

THE CULTURAL LOCALIZATION OF RICE IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS¹



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Introduced over 150 years ago, rice is now a staple food of urban Solomon Islanders. A reanalysis of the localization of rice is at the core of its glocalization in the Solomon Islands. Following a theoretical section on glocalization and neophilia, the article traces the history of rice in Solomon Islands through contact with Europeans. The article pays particular attention to changing foodscapes associated with urbanization and to the economic and symbolic dimensions of food exchange. (Rice, Solomon Islands, glocalization, eating habits, symbolism of food)

Rice has been present in the Solomon Islands for over a hundred and fifty years, but its consumption has increased so much over the last 40 years that it has become one of the staple foods of the capital city, Honiara. Its presence in meals has displaced in importance the traditional starch staples of cassava (*manihot esculenta*), sweet potatoes (*Ipomoea batatas*), yams (*Dioscorea esculenta*, *Dioscorea alata*), and taro (*colocasia esculenta*). In some households, it is consumed at nearly every meal. Rice is more difficult to obtain in areas where little cash is earned, such as remote villages, but the rural consumption of rice is increasing, albeit more slowly.

As rice is not a local cultivar, is not grown much locally, and must be purchased, how and why has it become so popular? The answer requires a social history of the localization of rice in the Solomon Islands, and how transformations of social life can be indexed by the transformations of food ideologies and practices. This article considers the place of rice in the urban social world, and how consumers conceive of and talk about it. The analysis is based on ethnographic, historical, and archival data collected in the Solomon Islands over many years. Of course, rice has a long history in the Pacific, where it is widely present (Pollock 1992, 2009), and the Solomon Islands are not unique in that regard.

The process of cultural localization of rice analyzed here builds on the concept of glocalization: the making sense of global phenomena in local terms. As with other instances of the localization of food items around the world, the localization of rice in Solomon Islands needs to be considered in terms of the combined effects of macro-processes of localization (i.e., economic globalization, government policies, urbanization, movements of populations) and of more micro-processes (i.e., advertising by rice importing

companies, the acquisition of new food tastes, changes of livelihood, and the symbolic value of food consumption).

THE CULTURAL LOCALIZATION OF A FOOD STAPLE

As history attests, peaceful or belligerent cultural contacts imply food contacts. Whether people visit, fight, invade, or create exchange networks, foods can travel and be adopted. New foodways challenge established ones, and new ideas about the edible and inedible enter the social scene. As exemplified by Mintz's (1986) history of sugar, these changes are far-reaching and embedded in economic exchanges and political relations that go beyond the immediacy of the producers' and consumers' life experiences. For example, the spice trade that linked the Orient to Western Europe is one of the best-known instances of early large-scale trade, and recent forms of globalization continue to change local food cultures. New crops, new culinary cultures (Western fast food, for instance), and new tastes may co-exist with local ones or supplant them. New food items, together with new ways of thinking about food, make their mark on local people's foodscapes, and some can become part of national or traditional food practices or cuisines, as with tomatoes in Italy, potatoes in Ireland, beef in Argentina, garlic in Provence, okra in Caribbean islands, and cassava in tropical Africa.

Rice in the Solomon Islands is such a story. It arrived with European travelers and missionaries in the nineteenth century and was quickly adopted by the Islanders. While rice has characteristics that make it fit well with the local gustatory repertoire, its success is due as much to changing lifestyles in the archipelago. Globalization brought rice to the Solomons; glocalization transformed it into a local food item.² Glocalization, the process by which foreign ideologies, practices, and goods are appropriated locally (Robertson 1995), is the result of globalization.

Scholars of food and agriculture have paid special attention to the impacts that introduced foods have had on local livelihoods, particularly when non-local cultigens have been planted on a large scale. Some scholars emphasize the transformation and disruption of eco-agricultural systems that result (Goodman and Watts 1997), or relate globalization of food systems and poverty (von Braun and Mengistu 2007). Others (e.g., Hinrichs 2003) understand "localization" not as the emplacement of a new crop, but as the development of food identities that speak of place. They aim to better understand the economic and ideological concerns that accompany localization. The word "terroir" comes to mind, as it conjures up images of place, authenticity, savoir-faire, and proximity between producers and consumers. Still other scholars take a cultural approach to explain how foreign food items are

introduced and adopted (Plotnicov and Scaglione 1999), becoming a source of pleasure and distinction (see Mintz's 1986 analysis of sugar in England). Icons of national cuisine (Gentilcore's 2010 history of the tomato) are associated with identity of self (see Onukhi Tierney's 1994 symbolic analysis of rice in Japan) or, as with mutton flaps, are rejected by white Australians and New Zealanders, but are much sought after in some Pacific island countries (Gewertz and Errington 2010).

This essay aims to understand the dimensions of the cultural localization process. Considering the approaches mentioned above, the history of rice in the Solomon Islands suggests that the cultural localization of a food item is at the intersection of cultural constructs, social needs, and economic factors. But it is equally clear that food localization involves a reanalysis of the introduced food so that consumers can recognize it in relation to the local foods among which it is introduced. Such reanalysis never takes place in a gustatory, socio-economic, and symbolic vacuum, but rather against the backdrop of local cultural elaborations through which the new food will be understood. The cultural reanalysis Islanders made of rice quickly found that rice fit nicely in their food world, in both practical and symbolic terms.

