Decolonizing *moana* stomachs: recipes for food sovereignty from Oceania

by

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ABSTRACT

Colonialism, militarization and contemporary corporate food regimes have eroded the food sovereignty of the populations of Oceania. Such phenomenon named gastro-colonialism, has not only shaped local foodways with tinned and processed food, building a taste for it, but also made islands dependent from external food provisioning. In order to stress the relevance of the food sovereignty paradigm as a new arena for the emergence of collective actions in Oceania, this article analyzes firstly, the food sovereignty concept within the wider sovereignty issue, highlighting the plural and interconnected nature of sovereign-ties. Secondly, by analyzing the imperial forces accountable for such food dependency, it addresses the case of Tonga where the inalienability of the land could possibly shape a food sovereign milieu. Lastly, through a selection of indigenous artists, poets and writers bringing forward Hau'ofa legacy it illustrates possible "recipes" that could be scaled up to decolonize moana foodscapes.

Keywords: gastrocolonialism, food sovereignty, food regimes, Oceania, Tonga

RÉSUMÉ

Colonialisme, militarisme, et régimes alimentaires industriels contemporains ont érodé la souveraineté alimentaire des peuples d'Océanie. Ce phénomène, appelé gastro-colonialisme, a généré des habitudes alimentaires riches en produits de conserve et transformés, tout en créant une dépendance l'approvisionnement alimentaire extérieur. Afin de souligner la pertinence du paradigme de la souveraineté alimentaire comme nouveau domaine d'émergence d'actions collectives en Océanie, l'article analyse dans un premier temps le concept de la souveraineté alimentaire au sein du champ plus vaste de la souveraineté, en soulignant la nature plurale et interconnectée des liens entre souverainetés. Puis, en analysant les forces impérialistes qui interviennent dans la dépendance alimentaire des archipels, j'aborde le cas du Tonga où l'inaliénabilité de la terre pourrait donner forme à un milieu alimentairement souverain. Finalement, à travers une sélection d'artistes, de poètes et d'écrivains autochtones s'inscrivant dans la lignée de Hau'ofa, l'article montre les possibles "recettes" qui pourraient être développés à grande échelle afin de décoloniser les systèmes alimentaires océaniens.

Mots-clés : gastro-colonialisme, souveraineté alimentaire, régimes alimentaires, Océanie, Tonga

Introduction

Eating worldwide is increasingly becoming a political act, besides being a nutritional one, through which "proponents demand to participate in decisions and have a voice in establishing food system structures and particular, place-based conceptions of rights" (Wittman, 2011: 91). The entire food system from the land and sea to the table "precipitates", to use a metaphor from the chemical world where compounds precipitate, in the staple in which agricultural, forest, fishing, hunting and gathering political choices; land and water rights; cultivation knowledge and techniques; relationships with the ecosystems and its inhabitants; work and its costs; values and symbols of food coalesce into gastronomic possibilities. Addressing food is therefore addressing a field which is wider than the mere consumption act, and the foodscapes of Oceania are no exception.

Currently, its food systems, despite the great heterogeneity of their ecology, history, social and political organization, are very dependent on external food supply. I therefore argue through the analysis of the food regimes of Oceania, that further imperial forces have limited the autonomy of the islands after the decolonization process,

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including those Island States which were never officially ruled by European colonies. "The legacies of colonial era", write Bambridge, D'Arcy and Mawyer,

> "touch virtually every domain for social, cultural, political, economic, and environmental wellbeing, concluding for both those non-self-governing Pacific Island States that legally decolonized between the end of World War II and the 1980s and for those many Pacific Island territories that are still today non self-governing" (2021: C)

These forces are subtly exercising power through free trade agreements that overcome the single states, are active in preventing self-governing process, and interfere with the achievement of a full food sovereignty, namely the right to decide about one's agricultural, fishing, gathering, hunting systems as well as what to put in the stomach.

This last digestive organ is brought into play in an effective Oceanian neologism, that of gastro-colonialism, which indicates the range of complex and often overlapping neo/colonial gastronomic impositions dominating the Pacific societies (Santos Perez, 2013). Coined by food activists in the art-performance and literary world, it is a useful word which overcomes the mere etymological dimension of the physical organ, encompassing the colonization of an entire foodscape, composed of social norms, representations, symbols, eating habits and patterns, peculiar food grammars and culinary orders.

Articulated in three sections, this contribution will firstly address the western concept of sovereignty and the way in which such a concept has taken shape in Oceania, tackling the existing relationship between food, land and sea sovereignty (Bambridge *et al.*, 2021). In this section, the specificities of a food sovereignty paradigm will be analyzed within the wider sovereignty debate, as opposed to the enduring concepts of food security, in order to highlight the processes of colonization of the foodscapes which have occurred all across Oceania, creating a food dependency.

The second section of the paper examines the Kingdom of Tonga, my main field of expertise, as an exemplifying case of food sovereignty potentialities. Despite remaining independent of European rule, Tongan stomachs have been colonized by neocolonial forces: the corporate food regime institutionalized through the affiliation to the World Trade Organization has "shifted the locus of control for food security away from the nation-state to the world market" (Plahe *et al.*, 2013: 309). This has for many years directed the State development policies, encouraging the smallholders to embrace certain paths, such as the Green Revolution intensive monoculture industrial farming. Nevertheless, the current regional vision aimed at strengthening the "archipelogics" (Favole & Giordana, 2018) for Pacific common interests and tailored ways to development, make Tonga one of the states with the greatest opportunity to put into practice food sovereignty, in light of its land inalienability laws.

The third and last section of this article addresses those spaces of creativity and originality created by interdisciplinary artistic forms characterized by in-betweenness (Hereniko, 2022), which actively advocate for emancipated islands' food systems bringing forward Epeli Hau'ofa claims (1994). I draw on contemporary forms of artistic movementism, namely those spontaneous groups privileging a political action outside of the corridors of power and rather pursued in the outer social world, in order to understand and interpret forms of political engagement creating the foundation for action, on which possible "recipes" and "ingredients" from which a sovereign food system could grow.

