

Anti-Commodities Revisited : Food, Culture, and Resistance

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CHAPTER 3

ANTI-COMMODITIES REVISITED

Food, Culture, and Resistance

SANDIP HAZAREESINGH AND HARRO MAAT

THE antecedents of the concept of anti-commodity lie in a body of critical research that sought to revisit the social histories of commodity production and consumption from the vantage point of societies in the Global South in response to Eurocentric frameworks privileging Western perceptions, actors, and origins. Here, the crucial initiatives were the Commodities of Empire and the related Commodities and Anti-Commodities projects that came to the fore during the period 2007–2013, providing the framework for annual workshops that led to a series of publications, most notably a special issue of the *Journal of Global History* in 2009.¹ This research attempted to incorporate in a single analytical framework both global spatial movements and exchanges and local staying-in-place of plants and crops with a view to revealing complex commodity histories beyond colonial narratives of successful export-oriented production in colonized societies. One important element identified by this scholarship was the continued resilience and viability of peasant modes of production anchored to local knowledge systems that enabled the maintenance or adaptation of preferred crops and foods in various parts of the world.

This work also drew on previous suggestive studies of peasant agency and creativity, particularly in the context of the main staple food crop of the Global South, rice—notably Paul Richards’s work on African farming systems and Francesca Bray’s analysis of the productivity of Asian smallholder paddy agriculture.² Simultaneously, Judith Carney’s and Richard Rosomoff’s important book, *In the Shadow of Slavery*, demonstrated how enslaved Africans brought a body of farming knowledge that enabled them both to survive in and to Africanize the food systems of the plantation societies of the Americas.³ It painted a picture of resilience and agency maintained in the face of overwhelming odds while providing fresh insights into the pervasive influence of African plants and crops in the Atlantic World as they moved from the south to the north. Researchers involved

in the Commodities and Anti-Commodities project specifically sought to give prominence to local counter-movements unleashed by colonial powers' agrarian intrusions into, and dislocations of, colonized societies.

Anti-commodity was conceived as an original lens and a fresh perspective to re-examine local peasant agency in the context of colonial agrarian policies, paying due attention to James Scott's exhortation to understand everyday forms of peasant resistance, 'the prosaic but constant struggle between the peasantry and those who seek to extract labour, food, taxes, rents and interests from them'.⁴ This research was brought together in an edited collection in 2016, *Local Subversions of Colonial Cultures: Commodities and Anti-Commodities in Global History*, which defined anti-commodity as:

an enduring form of production and action in opposition either to actual commodities or to wider social processes of commodification, rather than simply a momentary form of protest or reaction. It refers to a range of local productive processes associated with values other than the purely economic, that are either maintained from the past or originally created to confront the various modes of commodification primarily but not exclusively unleashed by European colonial hegemonies.⁵

This definition has been seen as a productive starting point for further exploration of the subject in subsequent studies, discussed in the next section.

ANTI-COMMODITY LITERATURE IN HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY CONTEXTS

Primarily focusing on the colonial period, authors in the *Local Subversions* collection employed the concept of anti-commodity with different emphases reflecting the diversity of the thematic, historical, and spatial contexts of their research as well as their particular theoretical preferences. The concept's versatility meant that it could be employed to productively define a process of sanitary resistance against disease-causing cash crops amongst cultivators in late nineteenth-century Punjab,⁶ an unstable pattern of smallholdings in the shadow of commodity plantations during the same period in Cuba,⁷ as well as to understand a series of labour strikes against the colonial commodity railway network in late colonial Kenya.⁸

At the same time, a striking feature that emerged from the essays was the importance of food-crop sustainability as a powerful motive for engagement in anti-commodity production. Hence, in nineteenth-century Sierra Leone, free peasants reworked the 'red' and 'white' rice varieties of the plantation system through astute seed-preservation choices geared to achieving food security;⁹ while in early twentieth-century Sumatra,

smallholders persisted in cultivating 'upland rice' to maintain their diverse farming systems in the face of the colonial drive to intensify the production of cash crops.¹⁰ Similarly, in nineteenth-century western India, peasant resistance to growing American varieties in favour of local, country cotton was based on the latter's traditional complementary role in a diverse cropping system designed to ensuring sustainable millet-based food supplies.¹¹ Moreover, staple foods such as rice were also performative of local cultural identity,¹² involving sacred ritual practices that could also sometimes carry religious injunctions against growing 'the white man's crop'.¹³

It is perhaps not surprising that food featured prominently in these exemplars of historical anti-commodity practices. Of all human products, food embodies perhaps most convincingly the primacy of use over exchange values. As producer of life, health, and culture, food possesses a range of values that precede in importance economic and market attributes and have often provided the cultural basis for political and economic autonomy. In a recent historical study of Haiti, Johnhenry Gonzalez has shown how runaway slaves set up rural communities based entirely on subsistence agriculture with cassava, yams, and sweet potatoes replacing sugar, thus 'decommodifying' colonial sugar plantations. Known as *marronage*, this process rapidly came to characterize the entire country with the result that Haiti evolved into a 'maroon nation':

