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Final Reflection Paper

Culture is the Embodiment of Food and Ethics

“Food is our common ground, a universal experience.”

- James Beard

In my Big History Through The Lens of Human Culture class, we studied human culture and the connection among culture, food, and ethics. Before we make the big connection between these three topics, we must break down all the main points — first, let’s start with what culture is. That is the question of the hour: What is culture? A definition given in Dr. Taylor’s powerpoint presentation, *What is Culture; What are Human Cultures*, defines culture as a group consisting of shared, socially learned knowledge, and patterns of behavior. Throughout the semester, we were assigned a country to research and develop a paper on culture. My country was Argentina and the cultural aspect I chose from this country was its national dance, the Tango. This dance aside from being an expressive form of art and creativity is a symbol for the Argentine human culture and their shared identity. The Tango is characterized as a strong, passionate, poised, and expressive dance, which also characterizes the personalities of Argentine people. See, culture can be any general or specific aspect of a human society and for the Argentines a key aspect is the Tango. But, for all humankind a common aspect, which can also be seen as a universal experience, is food.

Culture can be defined in several ways, but the definition given by Dr. Taylor really captures what everyone could possibly say about culture. In her definition there are three key elements to culture. First, culture is shared and therefore it is collective. Culture is shared by a group of people which makes it collective. In order to be shared, Dr. Taylor notes that the group of people must be capable of communicating and interfacing with each other. Second, culture is socially learned and is stated in Dr. Taylor's presentation as a process that infants grow up in that develops their sense of culture and society. And third, culture is knowledge — which includes norms, values, and symbols. Since culture includes norms according to Dr. Taylor, which are “shared ideals or rules about how people ought to act” (Taylor), it also includes food and how a culture gathers, prepares, and eats the food.

The connection between culture and food is fabulously made through Wrangham's research in his book, *Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human*. His overall thesis is how our early ancestors discovered fire, controlled it, cooked with it, and due to that is how we have human culture. Therefore, culture derived from fire. Fire allows for meats to soften and for its nutritional value to rise. If cooked food has more nutrients, it is better for the modern human body. When our early ancestors noticed that meat was easier to eat when exposed to fire and that it gave them more energy, they continued to use it. Wrangham wrote, “Our limited effectiveness at digesting raw food is due to having relatively small digestive systems compared to those of our cousin apes. But the reduced size of our digestive systems, it seems, enables us to process cooked food with exceptional proficiency,” (p38). The more energy our male ancestors consumed, the more efficient they were at hunting which allowed them to spend more

time around the fire, while the females cooked what they brought home. This time they had, both males and females, around the fire started communication between them. They could point to what they wanted and even grunt or moan to determine if it was well cooked or needed more time — hence leading to how culture is related to food.

A guest speaker in our class, Professor Rabbi Henry Shreibman, introduced the idea of how ethics and food connect. Ethics is shown a lot in the Jewish culture by how they choose to eat. According to my notes from Rabbi Shreibman's presentation, Judaism is an ancient culture that first started around 2,000 BCE. Judaism is one of the first religions — came before Christianity and Islam. My notes state that about 4,000 years ago, Jews were 1/2 agrarian and 1/2 pastoral societies. Their food culture started off vegetarian, but then led to include herd-able meat. One connection Rabbi Shreibman made between ethics and Jewish culture was their act of sensible killing. Jews do not mass murder. One statement that stuck with me the most from the Rabbi was how Jews believe that you are what you eat — they do not eat bottom feeders or animals in the deep ocean and they do not eat raptors or scavengers from the sky, land, and ocean. The animals Jews eat have to be herd-able and with no ability to kill other animals. By killing sensibly the Jewish culture inherits the traits of empathy and sensitivity, which reflects a lot on the people. One of the Jewish ethical principles for Kašhрут (Jewish Dietary Laws) is that if you treat animals well, you will treat your fellow human well. These ethical principals are very important to Jews in how they eat and how they treat others, basically all throughout their culture.

Every culture has its own sense of ethics in how they eat. Some cultures do not eat meat, some have certain meals on certain days, some use this spice and others use

that spice, and the list of ways go on. Ethic connects to Food because every society chooses what and how to eat. Food connects to Culture because a society can identify themselves by what they grow, herd and how they prepare and eat their food. A great lesson I have learned this semester is that culture is a huge part of one's identity and is always evolving.

Works Cited

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Wrangham, Richard. *Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human*. Basic Books, Perseus Books Group, 2009.