Since "there is no single path or prescription for achieving food sovereignty, it is the task of individual regions, nations, and communities to determine what food sovereignty means to them based on their own unique set of circumstances" (Schiavoni in Wittman, 2011: 97), a debate on what food sovereignty means and on how it appears and manifests, according to the social and political actors involved in each context, is an urgent matter. Such a debate on gastro-colonialism and decolonial diets has already started among other disciplines (Fresno-Calleja, 2017; Keown, 2005; Devatine *et al.*, 2022), leaving anthropology a bit behind. For this reason, this paper ultimately aims at shedding light on the importance of addressing food as an agency instrument, and in the long run, at helping to create a permanent observatory for the moving foodscapes of Oceania as arenas of political action.

Food Sovereignty within the Sovereignty debate

In his transdisciplinary and transhistorical analysis of the western definitions of sovereignty, Adriano Favole states that "sovereignty is the legitimate power of the State to use force and impose peace within, as well as to decide to use force against other sovereign States" (2022: 34). The term arose in the 19th century Europe as an absolutist vision of the Sovereign and the State, entailing the power of command and the monopoly of the force over both a specific territory and its population. It became the propelling force of the European colonial endeavors in the following centuries.

However, the development of the contemporary world, argues Favole, brought about two

ingredients, constitutionalism and pluralism, which have reshaped the sovereignty recipe: the first aimed at dividing and balancing powers resulted in the weakening of absolutism, and the second –composed by classes, associations, political parties, unions– created a *de facto* "polyarchy where there isn't really a Sovereign" (Matteucci in Favole, 2022: 34).

This nationalist and absolutist concept appears to be absent in the early ethnographic accounts of Oceania: studies of political anthropology show that the idea of a sole and absolute sovereign, free from its upwards vertical relationships (divine entities and ancestors) and downwards vertical relationships (the land masters, religious and spiritual leaders) is mostly European. What instead seems to characterize the liquid continent, including within strongly centralized and highly authoritarian societies, is rather a pluralism of sovereignties.

Even after the fight for independence from the colonial rulers, the island states of Oceania have not embraced the adoption of a sovereign-state, which is just one of the possible forms of politics and self-determination:

> "the simple imitation of the European nationalism, the indigenous appropriation of sovereignty, it would have clashed with the hierarchies of sovereign states based on the 'line of color' as William E.B. Dubois puts it, with the result of failing decolonization" (Favole, 2022: 37)

The Pacific Way, theorized by Ratu Kamisese Mara in 1997, meant to avoid precisely a decolonization which had absolute and full sovereignty as its primary objective. Rather, the decolonization process initiated by the Pacific leaders was built on the critique of the western notion of sovereignty, which contributed so significantly to the imperial western hoarding of Pacific land and seas, and on a local archipelogic (Favole & Giordana, 2018) awareness: no island is really independent. Islands have overcome their vulnerability by thinking as archipelagos, through a constant relationship-building with other islands of the archipelago, and often way beyond it. This logic of the archipelago sits at the base of an Oceanian notion of sovereignty as "the right to choose interdependencies" as Jean-Marie Tjibaou has stated in a famous interview to *Les temps modernes* in 1985 (Tjibaou in Favole & Giordana, 2018). It is sovereignty, again in his words, "which gives us the right and the power to negotiate the interdependencies. For countries as small as ours, independence is to calculate well the interdependencies" (Tjibaou, 1996: 148).

At the same time, much of the indigenous literature on sovereignty points out that today "sovereignty has become an essential instrument in the fight for the right to the political, economic and cultural auto-determination" (Barker in Favole, 2022: 46). The term has been re-semanticized. As Taiaiake and Salisbury argue: «for people committed to transcending the imperialism of state sovereignty, the challenge is to de-think the concept of sovereignty and replace it with a notion of power that has its root in a more appropriate premise" (2005: 46-47). Sovereignty, argue Connell and Aldrich, "is not an absolute or even measurable quality of a state. In many cases, 'non-self-governing' is not congruent with 'colonized', nor is 'independent' synonymous of 'decolonized'" (2020: 24). Indeed, these heterogenous political systems of Oceania have coexisted with "periodic recolonizations" (Le Meur & Mawyer, 2022: 21) such as nuclear testing (DeLoughrey, 2012; Stoler, 2013; Ledderucci, 2022), "ocean commoning" through both fishing rights in international waters (Fache *et al*., 2021) and large scale marine protected areas (Bambridge *et al.*, 2021; Mawyer and Jacka, 2018: Mawyer, 2021; Nerici, 2022), mining (Ballard and Banks, 2003; D'Angelo and Pijpers, 2022) and deep sea mining (Childs, 2019; Tilot *et al.*, 2021; Gentilucci, 2022). This dialectic between grabbing and commoning, which clearly involves sovereignty matters, seems to be reshaping the islands of Oceania in unexpected ways (Baldacchino & Hepburn, 2012; Giordana, 2022).