The Haitian Revolution succeeded because the former slaves were able to create a system of property ownership and labor organization that was new but also rooted in West African economic and cultural lifeways, as well as the system of semi-autonomous provision gardens cultivated by slaves in the colonial era. In place of the sugar economy and its deadly marriage of slave labor and industrial agriculture, former slaves built an economy that was completely nonindustrial, and a labor system based on decentralized and autonomous production.¹⁴

Indeed, in Haiti, *marronage* formed the launch pad for the 1791–1804 revolution that ended both French colonial rule and the early industrial capitalism of the plantation economy on the island.¹⁵

The anti-commodity concept has been effectively deployed in some recent studies of crop commodification in the contemporary world, notably an essay by Andrew Flachs and Glenn Davis Stone that examines farmer knowledge in relation to the commodification of rice, cotton, and vegetable crops in Telengana, southern India. The authors make the important point that the least commodified crops (i.e. the vegetable and indigenous rice food crops grown for domestic consumption) are also those that embody the highest level of farmer knowledge rooted in local farming traditions and food culture; however, they also suggest that these crops are less important to local livelihoods than the hybridized varieties of cotton and rice where knowledge and expertise reside in agencies external to the farming household. They conclude that local knowledge of crops, a key feature of anti-commodity production, is destined to pass and give way to 'brands sold by experts' in the course of time.¹⁶ This view is perhaps unduly pessimistic, as it underestimates the distinctiveness of food crops in relation to commercial

crops and their enduring primary importance in the eyes of small farmers both for maintaining food security and preserving cultural heritage—that is their non-market and anti-commodifying attributes.

Indeed, these dimensions have emerged as particularly relevant to the radical critique of the dominant commodified industrial food system historically originating in plantation agriculture. This critical perspective, which has been gathering momentum in recent years, identifies the narrative of ‘food as commodity’ as the hegemonic discourse about how our present food system is valued as a self-evidently global force for good by focusing exclusively on its tradable features.¹⁷ In fact, geared to producing ever cheaper food through large-scale crop monocultures, this system has, over the past couple of centuries, contributed to environmental destruction, climate warming, loss of cultural agency and biodiversity, and unhealthy diets globally.¹⁸ Instead, an alternative conception of ‘food as commons’ has been proposed whereby ‘the multiple dimensions of food, other than the economic ones, are as equally and properly valued’, insisting that the main activities associated with food—cultivation, collection, preparation, consumption, and taste—are inherently cultural practices.¹⁹ In this context, small farms and farmers are viewed as pivotal as they often perpetuate local traditions and cultures of low-energy diversified cropping, thus creating local autonomies from global capital flows underpinned by a ‘de-commodifying’ logic as compared with large agricultural enterprises.²⁰ They are therefore seen as crucial to ecologically sustainable and heritage-preserving food futures, potentially heralding a change of direction in the historical trend towards commodification.

Another study of commodification, authored by Dominic Glover and Glenn Davis Stone provides a rich, nuanced analysis of the marketing of ‘heirloom rices’ grown historically as an anti-commodity crop for cultural and spiritual purposes in the Cordillera mountains of the Philippines. Interestingly, the authors suggest that commodification of these indigenous rices, arising from new opportunities to access an extended network of exchange, actually represents a strategy deployed to benefit the small farming communities and preserve aspects of the original anti-commodity rice culture amidst the vastly changed economic circumstances of the region. However, they view this process ‘whereby the rice and its surrounding culture are being changed in order to preserve them’ as inherently risky and difficult to achieve in practice.²¹ In contrast, Ronald Nigh’s and Alma Gonzalez’s study of alternative food networks in Mexico and France conveys a more hopeful perspective on this process of partial commodification. These networks are viewed as forms of ‘anti-commodity production’ involving, in Mexico, organic food produce with an emphasis on taste and nutrition, rural-urban linkages between producers and consumers to promote social solidarity, and a system of participatory certification that provides transparency and mutual learning. The networks also offer opportunities for sharing agroecological values and practices such as seed saving, diversification of crops, chemical-free production, emphasis on traditional local foods, and the organization of women farmers’ cooperatives. Such alternative foodways have sprung up in opposition to the dumping of cheap calorie-rich food by transnational corporations such as Walmart, which has had an adverse impact on the health of the population.²²

