

# Vibrantly Entangled in Sri Lanka

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## Food as the Polyrhythmic and Polyphonic Assemblage of Life

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### Abstract

Creatively operationalizing Claude Lévi-Strauss' predicament that food is good to think with, I initiate a methodological conceptualization of food by exploring the ways in which it is apt to study Sri Lankan domestic and collective village life. Food is approached as an assemblage that is an emergent resultant of heterogeneous aspects with which it is deeply entangled and by way of which it turns into a potent agent shaping life. More specifically, I explore the vibrancy of these different components that co-create the overall soundscape of food that as such becomes the conductor of Sri Lankan life. Food shapes domestic life by way of its preparation and consumption, and through its cultivation also conducts the collective rhythms at the village level. The conceptualization of food as an assemblage seeks to develop it as a methodology that opens up for a holistic integration and interdisciplinary collaboration.

### Key Words:

Food, Sri Lanka, Assemblages, Rhythmanalysis

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Stating that food is central to human life and organization is saying the obvious. Yet, apart from statements that food can be used as a *lens* or *prism* to study a myriad of other topics (e.g. Counihan 1999:6, Counihan & Van Esterik 2008:2) the theoretical and conceptual implications of this centrality have hardly been taken seriously. In this paper, I will initiate an embryonic conceptualization of food that takes its central role in shaping life seriously and that aims at developing food holistically as both a topic of study as well as a methodological approach, inspired by the famous Lévi-Straussian predicament that food is something good to think with. Food then helps to explore seemingly disparate and heterogeneous phenomena whereby their interrelations get teased out in novel ways. Inspired by Manuel DeLanda (2006), Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (2009, 2011), Karen Barad (2007), and others, I suggest holistically conceptualizing food as an assemblage that is an emergent resultant of heterogeneous aspects in life with which it is connected whereby turning into a potent agent taking part in shaping life as a whole. Given the limitations of an article format, I will only *introduce* and illustrate this particular holistic approach to food through expounding the nitty-gritty and sensorial details of domestic and collective village life as they take shape in Sri Lanka. I can only hope that this embryonic frame can entice further holistic studies through food across different settings and larger-scale contexts whereby becoming further developed and strengthened.

The abstract frame of assemblages becomes more palpable and sensorial when engaging in a conversation with rhythm analysis, as inspired by Henri Lefebvre (2004), focussing on rhythms—as combinations of time and movement—and the vibrancy of the components of the food assemblage. It then emerges as a specific polyrhythmic and polyphonic soundscape shaping life where components conjoin in harmonious and contradictory ways. Each of food's components has its specific vibrating rhythm and each must be understood in its relation to the whole that it co-creates, as in the case of a symphony (Bohm 1980:52), polyphony, and cacophony. For instance, the daily preparation of tea before Sri Lankan breakfast entails the conjunction of human effort, taste, thirst, the bucket, the shredded tea leaves, and the spoon, which in their conjunction of rhythms and movements co-create the overall concerto of tea. Such rhythms and vibrations permeate village life throughout different levels showing that food as an assemblage becomes the conductor of the music of Sri Lankan village life.

It is important to locate this proposed conceptualization within the field of food anthropology and contrast it with other holistic attempts to theorize the pervasiveness of food in life. Food here is taken broadly to include the various stages of the life-line of a solid or fluid item ingested and digested, consisting of aspects of its four phases—production, distribution, preparation, and consumption (Goody 1982:37)—and beyond. Thus, this broad approach entails that food enables us to oscillate between different scales that we see at work through the soundscape of everyday life in a Buddhist Sinhalese village in North-Western Sri Lanka. I particularly focus on domestic consumption and collective village-based production of food, thereby remaining confined within a rather small-scale range of life. To get a thorough grasp

of the sensorial relational practice of food at this scale, I lived with a host family for one year as part of an intense participant observation, which is a core method for this kind of refined approach.

### **The Locus of Food in Anthropological Study**

Food has often featured centrally in anthropological accounts, such as those of Malinowski (1984) and Evans-Pritchard (1969), which is not surprising given that it constitutes a pervasive aspect of social life that becomes explicit in the encounter with the Other. In these early accounts, from the time before something called food studies emerged, we encountered fragments of the way food is produced, shared, cooked, or consumed, without these activities necessarily constituting the core focus of these authors. Interestingly, by placing food within the totality of their accounts and not treating it as a specific topic of focus, they offered a relatively holistic view on the role of food in the wider organization of life in their respective fields of study. Audrey Richards (2004) focused more explicitly on food in her account on the Bemba in what is now Zambia, looking at the four phases of food—production, procurement, preparation, and consumption—and their respective implication on nutrition. Similarly, Stanley Walens (1981) demonstrated eloquently on the basis of the work of Franz Boas that the whole world for the Kwakiutl consists of shifting relations between eating and being eaten. However, a more systemic and systematic approach to the study of food emerges in Claude Lévi-Strauss' series *Les Mythologiques*, starting with *The Raw and the Cooked* (Lévi-Strauss 1983) in which food is first studied as a topic in its own regard—in terms of food

classifications—and where it rapidly turns into the study of Amazonian society *through* food, thereby deploying the methodological approach that food is good to think with. Indeed, the categories of the raw and the cooked, later supplemented by the category of the roasted and other transformative principles (Lévi-Strauss 2008), no longer pertain only to food classifications but refer to the wider Amazonian categories of nature and human respectively, as well as their interrelations. In a similar way, the account of Marshall Sahlins (1976:24-38) approaches food as telling something about something else when he discusses how the structural opposition between land-people (owners) and sea-people (chiefs) in Eastern Fiji plays itself out in food-related practices and arrangements. Here, food is thus not so much a topic of study for itself, but rather for something other than itself; in which food structurally and symbolically expresses other relations. Other examples of this refined approach to food include Mary Douglas (2008), studying the Biblical books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, and Miriam Kahn (1986), exploring the mutual symbolic synergies between food and human beings.