Reanalysis involves at least three processes. The first is one of discovery, where neophilia and early adopters play a large role. The second is one of identification, in which the characteristics of the introduced foods are evaluated and their advantages and disadvantages recognized (e.g., it does not fit the ritual cycles of indigenous crops, like taro ritual, or is susceptible to local pests). In some cases, the new food is transformed so that it can enter the diet. An example is the addition of sugar to chocolate by the Spaniards to make it more acceptable to their palate. The third process is one of ascribing symbolic meanings to the new item. Through these processes, introduced food can be aligned with the practices and ideologies associated with local food items and people can appropriate it. At times, alignment takes place in the face of hegemonic forces that impose, or oppose, the new food item, but the process always leads to a local transformation of what Poulain (2002) has called food-related social spaces.

The initial step of reanalysis depends on neophilia, whereby some consumers are attracted by the novelty or the exoticism of new items. In the Solomons, rice entered the local diet as part of the food rations given to young men who worked on local copra plantations, or given to students in mission schools at the turn of the nineteenth century during the two or three months each year when local root crops were not available.³ Its allure for some was partly that it smacked of modernity. Some were keen to experience other lifestyles, and eating novel foods was a step in that direction for them. There is something playful in partaking of exotic food, as food diversity can be

entertaining (Wilk 2009:188). Solomon islanders find multilingualism to be exhilarating, a way to partake of different worlds, each indexed by a language (Jourdan 2007). The same is true of food consumption. By partaking of different foods, styles, and registers, the consumer stretches her gustatory palate into a world of make-believe experience where imagination alone could not take her. This gustatory exploration does not mean that people will abandon or think less of their own food culture, although some food adventurers neglect or demean their own food traditions (Heldke 2003). While some neophiles may ignore their own traditions, most seek to supplement their food repertoire and increase diversity, particularly when the local cuisine is seen as repetitive. Neophiles are the buffers between outside food traditions and local ones. If they continue to eat the new food, it may serve as a model that contributes to the transformation of an individual food adventure into a collective one.

Solomon Islanders, and Malaitans in particular, have always been exploratory when it comes to food. By the mid-1800s, their gardens were full of new crops, such as sweet potato, and new varieties of old crops. People freely incorporated new crops into their gardens during the labor trade and brought back crops from Fiji and Queensland to grow locally (Akin in press).⁴ Eating food “x” when everyone else is eating only “y” is a value-added dimension to the construction of self that brings about social distinction. The symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1979) that comes from eating “x” puts the eater in a social sphere where difference and connoisseurship may translate into prestige (or weirdness), if only partially and temporarily. The early history of rice in Solomon Islands is partly shaped by its rarity: those who had it, and displayed their ability to purchase it, saw their prestige increase.

But one also must be wary of pursuing the constructivist argument too far. Neophilia, and the agency of eaters that is thus revealed, is but one side of the food glocalization coin. The less rosy side is the economic rationalizing of food exchanges, the profit of international companies that advertise and sell these food items, and the governments that subsidize their production elsewhere so that they can be sold cheaply in a new locale and (as often happens) destroy the production of the same or other local staple. In the case presented here, Solomon laborers on overseas and local plantations were given a foreign diet consisting mainly of rice. Whether they liked it, found it exotic, or acquired a new identity by eating it was irrelevant, for the workers could not choose their own food. Today, the requirement to eat rice remains for many, but in a new guise. Most Honiara residents eat rice because they have no choice—price and accessibility drive their food choices. In this permanent dance that individuals perform between agency and structure, the latter often sets the rhythm.

Beyond neophilia, the localization of an introduced food depends on the local foodscape. Is the item filling a void or fitting into an existing dietary slot, perhaps as a replacement for an indigenous food (e.g., taro which was almost wiped out by blights beginning in the 1920s)? Is the new food source reliable and plentiful? Does it make local food tastier?

NEOPHILIA AND EARLY ADOPTERS

Rice (*Oryza sativa*) is not a local cultigen. It was introduced in the Solomon Islands by Europeans traders, settlers, and missionaries as a convenient staple. It traveled well, kept well in storage for long periods, cooked quickly, and was filling. It sold well in Roviana stores in 1896, and was available on Sikaiana and Ontong Java at the turn of the twentieth century (Bennett 1987: 100). Most of this rice came from Australia. Many Solomon Islanders probably got their first taste of rice at mission stations and schools, and at the plantations that developed in the country in the early part of the twentieth century. The earliest mass exposure to rice probably took place when 17,756 Solomon Islanders were “recruited” to work on the sugar cane plantations of Queensland during the second half of the nineteenth century (Price and Baker 1976:110). Given its storability, rice was the food of choice during recruiting trips, and was used widely on ships. In Queensland, however, the laborers received rations that contained mostly potatoes and up to six ounces of rice, to which was added meat, bread, sugar, and tea (Moore 1985:202–05, 365).