While also focusing primarily on the contemporary world, another body of recent research has sought to investigate the historical dimensions of farming and food systems, moving away from presentist economic frameworks of analysis centred on price-driven livelihoods. This research moves beyond conventional archival history and typically deploys interdisciplinary and participatory methods involving archaeology, cultural anthropology, ethnobotany, and oral history. It is concerned both to reassert the importance of non-market, often non-secular beliefs and values inherited from the past through which farmers ‘know’ and prioritize their crops and foods and to challenge deficit views of pre-colonial food systems in the Global South. In these studies, ‘history’, in the sense of remembering and valuing local pasts as ‘cultural memory’, remains an active and cherished influence on the present and future of farmers’ lives.²³ Cultural memory continues to shape alternative epistemologies that enable farmers to cultivate ‘happy landscapes’ offering spiritual and emotional sustenance.²⁴ Subject to continual reassessment, history can also reveal the vitality of pre-commodified indigenous food crops, such as the pearl millets used by West African farmers to weather the worst drought recorded in the last millennium.²⁵ It thus also furnishes insights on past strategies used by farmers to meet climatic and other challenges, which remain relevant to the redesigning of future food systems.²⁶ This research perceives the past and its relationship to the present and future as more open, fluid, and changeable than Glover’s and Stone’s more conventional view, whereby ways of life that shaped the production of anti-commodities ‘have passed into history and will not return.’²⁷

The two case studies that follow further elaborate on the relationship between food and anti-commodity production, following lines of inquiry suggested in *Local Subversions* as well as in the more recent literature discussed above. In the first part, we return to the concept of *marronage* but move the historical spotlight from Haiti to the British and Dutch colonial territories in the Caribbean where both colonial powers established an extensive plantation sector based first on the labour of enslaved Africans and subsequently of indentured Asian labourers. We show how fleeing to the countryside, escaped slaves created new maroon communities that produced impressive food surpluses based on an alternative, anti-commodity system of self-sufficient agriculture. In the second part, we travel to the post-colonial world with the primary aim of shedding further light on capabilities derived from cultural heritage, which are increasingly recognized as crucial to anti-commodity production. Based on oral history interviews with women farmers, we explore women smallholders’ traditional knowledges and rituals pertaining to *ragi* or finger-millet cultivation in the State of Karnataka in southern India.

MARRONAGE AS ANTI-COMMODITY FOOD PRODUCTION

The coastal region of the Guianas lies to the north of the Amazon basin and was for several centuries divided between British, Dutch, and French colonial powers—British

and Dutch Guiana becoming the independent states of Guyana and Suriname. The colonial history of the Guianas has strong affinities with the plantation societies in north Brazil and most Caribbean islands where commoditization extended to human beings. The slave trade and, after the abolition of slavery, indenture and other forms of recruitment led to a massive global relocation of people who were valued first and foremost as labour resources for the plantation system.²⁸ The commoditization of labour was directly challenged by revolts and escape by the plantation labour force. *Marronage*, forms of escape from plantation slave labour leading to the setting up of unauthorized settlements in marginal territories, was premised on the belief that escaping slaves could survive on their own farming skills independently of the food provisions on estates. In the Guianas, maroon groups primarily settled in the eastern region of Suriname.

Plantation production relied heavily on overseas trade. Transporting goods was impossible without carriers, cart drivers, boatmen, and transshipment teams. The sea-going vessels had to be loaded with sugar, cotton, coffee, and other plantation products after food items and other imported products were offloaded. The movement of goods and people comprised the essence of the system of slavery and restrictions of movement imposed on the enslaved workforce became one of its many contradictions. The official trade thus drew 'illicit' counter-movements and transactions, creating extensive informal networks within and between plantation economies.²⁹ The result was a very lively parallel economy that plantation owners and administrators tried in vain to control. Town or public markets evolved into key places where a variety of marketable goods produced or gathered by smallholders were exchanged to supplement their subsistence crops—most prominently fruits, vegetables, herbs, grains, fish, and meats. These markets were almost exclusively run by enslaved people, free smallholders, and maroons with women often playing a leading role; they functioned as crucial nodes in the network of anti-commodity production in enslaved communities' food gardens, on maroon fields, and on the subsistence farms of freed slaves.

In the Guianas, resistance can be seen primarily as a strategy to protect the spaces in which enslaved workers had established an alternative social world rather than simply the result of enduring discontent with the repressive plantation regime. While tasks and work hours were officially set by estate managers, their implementation often allowed the workforce a measure of autonomy.³⁰ Teams of fieldworkers were able to vary the daily rhythm and specifics of the set tasks according to the size and layout of plantation fields, the nature of the crops, and the period of the growing season. In particular, timber plantations offered substantial operational space, as concessions to fell trees involved areas of forests that could stretch out over hundreds of hectares.³¹ Being far away from the estate premises invited the option of *marronage*, which estate managers could try and prevent by conceding more time for the tasks set and for domestic activities such as preparing meals, collecting forest products, hunting game, or trapping fish. Much of the time won from formal duties was spent on growing food crops, hunting and gathering, preparing meals, and convivial eating. *Marronage* was the ultimate act of creating space for living autonomous lives and for doing agriculture differently. The maroons

formed a 'runaway peasantry' that evolved into full-time smallholders following the abolition of slavery.³²