Even though these examples of ground-breaking work show relatively holistic approaches of studying human life and organization *through* food, they tend to remain within a certain realm of life, whether by approaching small-scale societies as bounded and downplaying cross-boundary interactions, maintaining a dominant focus on nutrition, denying food's materiality in its reduction to the structures of the mind, or reducing it to symbolic reflections of something else. Still, these attempts seem more holistic and integrative than what has emerged recently since they did not focus on food as such, but rather approached it in its entanglement with other aspects of life. Current food studies have foregrounded food as an important topic

of study in and for itself, thereby often obfuscating the complex entanglements of food with the wider realm of human life and organization.

The field of food studies emerged in the 1990s and has drawn upon disciplines as different as geography, anthropology, sociology and history whereby becoming increasingly proliferated, as evidenced by the several volumes edited by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (1997, 2008), Anne Murcott, Warren Belasco, and Peter Jackson (2013), and Ken Albala (2013). Yet, simultaneously, this field has fragmented into several subfields, such as the study of food and gender (Avakian & Haber 2005, Inness 2001), food and migration (Crenn, Hassoun & Medina 2010, Ray & Srinivas 2012), food and activism (Williams-Forsen & Counihan 2011, Counihan and Siniscalchi 2013), and taste and class (Warde 1997, Bourdieu 2008). Lynne Phillips (2006) argues that an important reason for this devolution and fragmentation lies in the shift from approaching small-scale communities as singular bounded wholes of a monolithic culture towards the study of global connections and flows whereby it seemed no longer possible to study food holistically. Hence, food studies increasingly came to study food in relation to a particular theme or subset of themes. Marianne Lien (2004:7) links this increased focus on topical concerns to the emergence of the anthropology of food as a subdiscipline and likewise notes that: “as a result of such delineations, the complex entanglements that were the hallmark of more holistic anthropological accounts tend to be lost.”

One way to solve this tension between holism and an interconnected messy world has been to ‘follow the thing’ and trace how it shapes social life (Appadurai 1986). As Sidney Mintz

(1985) eloquently showed in the case of sugar, such approach can flesh out numerous fascinating connections. By tracing the historical and global travels of sugar, he illustrated the various linkages between the slave trade and industrialization in Great Britain by explaining how the slaves were taken from West Africa to work at the sugarcane plantations in the Caribbean, providing the British labourers with the sweet fuel that transformed into manpower driving this industrialization. By following sugar he discerned the powerful role it played in shaping a world economy and studied it in a relatively holistic way by looking at both production and consumption, and showing how these cannot be understood separately. This following-the-thing-approach has been successful in elaborating exciting relations between disparate components and connections and has inspired many others to embark on similar endeavours in studying food journeys with respect to Coca Cola (Foster 2008), chocolate (Robertson 2009), and the potato (McNeill 1999). This line of inquiry through food items serves as a practical manageable starting point for expanding the range of heterogeneous aspects to be integrated into the holistic conceptual and methodological definition of food that I am proposing. Yet, this method threatens to install a kind of ‘thing-holism’ that restricts its focus too much on the thing and its immediate relations without sufficiently taking into account wider and more complex entanglements. Anna Tsing (2015) managed to avoid this pitfall in her exciting study on the entanglements of the Matsutake mushrooms with human and more-than-human ways of life in the context of global capitalist relations. Another danger in the thing-approach may be that it still regards the thing in an object-like way with a determined essence and ascribes it a relatively passive role in human life and organization, making it unable to account for its relational agency. My suggested conceptualization draws upon this approach, but modifies it to achieve a wider scope of integration.

To recapitulate, this conceptualization of food seeks to fulfil the ambition to (re)unite the study of food in and of itself as well as the study of food for something other than itself; in other words developing food as both a topic and a conceptual method of holistic research. To fulfil this ambition, the frame or definition of food has to incorporate certain sensitivities of the contemporary debates.

### **Deploying a Contemporary Conceptualization of Food**

Drawing upon the existing literature at hand one could argue to define food, along the lines of our holistic aim, as a ‘total social fact’ (Mauss 1990:78-79) or ‘total social phenomenon’ (Scholliers 2007), wherein food is not a mere institution among others, but rather forms an entire social system. These concepts clearly evoke the centrality of food and the ways in which it thoroughly shapes social life. Yet, both ‘fact’ and ‘phenomenon’ have a static connotation, downplaying the vibrant dynamics that food brings about in life. Other attempts to holistically approach food include ‘gastropolitics’ (Appadurai 1981:495) or ‘gastrosemantics’ (Khare 1992:1,27) that respectively look at food and the role it plays in human relations of hierarchy (e.g. caste), conflict, and competition over resources, or in which one approaches food as a comprehensive cultural language akin to Roland Barthes’ (1997) notion of food as a system of communication. Yet, these concepts likewise come short in their interdisciplinary reach and ambition as they predominantly focus on the human relations and forms of communication in relation to food. If we wish to develop a frame that truly opens up to interdisciplinary enterprises and allows us to communicate on equal footing with biologists, nutritionists, bioengineers, and the like, it becomes crucial to stress the heterogeneity of food



and not overemphasize its social nature, albeit important. As such, we need to deploy a concept that exhibits an abstract and generalizable sensitivity to the intrinsic human/non-human entanglements that animate the present-day academic debate in unfortunately very divisive and non-constructive ways.