Indeed, within the Oceanian sovereignty prism, in the first place, sit a number of island states which have opted for shared-sovereignty formulas, forcing the former colony to take responsibility for its past actions (the European overseas territories): "the dispersed and heterogenous European Overseas Territories are riven by post-colonial tensions and, not infrequently, by autonomy claims which nevertheless, rarely take the shape of independence movements (even if referendums do exist on this matter), and rather come in the form of more complex sovereignty claims"[1] argues Favole (2022: 51). Examples can be found in Wallis and Futuna as well as in New Caledonia, two different contexts which elaborated different (and constantly evolving) formulas of coexistence of French and indigenous institutions, not without a great deal of criticism (Blaise *et al.*, 2020). As Pierre-Yves Le Meur and Alexander Mawyer explain in their analysis of Oceanian sovereignties, these states

> "may exemplify the contemporary status of everyday sovereignty – that is not a political essence, possessed or not possessed, but as an assemblage of governance practices, legal regimes, political ideals and affects, and articulating institutions actively contested and negotiated, resisted and desired, deployed and refused, and endured by Indigenous people and local communities across islands worlds" (2022: 10)

1. Translation from Italian by the author.

Secondly, such Oceanian sovereignty prism is dotted with plural forms of non-state sovereignties:

> "the plurality of sovereign claims, related to the plurality of legal orders (or legal pluralism) is made even more complex by the presence of competing politico-legal authorities who are involved in a form of institutional or 'arenal' pluralism." (Le Meur & Mawyer, 2022: 16)

Oceanian sovereignty is indeed plural and according to the context one of them might be prioritized over another. French Polynesia, with the institution of the *rahui* has indeed formally included a water sovereignty set of rights which coexist with French ones, in a regime of legal pluralism (Bambridge, 2016).

Therefore, we witness on the one side, the presence of (or claim for) specific sovereignties carried out within the current political systems (mineral, food, land or water) which in the long run could modify the entire system; on the other, the claim for a more encompassing "island sovereignty" (Blaise *et al.*, 2020), matching the liquid and pelagic ontology of Oceania as "an alternative power able to contain and challenge the land sovereignty exercise" (Gilroy in Aria & Lattanzi, 2022: 2). This last, drawing on a *hydro*-graphy "which restores the attention to the sea that *geo*-graphy, with its obsession for emersed lands, has removed"[2] (Giordana, 2022: 2), not only challenges the fact that "sovereignty diminishes with the increase in distance from the coast and dissolves in the ocean" (Giordana, 2022: 3), but also tunes with the latest Oceanian neo-logisms "to island" (Teaiwa, 2022).

Food sovereignty recomposes the gap between *geo* and *hydro*. Sitting at the crossroad of land and water –i.e. agriculture calendars are the result of the entanglement of plant blooming, birds, fish, whales' migrations, root crops harvesting and fishing seasons– it is also an arena where homogenizing global forces come at play.

Food sovereignty is defined by the peasant movement La via Campesina[3] as "the right for people to decide their own food and production system, based on healthy and culturally appropriate food, produced in a sustainable and ecological way, which places those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies, above the demands of markets and companies, while also defending the interests and assuring the inclusion of future generations" (in Motta & Teixeira, 2022). Food sovereignty, far from being a western concept is, in fact, the result of a twenty-year debate, which La via Campesina started in the 1990s in South America, through a fine-tuning participatory democratic process that illustrated an early shift from the emphasis on the nations states' right to decide food policies to the rights of local communities and peoples (Plahe *et al.*, 2013: 319). Rooted into contemporary grassroots practices and political approaches, food sovereignty prioritizes the local, social and cultural organization, challenging the "conventional wisdom and policy to best 'feed the world and cool the planet' acknowledging communities of practitioners and indigenous knowledge" (Wittmann, 2011: 89). It is, indeed, the manifestation of a resistance movement to the corporate food regime which opposes "food from somewhere" (Bové & Dufour in Wittman, 2011: 90) to the neoliberal "food from nowhere" (Wittman, 2009), and an alternative food paradigm "engaged in deep, ongoing conversations about what kind of trade relations will best serve the social, economic, political and environmental principles" (Wittman, 2011: 94).

Such an alternative food paradigm draws its roots in the emancipation from a food dependency regime, established during the colonial rule and protracted in contemporary times through more subtle neocolonial arrangements.

Indeed, colonization has been carried out worldwide also through the introduction and settlement of European foods and foodways. This less explored way of exercising power and control, which resulted into imperishable forms of food dependency, was not only crucial for economic purposes, according to Rebecca Earle, but also for the preservation and non-contamination of the colonial body (2010):

> "Diet was in fact central to the colonial endeavor [...]. Far from being an enterprise based on an unquestioning assumption of European superiority, early modern colonialism was an anxious pursuit. This anxiety is captured most profoundly in the fear that living in an unfamiliar environment, and among unfamiliar peoples, might alter not only the customs but also the very bodies of settlers. Perhaps, as Columbus suspected, unmediated contact with these new lands would weaken settlers' constitutions to such an extent that they died. Or perhaps it might instead transform the European body in less lethal but equally unwelcome ways, so that it ultimately ceased to be a European body at all." (2010: 688-689)

In Oceania, such food introductions had a strong impact on the islands' foodscapes, not because the populations were unaccustomed to transported landscapes (Borgnino, 2022) and cultural selections, but because it soon became part of a wider colonial strategy of land grab and exploitation, slowly eroding (when not depriving)

2. Translation from Italian by the author.

3. An international movement composed by farmers, landless people, peasant women, indigenous, migrants and farm workers of the world, defending small scale agriculture as way to promote social justice and dignity. It includes over 150 local and national organizations across Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas, where it is highly active.

the local populations' food sovereignty (Douaire-Marsaudon, 1998; Serra-Mallol, 2007, 2013).

Jagjit Kaur Plahe, Shona Hawkes and Sumil Ponnanmperuma, in a wide and useful overview of the modern gastro-history of Oceania define such early stages of European economic engagement with the islands of the Pacific Ocean as a "colonial settler Food Regime" (2013). Founded on extractive and exploitative development, such a regime was characterized by a flux of edible goods from the world South to the North and entailed the reconversion of entire ecosystems into agricultural commodity exporters: "in this era, patterns of resource allocation, production, and distribution of food were dictated by requirements of the centers in Europe" (2013: 312). Fiji is one example: between 1874 and 1939 the archipelago was converted into a producer of sugar and copra for the world markets. Not only the islands' ecosystems and the knowledge behind agroforestry systems (Clarke & Thaman, 1993) were severely compromised, but the population impoverished because of unequal redistribution of revenues. Samoa and Vanuatu, through the mono-production of copra, also fed the empire's markets.