As a deliberate movement away from commodity production that characterized the plantation system, small-scale farming became an arena where choice and cultural values could be performed. This anti-commodity process included the rearrangement of labour time and a different mode of land use as well as the subversion of existing institutional, social, and economic arrangements to facilitate new patterns of exchange. Maroon farming functioned as the counterpoint to the commodity-focused plantation system. Provision gardens centred on food crops were at the heart of maroon culture, coexisting with less autonomous activities such as working on the fields with cash crops and other tasks set by the estate manager. The gardens were distinct in the way food was cultivated, including the setting up and tilling of the plots, the selection and planting of different food crops species and varieties, and the use of the harvested produce. More than just a choice of particular food crops, anti-commodity production implied specific crop compositions that reflected a concern for food security. For example, combinations of crops or crop varieties were planted at different times of the year to anticipate availability of labour and secure fresh produce over a longer period. These arrangements were also intrinsically connected to norms and agreements about the division of labour within and between households, community demographics, as well as characteristics of soils, landscape, ecology, and climate.

The limitations of historical records make it difficult to reconstruct in detail farming activities on the provision gardens. The best we can do is to read ideologically Eurocentric and racist narratives of colonial observers 'against the grain' to at least partially recover maroon practices and meanings. Most colonial accounts did not consider enslaved communities' farming activities to be 'proper' agriculture. In a 'handbook' he wrote in 1787 for his fellow estate managers, coffee-plantation manager Anthony Blom went into great detail about the fields for sugar, coffee, cocoa, cotton, and tobacco, and provision grounds that were part of the cropping scheme. These official provision grounds (*kostgronden*) were distinguished from 'negro provision' (sic) (*negerkost*).³³ The former contained mostly starchy crops like cassava, plantain, and taro. Food crops were also grown on newly cleared plantation fields as a way to prepare these fields for the main cash crop. A plantation field thus could have either a food crop or a cash crop and sometimes both, as in the observed case of young coffee plantings surrounded by plantains as a shadow crop for three or four years until the coffee shrubs had matured. When cash crop yields diminished, the fields were cleared and left fallow for some years and then planted with new crops.

Blom observed that the enslaved communities divided their fields amongst themselves and grew a wider variety of crops. Pulses, root crops, okra, yam, groundnut, sesame, pumpkin, and watermelon are specified, but there must have been even more, given the items that he and other contemporary observers mentioned in passing such as pepper, potato, various leafy vegetables, fruit trees, and medicinal plants. It is likely that the immediate surroundings of houses and sheds, pathway edges, embankments, and fallow fields offered additional spaces for the cultivation of edible

plants. For plantation administrators, these small patches of land were negligible and their produce a marginal reduction of the economic costs for provisions. For the enslaved communities, however, every plant grown was part of a valuable, if scattered, agroecology that formed the basis of anti-commodity production: establishing this required both intense bargaining and concealment of their own time at the risk of brutal punishment.

Colonial observers also remarked that slaves used particular foods for special occasions—for example, offerings of meat, vegetables, and rice at funeral ceremonies.³⁴ It is indeed quite remarkable to see rice mentioned in the Guiana context prior to the first experiments with this grain as a commercial food crop, which began in the mid-nineteenth century. As a grain crop it would require substantial labour to make it worth growing as a main food crop. This suggests that enslaved communities planted small patches with rice for additional consumption and ceremonial purposes. It might also be the case that smugglers, trafficking a variety of goods to and from the Guianas, brought rice and foods that were grown in other places. Another possibility is that rice was one of the items exchanged between slaves and maroons, the latter growing rice on a more substantial scale near their settlements probably at least as early as the mid-eighteenth century.

The escaped slaves who formed maroon communities in the Guianas took up farming in ways that combined the cultivation of crops in their compounds as they had practised on the estate provision grounds with crops grown on more extensive fields created by slash and burn of forests. Pursuing runaway bands and tasked with destroying the deserted farm fields he and his men encountered, mercenary soldier John Stedman has nonetheless provided an interesting insight into not only the variety of crops they ransacked but their rapid re-emergence once the soldiers had gone. He refers to 'several cotton and plantain trees, *okera* or *althea* (okra), pigeon peas, maize, pineapples and some rice. All which had again spontaneously sprung up since our last devastation' (p. 294).³⁵ This indicates that either the same occupiers had returned or that other runaways had arrived and put the same farming space to good use.

When maroon groups became free colonial citizens in the mid-nineteenth century, colonial sources became somewhat less overtly racist and hostile to their lifestyles. The sawmill owner A. M. Coster, writing in 1866 about his visits to maroon villages, was impressed by their friendliness and hard work, which served him well in purchasing logs. The seasonal variety and patterning of food crops emerge clearly from his accounts. Of the main foods, rice and cassava, the first ran out in the dry season when *napi* (sweet potato), yams, and *tayer* (American taro) became more important. Leaves or stems from a *Lobelia* species, *amaranth* and *tayer*, were used as vegetables, and peanuts appeared to be their favourite ingredients for all kinds of dishes.³⁶ Distributing crops and varieties in fields and over seasons allowed the maroons to distance themselves from the extreme commodity-focused production of the plantation sector, manage their societies in the way they wanted, and acquire a new social status as a result.