It is through the plantations and the mission schools that rice entered the Solomon Islands diet on a wide scale. Archival documents show that as early as the 1920s rice was one of the essential ingredients of the daily rations given to plantation workers (Bennett 1987:171; Jourdan 1987:245) along with the weekly ration of sugar, tin beef, soap, salt, tea, and tobacco. Rice was also a large part of the diet of Solomon Islanders working in government and mission stations, and at Tulagi, the capital of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate (“BSIP”) until 1942. During World War II, rice was an important part of the rations distributed by the American army to the Solomon Islands Labour Corps. After the war, when battle damages were assessed, rice became essential for the BSIP government to feed the villagers whose gardens had been destroyed by the fighting on their land. While subsistence gardens were being rehabilitated, rice was a convenient substitute for the root crops that were destroyed. Increasingly, rice came to be included with the goods that plantation laborers and government employees brought back to their villages when they returned home at the end of their work contract or when they were on leave (Bennett 1987:249). Along with Pidgin English, cash, clothes, a “kit” of steel tools, and other consumer goods, a bag of rice was an item of choice

of the returnee who hoped to obtain some prestige upon getting home with some overseas experience.⁵ Returning laborers sold rice for shell money, which was essential if one wanted to participate in formal exchange ceremonies (Akin 1999).

In Melanesia, food is the obligatory item of exchange and gift giving in social relations. It is central to all ceremonies and festivities that mark the lives of individuals and groups. While traditionally this food consisted of yams, cassava, taro, pork, and fish, a bag of rice given in even the most traditional settings, such as bride-wealth exchange or mortuary feasts, would bring immense prestige to the giver. Returnees, as they were known, also knew that rice would provide a welcome change from the local diet. Over the years of exposure to and consumption of rice, the plantation workers developed a taste for it while they recognized how practical it was, being easy to carry and cook; and its low weight compared to its cooked yield meant that a little rice went a long way and could feed many.

As demand developed, so did availability, so that progressively even the smallest village canteen, often owned by former plantation workers, would carry a few small bags of rice. As a food item, rice is found more commonly in coastal villages than in the hinterland, but it is by no means a new phenomenon. It was available as a prestige item in the Lau Lagoon on the island of Malaita since 1964 (Pierre Maranda private communication). It was also integrated in *maoma*, the large social gatherings that took place every two years within the 20-year funeral cycles. Occasionally rice was included in Kwaio (Malaita) mortuary feasts. Bathgate (1973:165-166) noted the regular consumption of rice in the village areas of Taboko and Verahue, West Guadalcanal, but the eating patterns were different. In Taboko, rice, bread, and biscuits seem to have been used as substitute foods; in Verahue, rice was a supplement to the diet (Bathgate 1973:167). The consumption of rice in the two villages differed significantly: 4.39 ounces per consumption unit per week in Verahue, and 1.81–1.89 lbs. in Taboko. These rice-eating habits differ slightly from those observed at Manakwai (North Malaita), where rice eaten per consumption unit per week remained low at 3.6 ounces (Frazer 1973:30). Despite their difference, these figures indicate clearly that in the early 1970s rice was already a part of the diets of villagers, when they could afford to purchase it.

With the development of Honiara, the demand for rice increased under pressure from migrants and urbanites who, without land for growing food, had no option but to buy food. Rice was easily obtained and reasonably priced at the time, and quickly became the main food of urban residents.

URBANIZATION AND THE URBAN DIET

Honiara was established after World War II on the island of Guadalcanal, on what remained of the American army military base at Point Cruz. Tulagi, the old capital of the BSIP, had been destroyed during the war, and the distinct advantage offered by Honiara was its proximity to the airstrip built by the Japanese. At its beginning, Honiara was a typical colonial town. As the headquarters of the British administration and the port of entry into the archipelago, it was comprised mainly of British and Australian colonials, their Melanesian employees, and a few Chinese merchants. More important, Honiara was the hub through which the Solomon Islands labor force, originating in the eastern part of the archipelago, was transported to plantations located elsewhere in the BSIP. The town became increasingly appealing for Solomon Islanders because of opportunities for paid employment, the establishment of an inter-island transportation system, educational and health facilities for families with children. The town itself was fascinating to many for the excitement it offered and for the haven it represented, away from the control of *kastom* (traditional practices, ideologies, and restrictions). Land pressure on some heavily populated island such as Malaita encouraged young people to make a living elsewhere, and many chose to go to town.

With population increases, Honiara is now home to 64,609 people who come from all over the archipelago (SIG 2011b:Table P1.1). New suburbs were established and migrants progressively became urbanites. The 2009 census shows that while the national annual population growth was 2.3 percent, the urban growth rate was 4.7 percent. Although housing estates were built for workers in the early days, housing is still inadequate and squatter settlements have developed outside town boundaries, where about 10,000 people reside.