According to these authors, cooperative imperialism between colonial powers (French, British and German) got the better of competitive imperialism: through collaborations, compromises and agreements they managed to respect each other's spheres in the interest of stability and continuity of an extraction economy. Of course, "feeding into a commercially driven food regime, disconnected food production from local needs and priorities [...] reconfiguring them to suit foreign interests" (Plahe *et al*., 2013: 313).

Two more global "food regimes" –namely "the rule-governed structure of the production and consumption of food on a world scale" which "sets the parameters, dimensions, direction of production, distribution and consumption of food" as well as the principle and ideology organizing "what, how and where food is produced and consumed, and by whom" (2013: 312)– had a severe impact on Oceania, according to Plahe, Hawkes and Ponnaperuma: a post-war food regime, with food flowing from the global North to the South, and a more recent corporate food regime characterized by land and ocean grabbing from corporate agri-business companies.

The post-war food regime, "characterized by the state intervention and influence in agriculture" through subsidies, quotas and price supports, "reinforced and perpetuated a key element of the first food regime, emphasizing exports over local needs" (Plahe *et al*., 2013: 314). This regime, still rooted in the plantation system, was nevertheless characterized by a new ingredient: market competition. Islands found themselves competing for markets on timber, coffee, cocoa, bananas and many more staples, on the same trade routes and links earlier traced by the former colonial powers.

Despite this period of history corresponding to the independence and emancipation from colonial rule of a number of island states, the 1970s were widely characterized by the increase of public funding for agricultural production to encourage economic growth and development through "five-year plans based on the prescriptions of the Monetary Fund, World Bank and Asian Development Bank" (Campbell in Plahe *et al*., 2013: 315). The 1980s shifted from budgetary state support to aid money, facilitating the islands' food dependency. Within a decade "Western Samoa's imports were four times the value of exports, Vanuatu's imports two and a half times its exports, and Tonga's imports five times its exports" (Plahe *et al*., 2013: 316). Some countries were nevertheless more successful than others in bargaining their way out of these colonial food systems: Vanuatu, for example, through article 71 of the constitution removed foreigners' rights to own land and stated that the republic's land belonged to its indigenous customary owners.

The third and last food regime identified by the authors is based on the second, since "the exported surpluses of the North overwhelmed the markets in the South, enabling the integration of corporate food supply chains into the system of world agriculture" (Plahe *et al*., 2013: 317). Corporate agribusiness played the lion part, aggressively expanding their markets in Oceania under the flag of free trade. A key player in making this expansion possible is the World Trade Organization (WTO). Indeed, membership implied a set of agreements, in the field of agriculture for example, which "required to relinquish the island states right to seek food self-sufficiency [...] steady eroding the power of nation-states with regards to protect food security" (McMichael in Plahe *et al*., 2013: 309). "Their right to become part of the world trading system", further argue the authors, "has been bought at the great expense to whatever vestiges of real autonomy and independence they may have had, especially with regard to control over local agriculture" (2013: 310). Therefore, the militarization of the islands, to various degrees, as well as the post WWII liberal free-trade agreements, added up introducing tinned and processed food first and big fast-food chains' later, proving a widely unfinished process of gastro-decolonization.

According to Hannah Wittman, the food sovereignty paradigm faces those contemporary issues -ranging from how to feed the world and what is the role of agriculture and technology in advancing national development, to how humans can practice environmental stewardship. It radically differs

from the food security paradigm, which is more focused on preventing world hunger with any means. According to the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) people are food secure when they "have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life". Although food security was defined and framed in a post War world, and within the elaboration of a set of universal rights and principles we still benefit from today, "this definition treats food as a problem of insufficient trade rather than hunger by privileging *access* to food rather than *control over* systems of production and consumption" (Wittman, 2011: 91).

Nevertheless, such an approach to food as a commodity, and hunger as a mere distribution problem, has been severely criticized (Patel, 2010), because it led to the last two food empires mentioned by Plahe, Hawkes and Ponnamperuma. Like a medicine which treated the symptoms rather than the cause, food security hid the structural problems of food production and distribution with the consequence of never "directly addressing the rights of communities to produce food and to retain command and control over local food systems" (Mazhar *et al.* in Wittmann, 2011: 92). Food access and security, for instance, are to be reached through the freedom to build interdependencies "prioritizing local agricultural production and protecting local markets from dumping/subsidized food imports" rather than through "intensive production based on principle of comparative advantages and distributed through market mechanisms" (Wittmann, 2011: 91). The food sovereignty agenda, therefore, represents an "alternative policy arena" (Patel, 2010).

If the enactment of food sovereignty is ultimately tied to relationality, are there any islands states of Oceania where food sovereignty is viable, given the Empire presence in the structural economic setting of the current century? Or should we rather look for formulas where, far from autarchy, the population has the right and the instruments to choose its *degree* of sovereignty?

The kingdom of Tonga, analyzed in the following section, represents a peculiar case on this matter.

The Tongan way

Tonga was the only Polynesian chieftaincy that remained independent from European colonial rule. This does not mean that interferences where absent. In particular, the missionaries played a crucial role in the political transformation of the archipelago into a kingdom, regulated by a constitution inspired by the British Common Law (Campbell, 2003). Indeed, the attempt of the London Missionary Society (LMS) to evangelize the Tongans through William Lawry's mission had a very short life (1796-1822) whereas the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS) through John Thomas and John Hutchinson not only succeeded but managed to keep religion and politics strongly intertwined (Latukefu, 1974).