More details about the variation in food crops grown by the Maroons came to light in the twentieth century when agronomists belonging to the colonial agricultural research

station visited the maroon villages. In the 1950s, entomologist Dirk Geijskes recognized the wider significance of the crops in the maroon fields:

From a more historical perspective it is relevant to point out some imported plants from Africa that are used by the Bush Negroes (sic), such as *agobo* (bambara groundnut) and *bongila* (sesame). It is likely that there are also varieties, of crops still cultivated today, from the time the escaped slaves took them from the plantations.³⁷

Geijskes's observation suggests that there were deep historical continuities in the range of crop species and varieties he found in the maroon fields that had persisted from the time these communities had settled. However, the trade and exchanges between Maroons, people on estates, and city markets implied continuous uptake and marketing of newly introduced crops and crop varieties.

Recent ethnobotanical studies on the diversity of crops and other plants in the maroon villages reveal a much larger set of species and varieties. A study in 2015 by Tinde van Andel and her team in two maroon villages—one located in the same Tapanahoni river area that Geijskes visited and the other on the upper Suriname River—found twenty-five of forty-one of the documented species introduced to the Americas.³⁸ In 2015, most of the same crops were present as in Geijskes's observations from the 1950s, but, using more fine-grained research methods, the team were able to identify a wider range of varieties. In the case of rice in particular, the varieties used by different maroon groups reveal a dynamic stock open to renewal and adaptation. The 2015 study found a similar number (twenty-five) of named rice varieties as in 1950 (twenty-two) but only six of the names overlapped.

A follow-up expedition by the team in 2017 to six maroon settlements on both sides of the Maroni river revealed even more variation. The rice fields from which samples were taken had up to seven different varieties, and three on average.³⁹ The women who farmed these fields gave very interesting reasons why certain varieties were preferred. They explained that although different varieties are often mixed for storage purposes, seeds are more carefully selected for their specific qualities in the field and expected tastiness as food in the kitchen. Most varieties had a little story attached to the name. The variety Milly, for example, was credited to a runaway woman 'who introduced this rice to the Maroni River in times of slavery when people did not yet live in the forest . . . when they had not yet created villages in the woods' (p. 10).⁴⁰

In this study, maroons and enslaved workers denied the plantation system's attempted dehumanization inherent in their primary status as resources for the production of valuable cash crops for export by initially wresting time concessions from estate managers, which gradually enabled them to establish an alternative world, imbued with their own priorities and anti-commodity values. This took the shape of provision gardens and small farms devoted to the cultivation of a variety of foods and domestically valued crops, which have tended to persist over time. These autonomous spaces were characterized by self-sufficient farming and culinary creativity, as shown by practices such as changes in land use, emphasis on tasty foods, and the naming of different varieties of rice according to their cultural references and historical memories.

FINGER-MILLET ANTI-COMMODITY CULTURE IN SOUTHERN INDIA

The small, self-sufficient farming settlements established by maroon communities on the coastal Caribbean represented a ‘counter-plantation system’⁴¹ that remains a historical exemplar of a non-market food system. This section discusses an important aspect of its historical evolution in the contemporary ‘food as commons’ movement whereby the cultural dimensions of food, including non-secular ways of knowing, are recognized as particularly significant to anti-commodity practices. We focus on women smallholders’ cultivation of *ragi* (finger millet) in the region of Kanakapura in Karnataka’s Ramanagara district in the context of a campaign to revive the popularity of millets. This part of southern Karnataka has historically been known as *ragi* country—the traditional staple food of local small farmers.

Millets were one of the many crops on the move from Africa, in this instance to India, over three thousand years ago.⁴² Finger millet still predominates amongst cereal crops grown, and smallholders cultivate it mostly under rainfed conditions within a diverse cropping system that includes paddy, maize, sugar cane, groundnut, pigeon pea, and a wide range of pulses, vegetables, and fruits. Crops rely primarily on the south-west monsoon rainfall (June–September), which is highly variable in a dry agro-climatic region. Specifically as food, however, everyday consumption of *ragi* has been declining in the villages of southern Karnataka over the past thirty years as a result of the availability of cheap rice introduced by the Indian State’s Public Distribution System (PDS) in the wake of the Green Revolution. Some of the farmers we interviewed observed that during this period, ‘it became cheaper to buy rice than to grow *ragi*’.