Infrastructure and resources in Honiara are stretched thin as more and more migrants settle in squatter settlements around town, hoping to find paid employment when often there is none. Many people depend on their kin for housing and food, and resort to petty trade on the side of the road (as betel nut vendors, running small food stalls, selling cigarettes) to survive and feed their families. With no land to grow food and no money to buy it, hunger is a constant worry for poor Honiara residents. In a country where 80 percent of the population is still involved in a subsistence economy (mainly horticulture, pig husbandry, and fishing), it is hard to imagine that urban residents could go hungry, but many do. And were it not for rice and kin-based support, known locally as the *wantok*⁶ system, more of them would.

Food practices and ideologies have changed to reflect changing lifestyles and expectations. In 1982 my survey of rice consumption in Vura, a suburb of

Honiara, where I was living, rice had long ceased to be the prestige food item that it was in the early days (see also Weismantel 2000). Rice had become the staple food and had displaced local staples, such as the sweet potato, yam, and taro, in the urban diet, particularly that of children. In some households, rice was served at every meal, with or without local root crops. This observation was corroborated by the results of the 1984 Honiara nutrition survey (the most recent), which revealed that 90 percent of the interviewed families ate rice every day, while 76 percent indicated that they ate *kumara* (sweet potato) every day. In the same survey, 62 percent of women reported having a garden, and 25 percent reported having a vegetable garden (*supsup gaden*). The National Nutrition Survey (SIG 1989) showed that rice was the choice food for busy urbanites, particularly with younger people and two-income families. My recent (Jourdan 2007) food surveys in two suburbs of Honiara (Vura and Kukum) show that rice now is even more important in the urban diet. When correlated with the presence of a vegetable garden around the house, these figures indicate a possible link between the consumption of traditional staples and having a garden. Women who had a vegetable garden were more likely to cook local root crops and vegetables than those who did not, as were women who were health conscious and had enough money to buy local produce.

The absence of a vegetable garden cannot solely explain the importance of rice in the urban diet. Other important factors are price, convenience, and taste. In Honiara markets, farmers from the neighboring villages sell their produce. But these have become expensive, and purchasing enough to feed a family is more costly than buying the equivalent amount of rice. Also important is the urban lifestyle, which puts a premium on speed and convenience. Readily accessible in all shops, corner stores, and canteens, easy to carry, quick to cook, easy to handle, rice is convenient. As Mr. Lauga, then director of rice production in the Solomon Islands ministry of agriculture, told me: "*Distaem, pipol save enjoenem laef hem isi*" (Nowadays people want an easy life). In middle-class families, cooking is often left in the hands of a young and often overworked *haosgel*⁷ who prefers cooking a pot of rice for lunch to the washing and peeling of sweet potatoes. In such families, rice is often the only food served for lunch or to children when they return from school. Cooking rice is expedient, quick, and saves money otherwise spent on cooking gas or firewood. In addition, a small quantity goes a long way, and like other local starches, it can be eaten cold. In some middle-class families, electric rice cookers have become popular. Most important, people cook rice because they like it. In the Solomon Islands, where staples are root starches, rice provides a nice change from a repetitive diet. Rice is said to be *suit*, (Pijin, to taste good). White rice is slightly sweet. As it is sweet, it is good, therefore *suit*.

Rice consumption also indexes the passage of generations. Children and young people prefer rice to tubers, and older people prefer tubers to rice. At mealtimes, staples are dished out first and might be followed by a stew of leafy greens, onions, tomatoes, and tinned tuna. Rice but no tubers are for children; tubers but no rice are for grandparents. Members of the parental generation eat both. The sweetness, softness, and whiteness of rice are appealing, particularly to children who, in Honiara, are reluctant to eat root vegetables and green leafy vegetables. Many mothers have complained to me that children only want to eat rice and canned tuna. In some families, this is respected and the child will be fed only rice and tuna.

Where people have access to coconut trees (including schools and plantations), or are able to purchase coconuts at urban markets, it is common to cook rice in coconut milk (Terry Brown, personal communication). This is called “milking the rice.” The result is a sweeter, stickier, and more nutritious rice. Often, especially if rice is prepared for lunch, toppings will be simple and consist of a packet of dry Chinese noodles, or a small amount of tuna, with no vegetables. As a snack, rice is most often eaten with nothing else. People say: “*mi kaekae drae raes nomoa*” (I eat rice with nothing else). This is the snack children often eat when they come home from school.

The basic urban meal is quite predictable but can vary by social class (i.e., financial means), age, and, more importantly, the amount of time people have spent in town. Other sources of variation are the structure of the household (nuclear or extended family), the presence of visiting relatives or wantoks, the number of children, a live-in maid (haosgel), whether the mother is working, etc. Despite these variables, one formula seems to dominate. If “A” is used to refer to the main ingredients and “b” to the secondary ones (*a la* Douglas 1971), with “A” as the starch, two elements signal the importance of rice and other staple starches: first, the sequence in which they are served (they are always dished out first), and second, the quantity served (they are always in large quantity).