As contemporary studies show

> "in alliance especially with Taufa'ahau, later to become the Christian king of a united Tonga as King George Tupou I, violence and force had been used to establish the church, and the missionaries had encouraged his forces to behave with improper cruelty." (Daly, 2012: 72)

The removal of specific professions which were tied to the collective organization of the land, such as the *tahui fonua*, was an example of such cruelty exercise. As Francis (2006) explains, the *fonua* (significantly meaning both land and its people) was organized into a system of concentric circles over which different leading figures supervised: the *'ulu* over the smaller *'api* unit; the *'ulumotu'a* over the *fa'ahinga*, namely a group of *'api* connected by patrilinear descent; the *tahui fonua* over the *kainga*, the affinal kin. The *tahui fonua* oversaw the agricultural and marine choices and the *tapu* periods over portions of earth and water.

With the unification of the islands under one crown the land was atomized and as a consequence "a disconnection of the symbiosis between the population and the land" (Francis, 2006: 357) took place, clearing the *tahui fonua* from its supervising stewardship function. While incorporating some elements of the *fonua* system, the 1865 constitution divided the land into *tofi'a* "shifting the emphasis from the symbolic connection with the chief, its family and the population inhabiting a specific territory, to the connection with nobles and land" (Cottino, 2016: 229). The latter, selected among those chiefs who supported Taufa'ahau Tupou I and the missionaries in the unification of the islands, were rewarded with these new titles (*nopele*). They were by constitution obliged to allocate portions of land (an *'api kolo* to live in and an *api 'uta* to cultivate) to each Tongan male once they reached the age of 16.

Therefore, missionaries participated to a de-territorialization and re-territorialization process (Deleuze & Guattari in Gaspar & Bambridge, 2008). They were also the protagonists of the introduction of two new root crops in Tonga: the cassava (*manioke*) and an American taro named *Xantosoma esculenta*. Despite being more productive and resistant, these crops consistently differed from the local root crops in nutrients content: they indeed lacked mineral salts, calcium and vitamins. "Apparently harmless these introductions have laid the foundations for the plant rotation

abandonment and the intensification of production" (Cottino, 2016: 129).

However, missionaries weren't the only social actors interfering with the Tongan rulers' political decisions. Despite the Constitutional reforms granting land ownership rights to the common people, and most importantly forbade sales of land to foreigners, it could not protect completely the kingdom's autonomy in making decisions. Indeed, debt as an instrument, has been used since the late 19th century to interfere with islands' political and economic decisions.

The case of the Godeffroy Company of Hamburg is illustrative (Plahe *et al.*, 2013). In 1969 the king of Tonga borrowed money from this company and paid its debt in kind by collecting tax revenues in copra and turning it over to the company of Hamburg for export. The population further borrowed money from the company for contributions to the Wesleyan church under the deal of repaying it in copra. This loan operation basically ensured Godeffroy the monopoly on the copra trade and a sort of temporary undercover land ownership.

These forms of interference can be listed within a watered-down colonial food regime.

The shades of such interference within the post war food regime in the kingdom are quite similar to that of neighboring islands with an entirely different colonial history. Indeed, agricultural reconversions for commercial purposes took place up until 2007: before 1965 the kingdom was transformed into a "banana reign", with a total exportation of 1,200,000 cases of bananas yearly, which came to an end because of the withdrawal of New Zealand as the exclusive buyer because of better bargains with the Philippines. From 1965 to 1985 the kingdom was transformed into a big reservoir of watermelon, followed by a twenty-year further reconversion to squash for the Japanese market (Cottino, 2006). Between 1987 and 1993 the number of squash producers increased from 40 to 1300, and such boost saturated the market making the prices drop. Thus, the last years of squash cultivation were a downfall for the farmers, who were getting very little revenues in addition to impoverished and unfertile lands.

I have elsewhere written about a foreign key figure whose role was pivotal in advocating for the kingdom to embrace the so-called Green Revolution: Giulio Masasso. This Italian deserter of peasant descent, who escaped conscription into the nationalist forces of general Franco, in Spain, jumped on a boat headed for Australia, and after working for a few years in Cairns' mines, upgraded his position becoming the cook of the mine. He was then sent to Fiji where the company had business, and he got close to the British colonial settlers engaged in the plantation economy. To make a long story short, when queen Salote from Tonga asked for help from the Fijian neighboring archipelago in order to get rid of a pest that was devastating the local cultivations, the name of Masasso came up. Thanks to his knowledge of the old Piedmontese tradition of fumigating ~~the~~ vines with tobacco leaves in order to kill pests, he was successful and was granted the title of land supervisor by the crown, becoming a modern *tahui fonua*.

Nevertheless, his little understanding of the local context, and the fever for commercial agriculture with the promise of large revenues for all, made him take a decision which further disconnected the people from the land. The interconnected arboreal factory (Thaman *et al.*, 2017) and the synergic agriculture which guaranteed ecological stability resulting from a stratified, highly sophisticated and complex knowledge transmitted down from generation to generation, was put to rest and silenced.

The voices of the farmers interviewed at the end of the fifties in the village of Nuku'nuku show the high degree of farmers' adherence to the kingdom's agricultural recommendations of the time: "We had between 10 and 20 bags of fertilizer per family", states an interviewee, "the root crops grew bigger, but we had to use more fertilizer each time to make them grow big, otherwise they would go back to being small. [..] Fallow would have been necessary for four or five years at that time, and this is all fault of the banana plantations"; "If we didn't use fertilizers nothing would grow", argues another, "a lot of diseases came to Tonga in those years. People still don't know what took all these diseases to Tonga. In the past we ate watermelons, and we threw seeds everywhere and they grew where you had thrown them spontaneously, now not anymore" (Thaman *et al.*, 2017). Neglecting the rotation, the agroforestry system (Thaman *et al.*, 2017; Francis, 2006) and the synergic approach meant, indeed, a great soil fertility loss.