We could possibly exhibit awareness to this human/non-human quandary in our conceptualization of food by defining it as a ‘total biosocial fact’. Yet, this does not seem to resolve the issues mentioned above since it remains an equally static notion and since the spectre of the discussion remains about where the agency is predominantly located: in human or matter, or in the biological or social. Moreover, some of the uses of ‘biosocial’ tend to stress that social phenomena derive from biological factors where social forms thus constitute a superstructure on top of the basic biological structure. For instance, Marvin Harris (1985) explains food preferences according to principles of natural selection rather than social structures. Hence, this form of biosociality, as epitomized by Paul Rabinow, is very different from Foucault’s ‘biopolitics’ (Senellart 2010), which is more of a sociobiological nature and where the socio-political takes precedence. The edited volume on biosocial becomings by Gisli Palsson and Tim Ingold (2013) could also provide a nuanced way out of this dichotomy in which neither one determines the other, since it stresses the mutual evolvment of both categories in their enmeshment, that is in their relational field. Still, it does not escape the spectre of the not-so-fruitful discussion of where the agency—as capacity to act, affect, and be affected—is predominantly situated. In this regard, it is more constructive, not to attempt a once-and-for-all determination of which aspect is predominant in its influence—the social or natural—but rather to see case-by-case how agency and these heterogeneous aspects emerge,

differentiate, and actualize within a relational field or in the phenomenon of entanglement (Barad 2007, Gabora & Aerts 2005).

### **The Assemblage of Food**

Let us turn now to our proposal of defining food as an assemblage before illustrating it through the domestic preparation of breakfast and the village-level cultivation of paddy where we will see that both preparation and cultivation of rice include a variety of components. These emerge in particular ways according to specific contexts and co-compose food as an assemblage in which each of its components has a distinct rhythm that together make up the polyrhythmic and polyphonic soundscape that the vibrating food assemblage produces.

By stating that food is an assemblage<sup>1</sup> I simply hold food to be an emergent whole, resultant, or synthesis of heterogeneous components. The emergent whole is not reducible to the sum of its parts, but since the parts act on each other they create or rather co-create a new resulting expression open to ongoing transformation (DeLanda 2006:4-5,49). This entails that the boundaries of the assemblage do not necessarily coincide with the boundaries of a thing, such as in the example of the event of Hans riding a horse, which becomes an assemblage of eyes, weight, pride, roads, etc (Deleuze & Guattari 2009:257-258). Let us take the example of the coconut, which could be labelled as the second staple food after rice in Sri Lanka. In our rendering, the coconut (or for that matter rice) is not just the coconut, but it is the assemblage

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<sup>1</sup> The notion assemblage is the English translation from the French *agencement* as developed by Deleuze and Guattari and has constituted an approach that is cognate to Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) and Material Semiotics in their focus on the emergence of entities as a result of heterogeneous relations, human and non-human, where agency is distributed (Law 1999, 2009). However, the assemblage approach differs from ANT in that the latter flattens the topology in the form of networks, whereas assemblages can expand or shrink in all directions.

of soil, weather elements, non-human entities, picking activity, and transformative human action that emerge as specific components according to context, and that co-create the resulting expression in terms of a grated coconut or coconut milk to be used for a curry or otherwise. Hence, the physical boundary of the coconut as regarded in essentialist terms and the boundary of the coconut-assemblage do not neatly coincide, as depicted below. Moreover, the assemblage is continuously being made, re-made, and sometimes unmade in the heterogeneous networks that enact it in different ways according to the various contexts, such as ritual, textual, political, and everyday contexts. In the ritual context, the coconut will actualize as overflowing milk (Van Daele 2013), whereas in breakfast it will more often emerge as grated coconut as part of a side dish.

Figure 1: Contrasting the Essentialized Coconut with the Coconut as Assemblage

The component parts can be detached from the whole and may be: ‘plugged into a different assemblage in which its interactions are different’ (DeLanda 2006:4-5), creating a new resulting expression of the assemblage as a whole as well as of the component in question. Adding the fire component, the resulting coconut would be indeed cooked instead of raw. The assemblage emerges and actualizes as a particular complex whole according to the components it exchanges in its interaction with other assemblages and environments. As such, the boundary of the assemblage is open and becomes context-specific as it entangles with different milieus. Hence, the context plays a crucial role in our approach as assemblages acquire their form through a process of context-driven actualization (Gabora & Aerts 2005). As exchanged components become part of a novel context that they shape in interaction, the components themselves also alter within the overall entanglement where they actualize with different actions and properties. Putting fire to the hearth for cooking or to a dry forest in slash-and-burn cultivation makes this component actualize as different within the respective domains of the house or the field-to-be, which the flame simultaneously transforms in less or more drastic ways.