In many households, “A” is unambiguously rice. Weekly food journals collected in a 2007 survey of 20 Honiara households across social classes corroborate observations I made in 30 years of research in the city. The journals show that rice is served at almost every meal, and in some cases, for breakfast as well. In some households, “A” includes another starch. In all the households I have visited or lived in, “A” is always served first. In poorer families, and for the majority of children, “b” is a single item and most often consists of second-grade tuna in small quantities (a can of tuna is often shared among six and at times even more people). As noted above, well-off families replace the tuna with fresh fish or meat, and their “1b” serving is bigger than the “1b” served in poorer families. When a second “b” is added, it can be a

small ragout of green leafy vegetables. Whereas a second “b” is rare in poorer families, it is almost obligatory for the wealthier. No dessert is ever served, unless the middle-class family celebrates an occasion, such as a birthday. If fruit is available—a rarity unless people have money or fruit trees near their house—it is eaten at leisure throughout the day and is not considered to be a dessert.

In the 1990s, a government campaign tried to encourage urbanites to diversify their diet and return to the more nutritious Solomon Islands traditional staples. The development of government-supported activities, such as the SupSup garden campaign or NGOs such as the Kastom Garden, renewed interest in traditional foods; but for some urbanites these items have become quasi-luxuries.

FOOD SECURITY

Before the end of World War II, all rice was imported from Australia, the United States, or Asia. With increased demand in the early 1960s, the government of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate (as the country was known before independence in 1978) considered the possibility of producing significant quantities of rice locally (Bennett 1987). This stemmed from a desire to limit imports of rice and diversify local commercial agriculture. Rice by then had become an important food item locally. By seeking to develop rice production, the government was reacting to as well as guiding the transformation of food practices. Between 1966 and 1971, the first rice paddies, which were rain dependent, were established in Guadalcanal around the Ngalimbiu and Matenopo rivers (Huetz de Lemp 1984:51–52). The rice selected was RS-18, a high amino-acid variety recommended by a research station in the Philippines as being suitable for irrigation cultivation in the Solomon Islands (Mariano Lauga, personal communication). Transfers were made to large paddies for irrigation, to ensure a constant production and supply of rice for the local market, and rice production between 1968 and 1979 increased from 2,000 tons to over 10,000 tons (Huetz de Lemp 1984:51).

At the beginning of the 1980s, the paddies were producing around two and a half crops per year. The rice was processed on the spot: dried, milled, bagged, and sent to market under the brand name *Feast Time Rice*. An expansion plan was curtailed by cyclone Namu (1986) which destroyed the paddies and put an end to the local production of rice. Over the years, however, consumers had become disenchanted with the quality of rice produced locally, and complained about its color (deemed to be not white enough), its texture (found to be not sticky enough), and the grains (deemed to be often broken). Solomon Islanders came to favor imported rice for its better quality.

In recent years, with educational institutions run by the missions in the vanguard, efforts have been made by community organizations and schools to produce rice to meet their own needs. The Solomon Islands ministry of agriculture is also encouraging people to grow rice to meet the demands of consumers. With assistance from the Republic of China, which has also distributed seeds and tools, mills have been established along the coast near growing areas. Farmers take their rice to the mill where they are charged between 15 and 20 cents per kilo for processing. So far, 700 ha are under cultivation and have yielded about 2,100 tons of rice per year. In 2010, the Solomon Islands launched a National Rice Sector Policy (2010–2015) to curtail the imbalance between supply and demand of rice now that the per capita consumption of rice is increasing by 2.5 percent per year (SIG 2010:1). To ensure a sufficient supply of rice, the government is keeping imported rice costs low.

These developments have been criticized by grassroots organizations such as the Kastom Gaden Association (“KGA”), whose mandate is to promote indigenous staple food crops. A target of this criticism is the increasing dependency of Solomon Islands farmers on government money, fertilizers, pesticides, and so forth. In a press release issued May 16, 2005, KGA’s manager stated that rice production only succeeds with subsidies and these may not always be available. It also relies on transport, fertilizer, pesticides, and machines that soon break down. In KGA’s experience, most families give up growing rice after a few seasons because it is harder work and more risky than growing root crops like sweet potato.

With the regular devaluation of the Solomon Island dollar (“SBD,” worth US\$0.1261 in 2011) and the world-wide increase in the price of commodities such as corn, wheat, and rice, the price of rice locally has increased tremendously. The government, recognizing the importance of rice for Solomon Islanders, has limited the import duty on rice to 5 percent, while import duties on other food items vary between 10 and 20 percent. Yet, the reductions in the import duty bring little relief for workers at the lower end of the wage scale, who rely on rice as the main source of food. (See Table on price increases of selected commodities since 2002.)

Table
Prices of Selected Commodities (in SBD)

	Solrais Rice 20 kg bag		Canned tuna 2nd grade 180 kg	Sweet potatoes 1 kg heap	Slippery Cabbage (<i>Hibiscus manihot</i>) 1 kg bunch	Imported chicken wings 500 g	Plain white flour 25 kg bag
2002	67.69	3.35/kg	3.73	3.65	5.82	15.44	60.23
2003	81.01	4.05/kg	3.93	2.05	3.88	20.42	93.36
2004	83.35	4.19/kg	4.70	1.72	4.24	20.63	114.86
2005	91.70	4.55/kg	4.94	2.28	4.94	18.67	110.05
2006	99.78	4.99/kg	5.04	2.28	5.01	20.88	114.13
2007*	112.51	5.62/kg	5.25	5.71	5.42	27.50	149.18
2008*	203.08	10.15/kg	6.73	3.77	10.18	35.00	200.51
2009*	295.17	10.25/kg	6.53	3.85	7.22	30.00	177.17
2010	174.00	8.70/kg	6.00	3.30	5.72	30.00	177.00