As in Mexico, this cheap food regime has led to the devaluing of traditional micronutrient-rich food crops such as millets and pulses, resulting in poor nourishment and health outcomes for the local rural population, particularly women and children. In response, an influential millet revival campaign has emerged in Karnataka (and other parts of India) over the past couple of decades, spearheaded by farmer activists, organizations, and trade unions as well as by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) promoting sustainable agriculture. The campaign emphasizes millets’ nutritional and environmentally friendly advantages in relation to rice, which include richness in protein, fibres, and micronutrients such as iron, zinc, and calcium, which rural women and children in particular have been found to be deficient in; moreover, they have a higher carbon absorption capacity and use water more efficiently, requiring just one fifth of the amount needed for growing rice while also able to withstand higher land temperatures.

One Karnataka-based NGO, Green Foundation, has drawn on local farmer knowledge and use of indigenous seeds to promote their wider take-up by smallholders in the region. To this effect, it has established three community seed banks in Kanakapura, which are run by *Janadhanya*—an association of women small farmers operating as a network of producer groups. The seed banks provide farmers who require them free

seeds in exchange for a commitment to give back twice the amount they borrowed. One farmer, Hombalamma, has acquired a public reputation as an eminent seed saver or *Beeja Matha* (Mother of Seeds). Historically in India, and the Global South more generally, selecting, saving, storing, and reproducing local indigenous seeds have primarily been based on women's knowledge and expertise. In the villages of Kanakapura, girls are taught by mothers and grandmothers how to sow and preserve seeds from a very young age.

'I have no education, but I have knowledge,' Hombalamma tells us. 'Men don't have this knowledge and they can't multi-task'. She perceives seeds as living, almost human, entities. 'They will not grow unless nurtured and loved like a child', she goes on.⁴³ She explains how for the past twenty-five years, she has been preparing and using a pure, organic castor oil derived from castor seeds to coat seeds from indigenous *ragi* and other food and medicinal plants, thus preserving them from pests and insects. This process of seed preservation underlines the ontological relationship between the natural and human worlds whereby seeds constantly reproduce both their own and human life by making food possible. Moreover, with hotter weather and the increased frequency of droughts, seed saving from indigenous plants that have a high capacity to survive such conditions has also emerged as a crucial climate-adaptation strategy. The *ragi* revival movement thus draws on local knowledge and reverence of indigenous seeds as producers of life. Indeed, these are perhaps the crucial cultural values that underpin anti-commodity food production.

Hombalamma and her family enjoy complete autonomy from the commercial seed market and are 'food sovereign', able to grow more than fifty varieties of organic food crops at the optimal time on their land. Finger millet, pigeon pea, and other pulses predominate in a varied cropping system that also includes foxtail millet, hyacinth and broad beans, bottle gourd, pumpkin, tomato, and other fruits. These crops reach maturation at different times during the farming season, thus minimizing risk to food security and ensuring a varied and nutritious diet. 'As I remember from the days of my grandfather, we have been eating tasty, nutritious food from locally raised crops on our farm', she tells us. 'It makes no sense for our bodies to consume foods from the outside that don't give us strength'. Hombalamma keeps what is required to meet family consumption needs and sells the rest in the nearby city of Bangalore.⁴⁴

The proximity of the urban marketplace only an hour and a half away shortens the usual market distance and enables direct contact with consumers: here, the growth over the last couple of decades of 'reflexive consumers'⁴⁵ keen on organic local produce, particularly millets, offering superior taste and nutrition to industrialized foods, has provided her and other women farmers with a regular weekly clientele at a busy urban roadside. Here again we find an alternative, localized food network in operation whereby anti-commodity values pervade both production and consumption processes, connecting healthy farming with healthy eating. For reflexive consumers, the act of buying is no longer primarily dependent on price and involves resistance to the desires generated by contemporary capitalist advertising. It expresses in effect an emerging form of demand that is more thoughtful and discriminating, providing an

impetus to wholesome food production methods based on local seed and environmental preservation.

Moreover, as the example of Hombalamma suggests, the 'alternative' desire for the aesthetic, pleasurable, and nutritious qualities of local millet foods is not confined to middle-class reflexive consumers in urban Karnataka. We found that women in the villages were particularly passionate about the tastiness of millet cuisine, and we were often invited to share in a home-cooked meal of a favourite regional dish, *ragi mudde* (finger millet soft balls). From an anti-commodity perspective, taste represents what Hayden Kantor referred to as 'everyday sensory labour' embodying agricultural and culinary expertise that is primarily centred on women.⁴⁶ The cultural practice of tasting expresses a sensual appreciation of food quality by these women who see themselves as the custodians of local cuisines and dishes. Now in her late eighties, Gundamma expressed particularly strong views about the preparation and taste of *ragi* and vividly remembers how they used to prepare this millet when she was a young woman. She expressed regret that the grinding stone has nowadays given way to the flour mill where the *ragi* grains are processed into flour. 'When you use electrical appliances, it spoils the taste', she affirms, 'because it already comes out half-cooked':