My rendering of assemblage<sup>2</sup> theory provides us with a non-essentialist, non-linear, and context-sensitive approach to ever transforming entities (in which this flux can also sustain stable processes and continuities). The idea of something being an assemblage may in fact be almost too simple in its abstractness, but becomes complex in the study of the messiness of real life, since it stresses the wholeness and intrinsic entanglement of heterogeneous elements, be it biological, social, technological, or political components. In this rendering, the question

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<sup>2</sup> It should be remarked that the very idea of assemblage is not at all new as we can see from Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz’ work *The Monadology* written in 1714, and specifically in paragraph 6, where he contrasts the monad, as a simple substance, with the compound (in our words assemblage) that: ‘comes into being or comes to an end by parts.’

of whether the human or the non-human exerts the most influence in the course of matters becomes obsolete, at least in the abstract, since the heterogeneous components find themselves enmeshed in a relational field, while emerging, affecting, and shaping each other. Indeed, food as an assemblage does not tell us much in its abstract form, but in a specific situation or in its ethnographic actualization, it becomes illuminating of the complex and refined interplay of food in the wider context by way of its heterogeneous components. The abstractness of the frame precisely serves to keep the field open to cross-cultural comparison and interdisciplinary collaboration in a holistic way.

Turning now to the tangible actualization of food as it takes shape in the Sri Lankan breakfast we can see its entanglement and interplay of components that co-constitute it as an assemblage as defined here. I focus on the rhythms of these components that emerge and co-compose the breakfast assemblage, which becomes a polyrhythmic and polyphonic composition. This illustrates the way in which the food assemblage works and how each of the components has specific vibrations that in their combinations superpose and create something new, a kind of surplus: that is the agency of the assemblage as a whole (Bennett 2010:23) with its distinct composite rhythm, temporality, and spatiality. As such food becomes the conductor of the different vibrating elements that make up the soundscape of life in the home, as well as in the village when combined with wider collective rhythms of cultivation. Note that the analysis of a phenomenon in terms of sounds and music is not new and has been earlier deployed to illuminate theory, such as in the case of Lévi-Strauss as discussed by Catherine Clément (1979). Here I particularly use it to render the abstract assemblage of food palpable and sensorially intelligible, specifically focusing on rhythms—as combining temporalities and spatialities or time and movement. This is inspired by the

rhythmanalysis proposed by Henri Lefebvre (2004), who observes that life is made up of a multiplicity of rhythms at different levels, ranging from cells of the human body over collective organizations to the entire globe and cosmos. By combining rhythmanalysis with our assemblage approach to food we get a more visceral feel of the very abstract holistic, cross-cultural, and interdisciplinary frame; a feel enhanced by the narration of a Sri Lankan breakfast in the present tense.

## **The Rhythms of Breakfast**

### *The Polyphony and Polyrhythm of Tea*

The morning starts around 5 am when the sounds of the nocturnal animals give way to the morning music of birds. One particular bird starts the concerto that gradually gathers momentum by encompassing the sounds of numerous birds, insects, and other animals. The whole concerto unanimously enters the home, initiating the first stirrings of the morning. The open and porous architecture of the house allows the sounds and smells of the outside to enter into domestic life. These sounds, along with the fresh morning breeze, and the first rays of sunlight penetrate the body amidst the increasingly bustling energy of the tropical morning. As the household—in this case my host family and I—responds to these sensorial signs, the women go first into the kitchen to light the log-fire of the hearth. The sounds of the morning tea—rustling of tea leaves and water pouring into the kettle—add to the crackling sound of the log-fire, the multi-species soundscape outside, and the chatting of the family members. Each of the components of the tea assemblage, such as the pot, water, human effort, social intentionality, fire, and wood generate sounds *in their mutually affecting of each other* and co-

compose the polyphony that fills the kitchen. After some time, the water in the kettle starts boiling, or ‘dancing’ as some would say jokingly, under influence of the fire. The sounds of the water heating and bubbling spread throughout the kitchen. Someone—generally a woman of the household—reacts and takes the kettle off the fire. She then pours the hot water into a plastic bucket filled with a mix of milk-powder and sugar, which creates an increasingly higher pitch as the bucket fills. The spoon she uses to mix the powder and water into the milk repetitively hits the bucket dominating the musical score. She pours the milk through a full tea bag into another bucket, again changing the sound as the milk flows slowly through the tea cornet, the tone increasing second by second. The composition changes once again when the tea is poured into everyone’s cup. The ensuing sounds of slurping crescendo, as everyone prepares to get on with the tasks of the day.

### *Co-Generating Rice and Side Dishes*

Soon after the morning tea, while my eldest host sister Nihinsa<sup>3</sup> keeps the fire crackling, her younger sister Vidusahani starts rinsing the rice of sand and stones. She moves the bowl in circles listening for the stones to scrape against the bowl and sink to the bottom where they are held by the ribbed surface of the bowl. Meanwhile, I start to make *pol sambol*, a daily side dish to the morning rice consisting of consisting of grated coconut, chili, and lime. I select a coconut that we collected and stored earlier, and start carefully peeling it by forcefully dashing it onto an upward standing knife and tearing the outer peel apart: something that requires training to skilfully balance the various components of force, weak spots, and speed, to get a clean and undamaged peeled coconut. Afterwards, I break the peeled coconut in two equal halves, a skilled technique that also requires balancing of my force and those of the

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<sup>3</sup> I use pseudonyms for reasons of safeguarding privacy.

coconut and the knife. The effort I invest in transforming the coconut into something ready to be grated makes me breathe faster and incites a desire for breakfast, which in combination with the ‘gastric fire’ that had already been ignited by the morning tea is steadily increasing. In local rendering, the gastric fire is a fire in the stomach that creates the feeling of hunger and that ‘cooks’ or digests the food (roughly related to metabolism). I bring the two coconut halves to the kitchen for the next stage of grating. One part of the grated coconut is used for the *pol sambol* that I am making, and the other is used as the basis for the adjoining curries and dal, which is made from lentils. After grating, I chop and grind the chili peppers by repetitively rolling the grinding stone over a slab and mixing them with lime juice and grated coconut, which produces a reddish coconut mixture.