Source: Honiara Ministry of Finance (SIG 2011a)

SYMBOLIC DIMENSIONS

Advertising the Foreign as Local

The localization of rice went beyond the simple need to produce it locally; it also involved creating needs in the population for a food increasingly thought of as convenient. Companies that imported rice were keen to have people see it as a genuine Solomon Islands food. As of the early 1980s, Honiara residents could hear radio advertisements for commercial items and services, one of which was a jingle for a rice commercial using a calypso rhythm and lyrics in Pijin. A lively and joyful commercial, it stressed the positive dimension of rice eating and fed into people's understanding of rice as a valuable food. The ad made an association between the children's happiness and their eating rice in order to put moral pressure on parents to buy the product.

Newspaper advertisements for rice targeted Solomon Island consumers in two ways: first, they were written in Pijin (newspapers otherwise use English); second, they presented rice as a true Solomon Island food. Typical of its regular advertisements is the one placed by Solrice Ltd. in the December 18, 1992 issue of the *Solomon Star* (see Figure).

By using Pijin, the company is reaching for a level of inclusiveness with the local population that English, the country's official language, would never attain. Pijin is the lingua franca of the country and of everyday life in town. The company's motto, "*Solrais hem barava kaikai blong iumi*" (Solrais is truly our food), places rice among food products available to Solomon Islanders as a local food, and as a "true" food akin to traditional Solomon Islands foods. The company emphasizes a sense of belonging with the

population by the inclusive personal pronoun “*iumi*.” Its etymology derives from the personal pronouns “you” and “me” in English. According to context, it means either “us” or “our,” always including both the speaker and the addressee. In the motto, the symbolic action of Pijin is reinforced by “*iumi*,” which is typically contrasted with the exclusive pronoun “*mifala*,” Thus, a sentence in which “*mifala*” replaces “*iumi*,” as in “*Solrais hem barava kai kai blong mifala*,” would defeat the purpose of using Pijin. The English gloss cannot render the difference easily, even though the literal translation might be similar to that of the previous sentence. A sentence using “*mifala*” would have the opposite meaning, implying “not yours.” By using the pronoun “*iumi*” in their ads, companies try to evoke strong emotions towards the budding nation. Note that immediately after independence, “*iumi*” was used often in Solomon Islands and heard in many catch phrases around the country; e.g., *Ples blong iumi* (our land).

Figure



As with other commercial ventures in the Solomon Islands, companies that import rice (such as Solrice Ltd. and Fielders Industries [S.I.] Ltd.) have sought to be visible in the mind of consumers at various significant historical or calendar events. For instance, in the July 6, 1989 issue of a local newspaper, the following message appeared:

The Management & Staff of Solomons Rice Company wish to congratulate the Government and the people of the Solomon Islands for their 11th year of Independence. The Solomons Rice Company will always remain the importer and distributor of Trukai and Sunwhite Rice. Trukai and Sunwhite hemi no. 1 raes bilong iumi, bifo, destaem and olowe nomoa [Trukai and Sunwhite is our best (i.e., preferred) rice, in the old days, now, and forever].

The brand name, *Trukai*, is noteworthy. In Pijin, *kai* means food, and here rice is presented as local food. As with the previous ad, the company seeks to localize rice in a way that conceals its importation from Australia. Here, too,

“iumi” makes the foreign as part of the local community. In addition, the line “bifoa, destaem and olowe nomoa” conjures up “*taem bifoa*” (in the old days) and adds legitimacy to rice as a true Solomon Islands food. But it is also a direct reference to Christian scripture.

It resonates with Christian doxology. “Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever more shall be,” which echoes biblical descriptions of God, especially by St. Paul. Whoever wrote the jingle was drawing on his Christian heritage, though perhaps unconsciously. (Terry Brown, personal communication)

Today, there are no ads for rice in local newspapers except to announce price, but one occasionally hears a new jingle on the radio that advertises Solrais, the largest distributor. The emphasis nowadays is on reminding consumers of rice’s versatility, with the hope of curbing the monotony of always eating rice. Solomon Islanders have developed a taste for flour based products and are increasingly using bread, biscuits, and cakes as an alternative to rice. Advertising strategies may change with the increasing cultivation of rice in the country and the recent importation of Asian rice that some Chinese shops sell at a low price (\$90 per 20 kg bag), undercutting Australian rice. Indeed, the price of rice is a concern, with some consumers looking for bargains in various shops before buying what they need for the day. In Honiara, where the politico-economic crisis of the early 2000s caused the cost of living to soar, the disparity between prices and the minimum wage is even greater than it used to be.