Trade agreements under the Corporate Food regime have also interfered with the food sovereignty of the kingdom. Since its accession to WTO in 2007, which meant agreeing to curb all tariffs at 20 percent, Tonga lost its right "to protect its agricultural sector through the use of tariffs and would risk a dispute with another WTO trading partner if it decided to increase a given tariff line" (Plahe *et al.*, 2013: 322). The authors further argue that under the WTO umbrella, "members cannot independently design trade policies that could affect market-access opportunities for other WTO members" (2013: 323), with the double result of a decrease in local production and a dramatic increase of imported food. Under such free trade agreements, Tonga, as many other island states of Oceania such as Fiji and Vanuatu,

is unable to extract from local foods the replacements of some imports. For example, flour from dried root crops could be used as substitute for wheat flour, but is not because it lacks investments in processing and storage facilities.

As a result, WTO has opened a highway for the flow of cheap processed canned and packed junk food, which not only stands out for its accessible price, but also for its long shelf life in a tropical climate. The *fale koloa*, namely small grocery shops widely distributed in the kingdom are ultimately selling these products with a great impact on the populations' health (Cottino, 2014). According to Plahe, Hawkes and Ponnamperuma, the ban on unhealthy imported meat such as *sipi*, mutton flaps, "where shelved, at least in part because of concerns that this could stymie Tonga's efforts to join WTO" (2013: 324). Francis (2006) also names a number of obstacles impeding the full implementation of the constitutional rights for Tongans to access land: shortage of land given the increase of entitled newborns; an increase of unutilized land that is left behind by diasporic Tongans moving overseas; a system of 99 years leases to foreigners involved in tourism activities; and finally, the more recent phenomenon of foreign loans for infrastructure construction mainly from China, which creates a debt and uneven diplomatic relationships.

Despite the heterogeneous political systems and arrangements within Oceania, such relationships of dependency characterize the great majority of its island states, with food imports reaching 85-90% in some contexts such as Hawai'i. As recently confirmed by a number of interviewees during my latest visit to the archipelago in summer 2022, the tourism industry sets high prices and inhibits the local population from achieving its own food security. *Kanaka maoli* are, paradoxically, a case of fishless native islanders: "during the pandemic, when all tourists were gone, we could finally access fish: we paid *ahi* 10 $ a libra, do you know how much it is now? 30!" stated an interviewee. On top of this imperialist situation, other elements contribute to making the native population fishless: the scarce exclusive access to the sea, limited to a few 'Community-based Subsistence Fishing Areas' and a post-pandemic rise in the cost of living due to the presence of rich (international) online workers who have elected the islands as their new home. Other interlocutors of mine have also pointed out that locally grown fruits and vegetables which are sold directly into farmers markets –where prices should be lower because of the absence of middleman– are subject to the influence of tourism, with visitors increasingly interested in tasting the local fish as a way to learn about the islands. I have myself experimented the impossibility of achieving a balanced diet with such prices, and therefore experienced no surprise in learning that many of the people with whom I wanted to re-engage during the visit were gone: unable to achieve food security and decent standards of life, *kanaka maoli* are forced to sell their properties and leave.

Unlike the case of Hawai'i, such lack of autonomy and vicious cycle of food dependency also characterize the kingdom of Tonga in spite of long standing agricultural practice in the hands of the local population. Food habits and practices, social norms, and their representations and symbols, to which I dedicated a full year of research between 2008 and 2009, reveal that "the roots remain" (Pollock, 1992), namely the diet is firmly based on local staples (root crops and local greens) which are hybridized with imported goods (Cottino, 2022). Access to land has indeed safeguarded the cultivation of local crops for self-subsistence and ceremonial use.

Certainly, the ban on selling arable land to foreigners has enabled the current ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forest (MAAF) to enact a quick response to the change in food paradigm that the Regionalization of the Blue Continent is bringing about. With the intent of cutting loose the ties to the foreign aid economy as well as bypassing stringent international agreements imposition within the limits of law, the MAAF since 2015 is diverting the course of food policies by grounding new pilot agro-forestry projects, with the intention of starting a new local and emancipated approach to food provisioning. In a colloquium held in 2015 with the MAAF Minister Honorable Tu'ilakepa, he drew a map of the first synergic agriculture pilot project that was going to be activated in order to start reawakening that part of local knowledge which was put to sleep by too many years of food empires. The implicit aim was that of regaining autonomy and taking the first steps towards a food sovereignty of the kingdom, which only an uncolonized land and sea can allow.

The corporate food empire subtly advocates for the extinction of customary ownership, which officially stands in the way of economic growth and development, but unofficially gets in the way of the islands' transformation projects into no-man-business-lands, namely lands of private business enterprises. Nevertheless, and despite the fact that the decision about who gets to be sovereign and accountable for enforcing food policies is still in the hands of multiple powers. In Tonga, the inalienability of both land and sea portions (within the exclusive economic zones) guarantees a certain degree of control over the system of production and consumption, as well as a certain degree of autonomy in deciding what kind of trade relations will best serve the local social, economic, political and environmental interests, namely, to choose one's interdependencies.

Despite several obstacles remain –such as the land leasing system, the foreign loans which create local debts, the shortage of land, the diaspora of landowners– this archipelago is an interesting observatory for practicing food sovereignty, where those practices could become possible recipes for sovereignty claims in the decolonial indigenous futures of Oceania.

Ingredients and recipes for a gastro-decolonization

Epeli Hau'ofa mentions the plural dimension of sovereignty in Oceania, characterized by unity in diversity:

> "Our diverse loyalties are much to be erased by a regional identity and our diversity is necessary for the struggle against the homogenizing forces of the global juggernaut. It is even more necessary for those of us who must focus on strengthening our ancestral cultures against seemingly overwhelming forces, to regain their lost sovereignty." (in Bambridge *et al.*, 2021: 349)

The development of his ideas is ongoing through various means, and food has become a new "arena for the imagination of alternative social worlds and for the emergence of collective actions" (Leitch 2008: 302), opening to new solutions for the futures of Oceanians.