After Nihinsa puts the rinsed rice to boil, she pours water over the grated coconut and squeezes the pulp to produce the first portion of tasty milk, which is kept aside until later. She repeats this a second time to get a more watery mixture that is immediately poured into the round earthen pots where the lentils from the dal are ‘dancing’ to the intensity of the heat, produced by the conjunction of wood and fire manipulated by Nihinsa. In another pot, several spices (chili, cumin, cardamom, and cinnamon) are frying in coconut oil, creating sizzling sounds and releasing pungent smells. The intense aromas affect me so strongly that I have to leave the kitchen. The powerful components cause a strong visceral reaction, and I immediately feel what Sri Lankan cooking does. Only when Nihinsa adds the coconut milk to this spicy mixture and then adds the second portion of concentrated coconut milk, first put aside, to the bubbling dal, does the kitchen gradually become safe again for my unhabituated senses. The smells are now agreeable and instigate the grumbling sounds of hungry stomachs.



We all gravitate around the cooking process for about two hours while conversing with each other.

Through discussing the detailed level of tea preparation and cooking breakfast with all the sounds of the minute actions and associated activities, we can understand the complexity of balancing the altering heterogeneous components to get a resultant that is tasty, and as such can also grasp that the meal is a resultant assemblage of components that are assemblages themselves. For instance, the curry or side dish is a component-part of the meal and the resultant of the complex interplay of the taste aspirations, efforts, knives, fire, care, atmosphere, earthen pots, spices, moral codes and so forth. All these vibrating components produce a concerted rhythm (consisting of movement and temporality) of the curry and, at a higher level, of the entire meal in the cooking event. However, this overall vibration is more than just the sum of the partial rhythms and tunes of these individual actions and components, otherwise it would be difficult to perceive the meal and its cooking as an event in and of itself with its own pitch and tune. Yet, the components of an assemblage do not necessarily co-create predictable and harmonious wholes. Sometimes, they co-generate very indeterminate outcomes, with the components acting against each other and creating a cacophony. For instance, if the fire flares up, the cook must attentively intervene to diminish the heat and decrease the speed of cooking. If this doesn't happen, there would be a burnt meal affecting the ensuing mood of the day. Thus, cooking is about being implicated in balancing vibrating components in such a way that they co-generate a tasty meal and good atmosphere.

### *The Rhythms of Eating*

From the detailed level of the morning tea to the slightly more general level of breakfast preparation, we now move to an even higher level of composite rhythms of the meals as such, and their consumption. After preparation, we let the meal cool down a little so that we can eat with our right hands. Unlike in Europe, we almost never eat together, but rather do so in turns (that do overlap at times) in homogenous consumption groups, established according to age and gender. The elder men tend to take the first portion, followed by the younger men, then the children, and afterwards only the women. As such, we see a sequenced rhythm of consumption occurring. This is indeed a structure of repetition that sometimes gets altered owing to practical reasons or special occasions, such as large parties.

In contrast to the relative rigidity of the sequence of serving, the timings of the meals are strikingly flexible. Breakfast could sometimes be eaten anywhere between 7am and 11am, lunch between noon and 4pm, and dinner somewhere between 6 and 11pm. This depends on the incorporation of additional tasks, some of which are unexpected. Let me zoom back into the morning preparation of breakfast to illustrate the flexible incorporation of an unanticipated visitor and the modification of the cooking process this entails.

### *An Unexpected Guest*

One morning, while cooking our breakfast an uncle pays an unexpected visit at 6:30 am. My host sisters temper the fire to slow down the cooking process and try to gain more time. After

the obligatory game of invitation and refusal he accepts to join us for breakfast. The intensity in the kitchen rises, as my sisters prepare more ingredients, involving the detailed rhythms as described earlier. The speed of food preparation is accelerated to achieve the resonance of the newly added ingredients to the ones that were already cooking. Meanwhile, my host brother makes the obligatory tea to fill the time and avoid possible boredom until breakfast.

After the re-stabilization of the cooking process and the final preparations for breakfast, the uncle is incorporated into the rhythm of eating. As a male guest, he receives the first portion and as such becomes the one who decides when to start eating, both with regard to himself as to the others according to the ordered sequence. Thereby, he is directing the collective rhythm of eating as well as the individual ones, with of course possible exceptions. This general collective sequenced order of consumption means that the rhythm of life is not fully in one's own hands. Rather, individual rhythms are only variations of the collective ones. As such there exists no individual self but personhood is rather relational, existing by way of its relationalities. Thereby the individual rhythms of the person are deeply shaped by the collective rhythms. In other words, the person is a relational node that emerges and individuates while being constantly in flux according to the shifting and recurring relations and their vibrations. In such a context, where relations take precedence, the individualistic and entrepreneurial rigid linear time planning becomes redundant, as adaptability and flexibility is more valued. This flexibility is embodied in the relational habitus or disposition that leads to an experience of everyday life in which events and plans have to be continuously changed and adapted to the altering and individual rhythms of life and to tune in to achieve momentary resonances of encounters that tend to have some food at its centre.