Aesthetics: Color, Texture, and Taste

A gustatory characteristic of Melanesian cuisine is its blandness. In villages, food is often boiled, steamed in bamboo or wooden bowls, or cooked (technically steamed) in a stone oven (*motu*), with layered leaves holding in the heat from hot stones. Whatever is cooked is always served with no seasonings, except for the occasional addition of coconut milk or cream for texture and flavor. Fat is relished, particularly that of pigs on the rare occasions when they are killed. Spices such as ginger and turmeric are grown but are used for aesthetic purposes (body decorations; dyes for leaves, tapas, or mats) or for magic, and never, to my knowledge, to flavor food.

Townpeople have adopted gas stoves, and developed a taste for mild spices (and for hot spices in some cases), such as curry powder, turmeric, garlic, and soy sauce. Typically, rice and other staples are boiled with no spices or salt. People like rice’s starchiness and stickiness. A distributor of Australian rice told me in 2008 that his customers like glutinous rice that sticks and do not like long grain rice, which does not stick. Stickiness is like

the texture that traditional staples such as taro, cassava, and yams acquire when cooked, particularly when mashed into gooey puddings. Many people eat with their fingers, and sticky rice is easier to handle.

As with other local staples, portions of rice are always huge and always dished out first. In the Pacific, most people's conception of a good meal is a large quantity of starchy food plus some accompaniment (Pollock 1992:27). They say that a good meal makes one's stomach feel full. Rice, because it is filling and served in huge quantities, succeeds on all counts.

GIFTS AND TABOOS

Ethnographers have repeatedly pointed out the centrality of food in exchange and in the creation and reproduction of social ties in the Pacific. In the Pacific "food was used as an expression of mutual aid and support, as well as for more symbolic expressions of generosity" (Pollock 1992:18). Food's importance is impressed upon children from an early age. While they are learning how to speak, Kaluli children of Papua New Guinea are also socialized in how to share food (Schieffelin (1990), and the same is true in the Solomon Islands. Conceiving food as the cement of community is central to social life in Honiara. Hospitality requires offering visitors food, and family or clan members who arrive from the provinces bring vegetables and root crops from their garden. Sweet potatoes, tapioca, or even better, taro offered to the host is a treat in Honiara, where these have to be purchased at markets. Hosts relish these gifts for what they are as much as for what they mean.

Not to bring food is a breach of etiquette and signals a visitor's stinginess or disrespect. When local vegetables are unavailable, visitors may bring a bag of rice. The most prized variety is the white rice with unbroken grains, and people tend to make disparaging comments at the sight of brown rice, considered to be of poor quality and unpleasant taste. The size of the bag (from 1 kg to 20 kg) will reveal the means of the visitors and their feelings towards their host. It will also indicate how long they are likely to stay. To be considered appropriate, a bag of rice should be commensurate with the number of visitors and their intended length of stay. In ways reminiscent of the plantation period, visiting wantoks say upon arrival at the house of their family, "*mi tekem kam reson blong mi*" (I have brought my ration). They may present it formally or put it directly in the kitchen pantry. The gift is a sign of respect that opens the door for exchange. At the same time, it acknowledges that food in town is expensive and that visiting wantoks must contribute to the family pot. This is deemed crucial by the hosts, who are concerned that the visitors not overly burden the household's budget. Reciprocity is a must in the Solomon Islands and rice, along with clothing, tools (such as a machete or

chain saw), and money, are still among the obligatory gifts that people returning home distribute. It is impossible for anyone to consider visiting "home" for the end-of-year vacation without taking at least one 20 kg bag of rice for their village kin.

Rice consumption is increasing in the villages, particularly with the wealthier villages and households. While rice is still a prestige item in many remote areas, because few villagers have the cash needed to buy it, it is carried by canteens in coastal villages with a direct boat or road link to a town. In the past, its rarity and sophisticated urban status made it a prime item to serve at feasts and ceremonies. But now it is a regular feature of marriage and mortuary feasts, and of any gathering organized by politicians seeking re-election because it feeds a large number of people easily, and because people like it. In addition, rice is also the most generic and culturally neutral staple, and thus the most versatile. When in doubt as to what to bring to others, people bring rice. That criterion works well with large groups. Also, like sweet potatoes, rice is exempted from most of the food taboos and restrictions of the Kwaio of Malaita (David Akin, personal communication). The incorporation of rice in prestige events, such as bridewealth exchanges, shows how successfully it has been integrated in Solomon Island social relationships. That it has to be bought increases the prestige of the person who presents it. Being lumped with local starches in terms of taste and texture makes it a Solomon Island food that has its place in important ceremonies.

For the villagers who do not have easy access to cash, rice is a quasi-luxury, but also a resource for the influx of people during vacations, elections, etc. When one needs to feed a large crowd without depleting one's vegetable gardens, rice is the food of choice. One thereby appreciates the gift of rice made by politicians vying for votes in rural areas. Politicians are in many ways similar to Big Men, whose powers resided in their ability to provide food and to convince their constituents that they are powerful leaders.