The contemporary artists, performers, photographers, writers and poets of the liquid continent are a key ingredient, I believe, contributing to the valorization of such unity in diversity, and are actively engaging in forms of food advocacy in Oceania, proving that "poetry and literature is one way Pacific Islanders expose crime".[4] These contemporary gastro-critical voices (Tobin, 2002), from native and indigenous communities are actively shaping a political movement engaged in denouncing the "entanglements between culinary and cultural habits imposed by colonial, military, nuclear, capitalist and neo-liberal regimes in the Pacific" (Fresno Calleja, 2017: 13).

Craig Santos Perez (2013), who critically addresses the political hegemony in the food arena with the term gastro-colonialism argues in his poems that not only the legacies of the colonial-settler food regimes are still clearly visible in the islands' foodscapes, but also that such colonization has never ceased. In his poem *SPAM* (2014), Santos Perez exemplifies the degree to which such neo-colonial impositions have become part of the foodscape and became embodied:

> "Some kids remember
> the first time their father took them fishing.
> I remember
> the first time my dad taught me how to open a can of SPAM."

Indeed, *moana* stomachs have been colonized and generations of inhabitants share what Paloma Fresno-Calleja has named digestional genealogies (2017), a concept very well summarized by Siliga Setoga "White Sunday" (2014) artistic photograph showing a Samoan contemporary family celebrating White Sunday by eating KFC food on a table, behind which hangs a frame representing a tinned-fish ancestor.

Sia Figel, in her poem "Where we once belonged", cries out the frustration of a colonized taste and foodscape with the following words:

> "Each time a child cries for Coca-Cola instead of coconut-juice the waves close into our lungs. Each time we choose one car, two cars, three cars over canoes and our own feet, the waves close in further. Further and further each time we open *supa-keli* [tinned spaghetti] ... *pisupo* [tinned corned beef]... *elegi* [tinned herring] instead of fishing nets... raising pigs... growing taro... plantations... *taamu*... breadfruit. Each time we prefer apples to mangoes... pears to mangoes... strawberries to mangoes... Each time we order fast-fast food we hurry the waves into our lungs. We suffocate ourselves –suffocate our babies and our reefs with each plastic diaper...formula milk...baby powder...bottled baby-food and a nuclear bomb, too, once in a while. Drowning our children with each mushroom cloud, *Love Boat*... *Fantasy Island*... *Rambo*... video game... polyester shoes, socks –everything polyester... And *agaga* [spirit] as we knew it dies in our still biologically functionable bodies, full of junk-food ...darkness food ...white-food ... death food. For that is what we consume on a daily basis. We eat Death and we are eaten by Death, too. Symbiotically we live side by side." (1996: 234-235)

Santos Perez describes such structural subjugation to the different and alternating food empires:

> "Like many of our islands, the bodies of our peoples (our friends and families) will become uninhabitable due to the rising tides of obesity, diabetes and other chronic diseases linked to a colonized diet. For decades the Pacific has been a fatty food dump for the first world. The fats of Empire are in our stomachs, suffocating our organs. [...] Indigestion is not an event; it is a structure." (2013)

Tusiata Avia, of Samoan descent, writes an "Ode to Life" revisiting and reversing the western stereotypical gaze over Oceania as the garden of Eden:

> "You wanda Ode? / OK, I give you/ Here my Ode to da life/ Ia, da life is happy an perfek/ Everybodyssmile, everybody slaugh/ Lot of food like Pisupo, Macfonalan Sapasui*/ Even da dog dey fat/ You hear me, suga? Even da dog!/ An all da Palagi** dey very happy to us/ Dey say Hey come over here to NiuSila***/ Come an

4. Craig Santos Perez, talk within the Seminar "De/Romanticizing the Pacific: Imperial Legacies and Decolonial Endeavors", Oviedo University, Department of English, French and German Philology, March 31, 2022.

live wif us an eat da ice cream/ An watch TV2 evry day/ Days of Our Lives evry evry day/ Hope and Beau and Roman an Tony De Mera/ Dathow I know my Ode to da life/ An also Jesus –I not forget Jesus/ He's say to us Now you can/ Do anyfing you like/ Have da boyfriend, drink da beer/ Anyfing, even in front of your fadda/ An never ever get da hiding/ Jus happy and laughing evry time"[5] (Avia , 2009)

Artist Micheal Tuffery has also been very active since the 1990s in denouncing the yet-to-be-named gastro-colonization. In 2000 he created a series of art pieces by transforming cans of corned beef into bulls and cows (*Pisupo Lua Afe (Corned Beef)*): "The large number of tins necessary to build each the sculptures, which are the size of a real animal, points at the amount of tins consumed yearly on the islands and the subsequent accumulation of fat in the body, but also as they cumulative value as gifts" comments Fresno Calleja (2017: 5). Implying that there cannot be food sovereignty without control over food production and ownership, and without appropriate care of the environment, artist Sarah Munro, inspired by Tupaia's *Māori trading a crayfish with Joseph Banks* (1769), reproduces the scene in contemporary times substituting the content of Banks exchange with plastic water and food containers, bringing forward this foodscape colonization, which has reached wider ecological proportions (*Trade Items* 2021).

Poet Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner addresses Marshall Islands' foodscapes – showing how empires have built up dependency in the archipelago in her poem "*Hooked*" (2013): she mentions the "history of trauma" embroiled in the type of eating of the islands where Americans brought "shining tower/ of food... box after box after box /of canned spam, flaky biscuits /chocolate bars, dry sausages, hard candy" (in Fresno Calleja, 2017: 5).