In fact, these flexible rhythms of cooking and eating together were the most difficult aspects of Sinhalese village life for me to adapt to. The local flexible rhythm and tone was alien to the personal pulse of my habitus that has embodied entrepreneurial rigid planning systems, engrained in the fact that I eat meals at relatively designated times. Once, around 1 am, my friend asked me whether I was hungry or not. Instead of looking to my body, my impulse was to look at the clock. He found this weird, and told me that I was akin to a robot following the clock rather than listening to my body. Be that as it may, this regularity of strict repetitions with which I am familiar in a European setting renders my body quite unable to deal with ongoing differentiations. My digestive system has become automated by the repetitive internalization of the mechanic clock since babyhood, and has as such become comfortable with it. Arriving in Sri Lanka and trying to tune in and resonate with the flexible collective rhythms of my host family, both in relation to eating and thus also sleeping, my bodily rhythms and digestive system easily got upset, oscillating between constipation and excessive activity. This instance clearly shows how the rhythms of the various components of life, as articulated in one way or another with food, are embodied and taken to the visceral and carnal level. It is exactly around these very *corpo-real* aspects of cooking and digestion that the other rhythms of life, such as work and sleep, revolve and get embodied as well. Indeed, as Henri Lefebvre (2004:21) notes, a rhythm analyst: “calls on all his senses. He thinks with his body, not in the abstract, but in lived temporality.”

We have moved from intimate visceral levels of digestion and the minute vibrations involved in and surrounding the morning tea, to the domestic rhythms of the consumption of meals that shape the day in a flexible way. As such we can start to sense and understand how food works

and sounds as an assemblage, particularly in its Sri Lankan composition as it actualizes in the domestic realm in a village.

Yet, to further substantiate the claim that food defined as an assemblage serves well as a holistic conceptualization of food as both topic and method of research, it is necessary to zoom out to a more collective level to see how it can equally work at a higher and larger scale. By moving to the level of cultivation, we enter into a more political-economic sphere of village life as shaped by food. I am deliberately using ‘sphere’, as inspired by Peter Sloterdijk’s spherology (2003), to denote that domestic, political, ritual, and economic realms of life are not clearly demarcated, but rather have diffuse zones of mixing that indiscernibly increase and decrease in intensity as one moves from one sphere to another. Let us now move to the start of the cultivation process at the village level, one that is catalysed by the annual rhythms and intensities of the rains. Note that in this case I will be writing in the past tense since I am talking of a specific cultivation cycle in contrast to the fragment of everyday cooking which treated recurring aspects.

## **The Rhythms of Cultivation**

### *Rains Catalyzing Decision-Making*

During my fieldwork in 2008-09, the rains arrived very late and hesitantly, at least in our area. Nevertheless, irrigation reservoirs in neighbouring villages got replenished and soon their fields looked freshly green. This was not the situation in our village where the irrigation lake was only partly filled and the village fields remained brownish and fallow. Seeing the neighbouring villagers flourishing in their cultivation, the farmers in my village grew impatient as their stocks of subsistence rice dwindled. On the day the rain finally arrived, it fell softly, only permeating the soil and replenishing the groundwater level, not producing the needed run-off water to flow through the drainage canals into the irrigation reservoir. Several villagers claimed that the delay in filling the village reservoir was also because the drainage canals had not been cleared for a long time. They suggested that the farmers' association organize a *shramadane*, a collective sharing of labour, to clean the canals after the next season. The concern was that if nothing were done, the villagers would continue to lag behind neighbouring farmers in obtaining their harvest and in bringing their produce to the market, which would put them in a disadvantageous price-bargaining position. The realization of the importance of clearing the canals, I was told, returns in the same rhythmic repetition as the annual rains, but nothing seems to be done about it. Everyone complained about the village inactivity to solve the drainage issue, but they all seemed to look elsewhere for the solution.

It was one day in the middle of December that the heavy downpours suddenly came and stayed for a few days. A vital component for cultivation, the pelting rain catalyzed the movements and intensities of other components, as the level of water in the reservoir increased. The rhythm of village life changed rapidly and the music of life acquired a higher pitch. Soon, a decision regarding the start of cultivation had to be taken. Yet, there was much discussion, which exposed a deep (political economic) cleavage in the village. The most eager to start were the landless agricultural labourers who had less food reserves and little income. They initiated the discussion by approaching the agricultural extension officer who mobilized and presided over the farmers' association meeting where such decision is generally taken. On the other side were the land owners upon whom the former depended on for the land they cultivate for a share. My host family belonged to this group as they rented out all their fields. Some of the other owners cultivated their own plots and thus they were more divided as whether to start.

The whole discussion concentrated on determining whether the amount of water in the reservoir was sufficient to irrigate the paddy all the way through to its harvest, especially if the rains stopped early. Moreover, the landowners, able to wait for a longer time, also warned that sufficient water had to be reserved for bathing and washing, since the water in the reservoir is not only used for cultivation. Nonetheless, the labourers felt a pressing sense of urgency in getting a new supply of much needed food and income. Finally, the landowners gave in to the demands posed by the majority of the members of the farmers' association. This happened at a meeting attended by a politician from the then ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) who was on a campaign trail for the provincial council elections of 2008 and 2009. According to the generally pro United National Party (UNP) landowners, he attended this

meeting to galvanize personal support by arguing in favour of starting cultivation. Even though the two sides had come to an agreement, the owners still criticized the early start as careless for both the labourers and the villagers as a whole. Fortunately, the worst-case scenario of insufficient water did not materialize, but it was a close call, and some fields could not be harvested in the end. In sum, we see that economic status and party politics came into play in this decision-making event, which was initially triggered by the arrival of rains and concerns of multiple temporalities implied in cultivation.