RESISTANCE

The desire for rice is wearing thin for many people who have lived on it for so long. People say they get tired of eating rice and canned tuna every day of the week and are bored with food that is bland and repetitive, which is exactly what their forebears used to say about the traditional diet. Nowadays, there is a renewed interest in the traditional foods. Whenever people can afford it, many will try to include them in their meals. This interest does not stem exclusively from the desire by urbanites to recapture a past seen as pristine and peaceful. Preparing the old cuisine is labor-intensive and unappealing to young people born and bred in town. If nostalgia plays a part in this

renewed interest for home food, it is more likely to be associated with older people who experienced food in the village and often seek to rekindle their memories by cooking food in a stove oven on the weekend.

A renewed interest in traditional foods also stems from a desire for a diet that is more diversified. Nutritional factors are a secondary concern, at most. Many now flock to newly opened food counters that serve local vegetables cooked in a stone oven and prepared with imagination and flair. These are *nouvelle cuisine* dishes, Melanesian style. The new ways of using traditional food items and cooking methods, while presenting them in a simple way, appeal to the desire for new food experiences that still speak of home. More politically vocal diners talk about eating “our own food” and not that of the Chinese, a direct reference to rice. Now that Solomon Islanders travel overseas in large numbers, they realize that it is normal to not have rice at every meal. Rice has become associated with the Chinese, the powerful and successful merchants who control the retail economy in Honiara. Solomon Islanders distinguish between the Chinese who have been in the country for a few generations, and are thought to be more favorably disposed towards the local population, and those who have arrived recently. The latter are understood as eager to make a quick dollar at the expense of the country, and rumor has it that they keep and invest their wealth in foreign countries.

When the country was a British Protectorate, eating European food was akin to partaking of their world. With the Solomon Islands now independent (1978), part of the symbolic value of rice is undergoing a semantic shift. No longer the food of white men (most of whom have left the country), rice has become associated with the Chinese, who are now powerful in the country.

A final factor that may explain the emerging resistance to rice is that the price of rice has reached exorbitant levels. Might it be that, as many Solomon Islanders no longer can afford to buy rice, the lack of choice is expressed as the desire to turn to “true island food”?

CONCLUSION

This article contributes to understanding the homogenization or heterogeneization of local food systems brought about by globalization and the processes of glocalization of foreign foods into local ones. The examples presented here show the advantages of thinking about a mixed and subtle process of culinary change. Through a process of reanalysis, a foreign food item has come to be understood and considered as a local one. The adoption of rice by Solomon Islanders is an excellent example of food creolization.

The success of rice as a town staple is linked to various factors. For a long time rice was conceived as an exotic food, with foreignness a part of its

appeal. By its association with the white man's world, consumption of rice in the early decades of the BSIP (circa 1920) was seen as participating in that world. Eating rice became the sign that one had access to cash, and therefore that one was part of a world that was not based only on a subsistence economy. One had moved beyond the village to where having money was important, and eating rice was seen as a form of gustatory sophistication.

Over the years, rice in the diet of urbanites grew in importance. This growth was linked to pragmatic factors: rice was readily accessible, reasonably priced, easy to carry, filling, and being easy to cook was advantageous to busy urbanites. People developed a taste for it. In addition, rice proved a welcomed change from a repetitive diet. Paradoxically, the situation in town is now a reversal of the past: rice has become the most common food, whereas more traditional starches, such as potatoes, yams, and taro, are rarer and offer a welcome change.

This glocalization of a food item is facilitated by major social transformations: increasing urbanization; an increasing gap between the haves and have-nots; increasing levels of education; and the development of social classes. In the sea of changes sweeping over the Solomons, food acts as a site of modernity that is highly visible and indexes people's increased economic means, and their social identity.

Solomon Islanders are keen observers of the outside world and have shown over the years of contact with Europeans that they want to engage with it and with what they see as modernity. Appropriation of lifestyles through the appropriation of the foodstuffs one believes to go with them is one way to experience this world, as "individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern" (Appadurai 1996:4). But as they adopted rice, Islanders did a reanalysis of its identity by recognizing and celebrating the characteristics that most eaters like in local staple foods such as taro, cassava, yams, and sweet potatoes—sticky, bland, and filling. They integrated it into their repertoire alongside other staples. For this reanalysis of a potential staple to work the way it did for rice, the economic context must encourage it. As I have shown, town life is conducive for the practical advantages of rice when planning a meal: readily available, good yield, reasonably priced, and easy to prepare and cook. When both the symbolic and the economic conditions are met, the foreign food commodity becomes a local food staple.

NOTES

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2. Historical research shows that the sweet potato (*Ipomea batata*) also was “imported” into the Solomon Islands.
3. I am grateful to Terry Brown for supplying this information.
4. Recently, government efforts at introducing new crops for market development or to diversify the local diet have been met with enthusiasm. When I leave the Solomons after fieldwork, I am constantly asked to bring seeds of new crops next time I come; and women, the local gardeners, are particularly anxious to know about new foods.
5. I am grateful to Kevin Tuite for reminding me of the importance of this “tool kit.”
6. From the English “one” and “talk,” *wantok* refers to people of the same ethnolinguistic area. Increasingly however, the term has come to include friendship and shared experiences.
7. From the English “house girl,” usually a young female family member sent from the village to work in the household of urban kin. The ambiguity of being both kin and paid employee is often the source of difficulties for the girl.

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