When we were cooking stone-ground *ragi*, it used to be aromatic but with mill-ground flour, the *ragi mudde* doesn't have the right smell and texture, and it's also less good for our bodies. Even now, I tell my daughters-in-law, use the stone to grind, see how tasty it will be, see how strong I am from eating stone-ground *ragi*.⁴⁷

The women of Kanakapura see the delivery of tasty and wholesome meals as the rewarding end product of their daily farm activities, as caring for loved ones and protecting the household from the various diseases that continue to afflict life in the villages. They believe that millet foods are currently undergoing a resurgence on account of their superior nutritional value compared with rice. 'Rice is easily digested and passes through the body quickly, whereas *ragi* has more iron content, is digested very slowly, stays longer in the body, and therefore provides more stamina and strength', Devaramma explains. 'In the villages, people have always known this and are now coming back to *ragi*', she continues, observing that 'even in the cities' people were becoming more health conscious and making *ragi* an important part of their diet.⁴⁸ Our conversations also suggest that many farmers are reverting to traditional local varieties of *ragi* and of other crops like groundnut, pigeon pea, paddy, and oilseeds, using home-made manures such as *jeevamrutha* (cow-based fertilizer) and abandoning chemical fertilizers.

Ragi revival also draws on a deep historical ontology that reaches out to the divine and the spiritual, since good crops and food provision are ultimately believed to be the consequences of divine blessing. Kanakapura farmers believe that soils and cultivated land represent one element of the regenerative capacity of the earth, so the earth is worshipped as a giving, bountiful goddess. 'We call her *bhoomi tayi*' (Mother Earth), Shivamma tells us. This worship is expressed in numerous songs, rituals, and ceremonies that are performed in local villages to mark different phases of the agricultural

season. One particularly important ceremony is the *koorge pooja* (blessing of agricultural equipment and farm animals), which occurs at the start of the season after ploughing and before the sowing of seeds, performed in the hope of securing a plentiful harvest. 'We've been doing this *pooja* (prayer) since time immemorial, long before I was born,' Kalamma explains.

We wish to honour and care for Mother Earth so that she blesses our farm implements and animals, so we prepare a mixture of rice, sesame, and *jaggery* (unrefined sugar) from a fresh harvest of sugar cane, which we offer to our Mother; and we also make an offering of coconut, beetle nut, and fruit to our oxen.⁴⁹

'Then three women perform the sowing initiation,' adds Lakshmi Bai. 'One picks up some *ragi* seeds, put them in her saree, and starts sowing; the other two follow and do the same with *togari bele* (pigeon pea) seeds.'⁵⁰

Departing from market values, seeds, cattle, and farming implements are not seen merely as economic factors of production but as agency-possessing entities crucial to farming outcomes, and therefore deserving of human care and reverence. But this realm of worship, the very antithesis of the commodity world, is not perceived as a separate, alternative sphere to the secular realm of farming activities but rather as a connected one that provides a guiding light to these endeavours, ensuring that they are carried out in harmony with nature and the cosmos. In the context of smallholding farming in Kanakapura, it illuminates the millet/pulse choice and sequencing, underlining their enduring value as the prime seedlings of local food security and agroecological resilience. For centuries, *ragi* and pigeon pea have remained the dominant crops in Lakshmi Bai's village, with the nitrogen-fixing properties of the latter also enhancing soil fertility and increasing the nutrients available to other food crops.

Anti-commodity values also manifest themselves in the active role performed by tradition and more-than-human entities in influencing farming decisions. Although farmers closely follow official weather forecasts, they continue to rely mainly on traditional knowledge of the various rains including forecasting abilities, acquired from family elders and passed down through the generations. Timings of crop operations are based on their understanding of the twenty-seven different rains occurring during the farming season named after the *nakshastras* or lunar asterisms established by ancient Indian astronomy. The timely arrival of the *adri male* rains in June is regarded as particularly auspicious: for Shivamma, it is the sign to begin sowing *ragi* and groundnut, another nitrogen-fixing crop, and get the season off to the best possible start.⁵¹

According to the women, farmers can predict the coming of rain when the *coyla* (Asian cuckoo) starts singing or when frogs make loud noises at night, or again, when anthills begin to appear and they see ants carrying grass and *ragi* seeds as food to their dens. Ramakka recalls that during a particularly severe drought that lasted more than two years, there were no *ragi* seeds left to sow, so the farmers dug up the anthills and were able to find and sow some seeds. 'It is the ants who shared and gave us their seeds and preserved us from hunger,' she insists. Securing the annual *ragi* crop remains

important for most smallholders, as minimizing risk and building resilience in the face of the threat of rainfall failure continues to take the customary form of stocking up with a sufficient supply of millets for both food and fodder for two to three years. 'We try and build up stock for future years,' Ramakka affirms, 'and even if we have a good surplus, we never sell to government or middlemen, but only a sack or two to relatives and friends.'⁵²

In the women smallholders' narratives, *ragi* emerges as a sustaining anti-commodity food crop as they seek to move away from the rice-centred commodified food system resulting from the Green Revolution. Anti-commodity processes are rooted in a women-centred cultural repertoire that includes the traditional expertise to preserve the seeds of the many local varieties of *ragi* (and other foods), the culinary art of its preparation to obtain delicious and nutritious dishes, and the religious knowledge involved in its ceremonial uses in rituals marking the seasons of sowing and harvesting, which also provide emotional enjoyment and spiritual sustenance.