### *Collective Selection of Rice Varieties*

Another discussion in the farmers' association revolved around the selection of the rice varieties to be cultivated. Since everyone depends on the water from the same reservoir, the farmers have to select varieties that require similar amounts of time to grow and mature as to share the water in equal amounts. Moreover, observing a simultaneous start and finish of cultivation helps to save water. If one were to only irrigate a field here and there, and later some others, water would evaporate and be wasted during its transportation via fallow fields to those being cultivated. Indeed, the fields and canals are interdependent in their location in the irrigation matrix accounting for the collective nature of the village-level cultivation rhythm. Another reason for all farmers to start the work simultaneously and to select similar varieties is to harvest at the same time. If all the paddy fields mature simultaneously, everybody can guard their fields together and the risk of insects or wild animals is distributed more evenly. If some farmers harvest before others, the latter would be less able to defend their plot, which is deemed impossible. Hence, the cultivation cycle becomes collective as a whole but also in the



rhythms of each of its components: the growth cycle of seeds, the water release, the release of smells attracting insects and elephants, the harvest, and more.

### *Starting the Cultivation Concerto*

After these decisions were made, the village filled with a mix of bustling energy, intensity, joy, and insecurity. The rhythm of village life changed rapidly and the polyphony of life acquired a higher pitch. Yet, the little euphoria that was initially palpable soon shifted to increased anxiety when it became clear that the rains had stopped early and showed no signs of returning. Everybody knew of the challenging season to come, as they had already used much of the precious water from the lake, not for the actual cultivation, but only for the preparation of the fields. The farmers had hoped the falling rain could be used for the water-consuming preparatory phase, and that the water in the reservoir could be saved for the actual growing and maturing of the seedlings. However, the decision could not be reversed, as everyone had already started their work, so they were compelled to hope for the best.

To prepare the fields, some friends joined together and established labour sharing groups. Together, they ploughed each other's fields in turns after everyone had cleared the bunds. In this way they hired the tractor only for a short time—one or two days—and pushed down and shared the costs. In the village, buffalo weren't being used anymore for ploughing or harvesting. Many lamented this evolution on the grounds that ploughing with a buffalo prepares the soil much more thoroughly, but everybody had shifted to the tractor, as it is faster. Given that the rhythm has to remain collective it would be impossible for some to continue

working with buffalo, as they would then lag behind. So, interestingly, the ‘tradition’ of maintaining a collective rhythm in enterprises often forces people to join the powerful new trends, tools, and seeds that are part of the general increase in speed of cultivation. This is a result of technological developments that ease the work and that are geared to extract resources at a higher pitch, moreover enforcing this faster rhythm on plants through bio-engineering.

The intensive tasks of the preparation of cultivation were performed by men and adolescents who returned from the city to give their fathers and relatives a helping hand. Some of the others had to hire labourers from elsewhere to get the job done in time. After these preparatory works on the paddy fields, farmers started levelling the mud and drawing some smaller drainage canals to evacuate the water if necessary. What remained were *pōruwas* or ‘plateaus’ upon which the seeds are sown or where the seedlings are later transplanted. Besides the harvest, this period from preparation to sowing is the busiest period in the cultivation cycle for farmers, and the village is thus filled with vibrant energy. Indeed, the polyphony of the food assemblage as actualized in the context of cultivation engulfs village life completely at this time of the year.

#### *A Note on Interactions between Scales in the Intermingling of Domestic and Field Rhythms*

So far, I have described the rhythms of various vibrant components of the food assemblage as it actualizes in the domestic and village cultivation contexts, which operate on different scales. As such, the domestic food constitutes a component part of the village food assemblage that

in itself is part of the overall food assemblage to be studied. Indeed, the context becomes an assemblage of which a component is part. Recall the previous example of the curry as an assemblage of heterogeneous parts that it is itself a component of the larger meal assemblage. Hence, there is a hierarchy between smaller-scale components and larger-scale assemblages, but that is relative to the level of focus, such as when dealing at the minute level of tea preparation or the collective level of cultivation. Yet, these scales do not exist independently of each other, and assemblages can exchange components across scales by way of which an assemblage can affect the context of which it is a component (DeLanda 2006:10,17). Since the interaction between assemblages (of a similar scale or across scales) is mutual, the larger contextual assemblage can also affect its components and transform them.

Let us look briefly at the interactions between assemblages of different scales, taking the domestic food assemblage as part of the large village assemblage as actualized in the context of cultivation. Indeed, the everyday domestic rhythms acquire a different pitch at the frantic start of the cultivation cycle as well as at its end. During these bustling times of meetings, preparatory works, and sowing paddy seeds, the domestic rhythms of cooking and eating are clearly affected and altered. Breakfast is often prepared earlier than usual. Men take their food to the field in a packet wrapped in plastic and newspaper, or have it brought to them by their wife or children. The supply of food and tea for the men makes women oscillate between the fields and the domestic hearth. This adds additional movements to the already complex spatial rhythmic movements of the wife in the kitchen, the house, and the compound. For example, during work breaks, the women bring the men sweets, biscuits, and tea. Afterwards, they take the dirty dishes back home to wash, and start preparing the lunch, which is the most elaborate meal of the day. Hence, when the men are busy in the field, the pitch of the rhythm of

domestic tasks accelerates, as additional chores have to be performed. During this period of cultivation other daily tasks, such as cleaning the house and washing clothes, have to be done more swiftly or postponed to a calmer period.

