plants are enjoyed by consumers who have resources to buy local or organic products, means the upper or middle class, typically living in urban areas.

Localized food practices in Nairobi and the role of environmental trust

“Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO, 2009, p. 8)

One third of the population in Kenya is undernourished (FAO, 2009, p. 50). This situation is amplified by climate change and food price hikes which negatively affect food production and consumption. A burgeoning literature on African indigenous leafy vegetables (AIVs) explores the potential of AIVs to combat food security and “hidden hunger”^{iv} (Kimura, 2013). Communities in Kenya have used various species of AIVs for food and have valued them for their taste, nutritional value and medicinal value (Olouch et al., 2009). As studies show, AIVs contain many important micronutrients which is why their consumption significantly contributes to vitamin, protein and mineral intake and, thus, to healthy livelihoods (Yang & Keding, 2009). Moreover, it is stated that AIVs have “agronomic advantages over exotic vegetables, such as being adapted to the local climate and soils, and lower pest incidence.” (Oluoch et al. 2009, p. 148) Despite all these advantages AIVs are not as intensively consumed as exotic vegetables. Results from the literature review and field research suggest that AIV consumption is deeply embedded in socio-cultural systems of meaning as well as in ideas about sustainability and food quality and which translate into attitudes and behavior towards AIV that are rather persistent to change. Field research has been conducted in a high-end supermarket named Zucchini's as well as in poor households of the Eastlands in Nairobi. The Eastlands is densely populated (half the population lives in the Eastlands) and is characterized by low socio-economic status of the inhabitants. In these households, practices

of AIV preparation and cooking as well as meal cultures have been observed and documented and both interviews and group discussions on the motivation to consume AIVs have been conducted.

AIVs are predominantly consumed by poor households on a daily basis, despite the fact that AIVs are on average more expensive than exotic vegetables such as cabbage. The growing middle class population in Kenya does not consume AIVs on a regular basis because of its connotation to be a “poor man’s crop” and because of its time-consuming preparation (Gotor, 2010; Mwangi & Kimathi, 2006). Field research has revealed that lifestyles are changing and the women’s formal and informal employment in the urban area has increased. They do not have the time to prepare AIVs and thus prefer kale or cabbage, which is faster to prepare. This has been a setback in the promotion of AIV consumption particularly in contexts of higher socio-economic status. Preparing AIVs is insofar time-consuming as it involves activities such as sorting, plucking, thorough washing and cutting (Musotsi *et al.*, 2005). All in all the preparation of AIVs, depending on the species, take 1 to 1, 5 hours. Moreover, AIVs need to be washed several times with changing buckets of water. That means AIV consumption is highly water intensive which is particularly problematic for poor households. Nevertheless, poor households continue consuming AIVs on a daily basis. Interestingly, among these poor households there is high awareness on environmental issues and both food quality and safety: The interviewed households purchase AIVs predominantly from open-air markets for several reasons. Firstly, one of the reasons is, undeniably, that open air markets sell a higher amount of AIVs for the same price in the supermarket. Secondly, another reason is that women, who buy the AIVs, know each other via informal networks where they come from. In fact, AIVs are marketed via networks – which means, producers from for instance Western Kenya (i.e. Kakamega) send their produce via long distance buses to Nairobi where the AIVs are picked up by either family members or members of the village and sold in open-air markets. Thirdly, women in poor households are involved in manifold income-generating activities as well as in social reproduction, which is why the time-consuming character of AIV preparation poses a challenge for them. Nevertheless, they do not purchase AIVs that are already plucked and washed due to environmental concerns. Interviewed households stated that they do not trust in the quality and safety of already prepared AIVs due to water pollution and dust. As a consequence, efforts to upgrade AIV value chains and to modernize AIV marketing strategies are confronted with consumer’s environmental concerns.

Conclusion

The main interest of the paper has been to explore changes and trends in consumption among different indigenous species of leafy vegetables in different spatial settings to identify underlying factors that influence consumer behavior and thus everyday meal practices. Theoretical perspectives have been introduced; they indicate that consumption is an embedded phenomenon that is deeply shaped by gendered practices of care work as well as identity, lifestyle or ecological and place-based settings.

Every time we eat, we make a decision and those decisions are quite complex and divers in practice. To follow up on this, consumption is situated in the intersection between the global and the local, between consumers' preferences and producers' struggle for food sovereignty and thus, sustainable livelihoods for consumers and producers. The comparison of two very different metropolitan settings revealed that trends in consumption towards AIVs and Swiss chard occur similarly in Kenya and Germany but due to different reasons: Both in Nairobi and Berlin consumers ideas about high-quality food and an awareness of environmental issues have a significant impact on food practices of leafy vegetables, but, a differentiation must be made regarding the socioeconomic status. The Kenyan case study illustrates that these are concerns of poor households. In Berlin those issues matter for better off households. In both research sites, the main drivers for these concerns are modern and globalised food chains which disconnect the consumer. Whereas in Nairobi consumers concerns arise due to safety issues such as water pollution and dust, consumers concerns in Berlin are about the loss of varieties and equally important the loss of knowledge in cultivating and preparation.

In summary, by applying qualitative methods it was possible to identify individual motivations, perceptions and meanings towards leafy vegetables in particular and consumer behavior in general. Our case studies demonstrated the need for a holistic theoretical and empirical approach to evaluating consumption pattern. These results call for a more critical examination of gender issues in consumption research, which allows identifying social relations and hierarchies' that constitute everyday food practices.

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ⁱ We here focus on the interpersonal relationships between care-givers and care-receivers. Social reproduction also implies the material and hidden work of cleaning homes; washing clothes and so on—all the work which is done the better the more invisible it is.

ⁱⁱ Like for instance African nightshade (*Solanum scabrum*), spiderplant (*Cleome gynandra*), leafy amaranths (*Amaranthus blitum*) and pumpkin leaves (*Cucurbita moschata*).

ⁱⁱⁱ Benjamin Watson describes heirloom variety by three main criteria (Watson, 1996, p. 2-3, see also Jordan, 2007, p. 22): “1. The variety must be able to reproduce itself from seed. [...] 2. The variety must have been introduced more than 50 years ago. Fifty years, is, admittedly, an arbitrary cutoff date, and different people use different dates [...] A few people use an even stricter definition, considering heirlooms to be only those varieties developed and preserved outside the commercial seed trade. [...] 3. The variety must have a history of its own. Perhaps the variety was brought to America by immigrants, or saved and improved over the years by a single family or religious group, who handed down the seeds from generation to generation”.

^{iv} The term “hidden hunger” refers to the micronutrient deficiency (deficiency of for instance iron, vitamins A, D, E, K, B etc.) particularly among poor people.