CONCLUSION

The two case studies of anti-commodity production have underlined the centrality of food in sustaining attempts to secure localized resilient lives and livelihoods in the face of commodified production regimes imposed by globalized circuits of capital facilitated by both colonial and post-colonial rule. More than merely an escape from the pressures of market-driven global food systems, the case studies together with the wider literature discussed suggest that producing food as anti-commodity remains anchored to local knowledges, cultural values, and choices based on ontologies that express complex interactions and reciprocities between people, natural environments, and spiritual domains. Nor are anti-commodity practices simply historical phenomena whose times have passed. They remain alive, relevant, and indeed resurgent in the contemporary world. In this light, the original definition of anti-commodity with which we began this chapter can be further refined to mean local productive processes founded on cultural, spiritual, and ecological values as alternatives or in opposition to global market regimes promoting commodification.

Future anti-commodity research might involve excavating the largely hidden histories of peasant modes of diversified farming: first, to multiply past episodes of farmer creativity and resilience in the Global South thereby enriching and decolonizing agrarian histories of territories subjected to European hegemony, and second, to draw from historical landscapes precedents and practices for alternative food futures. For instance, there has been little research on the immediate post-independence era in Africa and Asia, which was, in many countries, marked by a de-linking from global markets in favour of a renewed focus on the local and the strengths of smallholder farming. There are other untold histories, such as those of indentured labourers primarily recruited from India following the abolition of slavery, who opted to stay on as smallholding farmers in colonized territories across different parts of the world. In the Guianas, for

instance, they brought knowledges relevant to the cultivation of various types of rice, lentils, peas, and beans as well as herbs such as turmeric, increasing the diversity of food crops grown in this region. They also faced and resisted colonial ventures to promote rice uniquely as a commodity cash crop for foreign markets. Full accounts of such tales of creativity and resistance would offer an arena for the fruitful deployment of anti-commodity approaches.

In relation to present times, the anti-commodity concept might be used to reveal the under-explored cultural aspects of alternative farming practices, food movements, and networks, including 'food sovereignty' initiatives. For instance, emerging research into indigenous people's food systems suggests that they are highly productive, equitable, and sustainable while also managing to avoid dependence on the global market; an anti-commodity perspective might highlight the various aspects of the rich ancestral biocultural heritage on which they depend.⁵³ Shining a light on this 'moral economy that stands behind the objective economy of visible transactions',⁵⁴ involving traditional knowledges, spiritual beliefs, and more-than-human entities, would help confer both academic and public recognition of these non-secular but foundational aspects of smallholder farming cultures in the Global South.

The anti-commodity approach is also relevant to the food and farming world of the Global North, and there is much scope for further comparative south-north studies on the lines suggested by Nigh and González Cabañas's investigation of alternative food networks in Mexico and France. A related recent field of enquiry focuses on the modes of resistance consequent upon labour-intensive commodity-driven agriculture in contemporary Europe where migrants and refugees form an important and often informal or even 'illicit' labour force. In recent times, social justice claims have led to revolts and strikes as well as alternative local food production initiatives like the Barikama Co-operative set up in 2011 in Italy. Some of the co-operative founders were at the heart of a protest known as the 'Rosarno revolt' by African fruit pickers the previous year, motivated by migrant-labour exploitation and racist attacks on workers in the Italian countryside.⁵⁵ The co-operative began producing locally sourced fresh vegetables and dairy products and delivering them directly to local households, with demand reaching a peak during the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic when residents were often in lockdown.⁵⁶

Indeed, COVID-19 has strengthened demands for a radical overhaul of globalized corporate food systems in the direction of localized crop diversity and shorter supply chains based on agro-ecological principles.⁵⁷ It is significant that producers focusing on specialized crops for distant markets, such as West African cocoa farmers and Kenyan horticulturalists, have been particularly badly hit by the disruptions in both communications and demand arising from the pandemic. Moreover, the resulting global recession has also undermined food security amongst low-income and vulnerable communities.⁵⁸ In response, there are increasing calls for the promotion of agricultural resilience and more sustainable, solidarity-based food systems necessarily involving the reduction of dependencies on long distance food transportation or 'food miles', and further amplified by the urgency of lowering greenhouse gas emissions. In the context of

both the pandemic and climate crises of the early twenty-first century, a favourable historical conjuncture may just have emerged for the rebuilding of food regimes along alternative, decommodifying, and equitable principles.

NOTES

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