### *Elephant-Affected Tunes*

During the time the plants grow and mature, the amount of cultivation work decreases and the pitch decelerates, until the frenzy of cultivation returns to the village around the harvesting period. Again, everybody in the village shares labour to finish the harvest simultaneously. This is important since it is impossible to protect the remaining fields against wild animals, especially elephants. Elephants and human beings are in fierce competition for food and this is a key component in village life that drastically affects its polyphony already from before the actual harvest.

About three weeks before the paddy is ready to be harvested the milky substance inside the husks are hardening into grains. In this process the emerging paddy emits a sweet smell that spreads across the fields and attracts elephants to the paddy fields. This is a tough period for the farmers who have to repair or build anew watch-huts in high and solid trees surrounding the fields. At the village level, several such huts with a view of the fields are built so that farmers can warn each other about possible elephant arrivals. Men guard their fields during the night for about three weeks. During this time, the evening meal must be prepared earlier so that they can leave in time. They often take food for the night, generally snack like items that pair well with tea, or in many instances alcohol. Farmers try to make the best out of this

tough period, making a fire to stay warm, or having friends join and keep them company. Once, while we were guarding the fields and having some alcoholic drinks, our small night party was interrupted by excited shouts. “The elephants are coming!” One of the men took his gun and aimed it in the direction of the trumpeting elephants in case if they would get too close. The numerous firecrackers thrown in the direction of the trumpeting sounds indicated the pace of the accelerating nocturnal concerto. Flickering torch lights, crackling sounds, and shouting men made up the soundscape or sonosphere of the stressed elephants that were trampling and damaging the fields while trying to escape. The volatility of the rhythms and tunes co-composing the atmosphere can quickly shift between boredom and enjoyment, to erupt into a frantic preparation for battle once the elephants announce their arrival.

The elephants impact the cultivation cycle and the activities of farmers, but also the diet in an important way. As the farmers have to guard their paddy fields during the pre-harvest period, they are generally not able to combine paddy with *chena* (slash-and-burn) or vegetable cultivation. It is impossible to simultaneously guard both fields against wild animals and elephants, unless one has sufficient men available in the family or the ability to hire laborers to do so. This is rarely the case, as nearly all young men seek their luck elsewhere in education, the army, or in other jobs in cities and abroad, and as the costs of laborers drive up input prices beyond their possible return. Only after people have finished reaping, threshing, and collecting paddy to store at home can they think of another form of cultivation.

Farmers will start *chena* cultivation only if there is sufficient soft rain to permeate the soil<sup>4</sup>. These soft rains, *thale vässe* (sesame rains), are named after sesame seeds often cultivated in *chena*. When these rains arrive, some farmers take on the whole task of clearing the fields by burning the jungle that has started to re-colonize the fields. They then cultivate these *chena* crops and vegetables, and likewise have to guard them for numerous nights. Many farmers cannot engage in such a tough combination of two types of cultivation, so many *chena* fields remain deserted and uncultivated for a long time, thus turning into a dense scrub forest attracting more elephants and further amplifying the difficulties for the remaining cultivators. Everybody blames the elephants for the diminishing of the variety of cultivation and diet. There is a sense that elephants are winning the battle, which provides an extra push factor of people leaving the village. Thus, if an elephant is captured, it attracts a large cheering crowd as it is driven into the truck to be transported to a wildlife sanctuary.

## **Conclusion**

Food is bound up with numerous (domestic, ecological, political) aspects of everyday life in Sri Lanka and elsewhere, and in its entanglements it offers us both an interesting topic of study in and of itself, but also for something other than itself. Defined as an assemblage, food turns into a holistic conceptual methodology of study that attests to the multiplicity of life in an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural way. The vibrations of the heterogeneous components with which food is entangled make it tremble and produce a polyrhythmic and polyphonic soundscape. As such, it becomes the conductor of the symphony, polyphony, or cacophony of life in different spheres.

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<sup>4</sup> Recall that pelting rain is required for the filling of the tank for paddy cultivation whereas soft rain is better for the other forms of cultivation.

The intention of this article has been to initiate the holistic conceptualization of food as an assemblage and illustrate how it works in a rhythmic fashion at the domestic and village level in Sri Lanka. Yet, to optimize this conceptualization in itself, several issues require further treatment and discussion. First, it remains to be demonstrated how our conceptualization of food would work in the study of phenomena at more extended regional, national, and global scales, since this would illustrate its potential for novel analysis more powerfully. As clearly illustrated in *Consuming Geographies* (Bell & Valentine 1997), where one moves from the bodily aspects to the global aspects of food—passing through the home, community, city, region, and nation,—the overall food assemblage does consist of an enormous variety of components that range from having an intimate to a global reach and peculiar interlinkages between them. Second, the complexity of the processes of scale interactions, the notion ‘scale’ (so far used in intuitive senses of level and numerical and geographical reach), and the dynamics of *scale-making* when components aggregate into large wholes; all need to be further elicited. Finally, food as an assemblage condenses human life and organization, but how do we qualify this condensation and how does it occur? Is food simply a material means of non-verbal communication, a symbolic form of condensation, and/or is it of a holographic type where food is part of the whole that it encompasses? These questions can help fine-tune the conceptualization that I initiated and illustrated here. This particular ethnographic vignette should have illustrated that our holistic approach to food holds the powerful potential of becoming both a rich topic of study and a potent method of cross-cultural and interdisciplinary study.

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