And lastly, to mention a few more engaged poets, *kanaka maoli* poet Brandi Nalani McDougall and New Zealand-born Samoan poet Michael Fanene-Bentely both address imported canned, frozen and processed foods –beef and mutton flaps, American turkey tails, Vienna sausages and McDonald's– as the only affordable and convenient food for diasporic Pasifika in Aotearoa-New Zealand ("*Corned Beef by Candlelight*", 2002) and single unprivileged mothers ("What a young single makuahine feeds you", 2008).

Despite the term, food sovereignty is very little used in these activists' vocabulary, the principles of food sovereignty in Oceania are there, rooted in land and water knowledge. "Unlike a sovereignty delimited by state borders established through western legal regimes" (Bambridge, 2021: D), Oceanian food sovereignty sits in the persistent idea of environmental commons, on the one hand rooted into the communal land titles (in some island states up to 90% of the total), and on the other hand rooted into the marine ecological space where islands find themselves connected. The relationship with the Ocean, ontologically founded on kinship, also "speaks to the intimately felt connectivity and responsibility towards the region's environmental futures (including both non-humans and human dimension)" (Bambridge, 2021: D). Indeed, "across Oceania, Indigenous and local cultural norms, protocols, and rights regimes hinged to sustainability have long been in place and remain operative alongside, if often over-shadowed by, the legal regimes established in the wake of settler colonial projects in the region" (Bambridge *et al.*, 2021: F). Namely, forms of self-government in the food arena –from fishing to agriculture– coexist with both other jurisdictions within each current political systems and with strong market and trade impositions, giving shape to a plurality of sovereignties in constant reformulation.

Yet, argue Plahe, Hawkes and Ponnaperuma, "under the corporate food regime, customary ownership stands in the way of economic growth and development" (2013: 321). For this reason, these authors argue that the term food security is still so persistent in this area and hasn't been replaced by food sovereignty: "Under the corporate food regime, the emphasis is on food imports, liberalization of the market, and land reform: agricultural extension services to support local farming and self-sufficiency are not on the list" (Plahe *et al.*, 2013: 324). Nevertheless, the more populations are alienated from the land and the ocean and the more they are food unsecure, proving that the "food security recipe" can become an under-cover instrument of dependency.

However, food creates ties, not only within the communities where it plays a central role in the overall relatedness social system, bonding people and kin into a net of social obligations, but also within institutions and countries through supply and demand. These food "sovereign-ties" (Bambridge *et al*., 2021) are therefore a double edge sword: if agreements can sometimes guarantee cooperation and fixed prices, on the other hand they can trap entire countries in forms of dependencies.

Food sovereignty as a concept emerges exactly as a political action to engage in relationships and cut loose those formal or informal bonds of dependency. Thus, it is part of a prism constituted by a number of other sovereignties coexisting in an arena of competing homogenizing

5. * Corned beef, Macdonald's, Samoan Chop Suey
** White New Zealanders
*** New Zealand

global forces but also, in light of Oceania's crossroad position between land and ocean, it appears to be that conjunction ring towards the claim for a more encompassing island sovereignty. It is in this twofold direction, global and local, that these *moana* and *onesolwara* artistic movements are bringing further Hau'ofa critique of dependency (1994) claiming an Oceanian islands' sovereignty, complementing and not excluding, narrower sovereignties (Bambridge *et al.*, 2021).

Since Oceanian poetry is, in the words of Santos Perez, engagement with space, it plays a role as a re-shaper and re-writer of bonds and dependencies, proving to be a precious ingredient for imagining new food rights and policies: it proposes a "geopoetics" which, through "poemaps" (Santos Perez in Magrane *et al.*, 2020), can recompose ties and interdependencies within archipelagos, remap and rewrite routes and connections as they once were before (gastro)colonialism and (gastro) militarism reconfigured them. A decolonial act which visually un-tie and re-tie connections. "Decolonial maps", explained the author, "use words that embody geographical features" creating the shapes of the islands and archipelagos as well as navigation charts.

Therefore, if the gastro-critical voices have proven to be key ingredients, as much as yeast is for the leavening of bread, the Oceanian recipe for food sovereignty calls for a more complex political set of steps, which begin with land ownership and proceed, in Wittman's words, with the decision of "what kind of trade relations will best serve the social, economic, political and environmental principles" (Wittman, 2011: 94). Such a recipe lays its foundation on the acknowledgement that within the heterogenous sea of islands, sovereign-ties are drawn through "the ongoing relational responsibility to the Ocean and its regional natures", and not through the means of the state, "which ratifies Indigenous peoples and local communities' rights to exert agency over the region's ecological futures" (Bambridge *et al.*, 2021: E).

In conclusion, one recipe appears crucial for the achievement of a full food sovereignty, it is the claim for community land ownership, tuned with the different customary formulas that each context has elaborated, and cultural rights of access to food. Whether in the water, in the air or in the land domain, the acquisition of multiple sovereignties, (temporarily?) coexisting with other jurisdictions and powers, could ultimately lead the way to more tailored island sovereignties.

A second recipe rests on the negotiation of the "ties" and the interdependencies through decisive new trade agreements and a political agenda which sustains the decolonization of the diet, on the one side encouraging local staples through tiered prices and discouraging unhealthy, packaged and processed foods, and on the other, activating a massive valorization campaign of recipes using local ingredients[6]. Such a process will entail a great effort, beginning with the re-education of the palate to before-sugar tastes but also, and more importantly, the reorganization of the staples' social hierarchy, whose status is strongly influenced by their foreign origin (Cottino, 2022). The main aim should therefore be that of challenging the structural conditions hindering an easy, affordable and culturally sustainable control of (and not merely access to) fresh, clean and good local staples, as well as valorizing the islanders' recipes for resilience through policies acknowledging (im)material botanical and agronomic knowledge, and the centrality of food in the structure of the social organization of the islanders. As the Chamorro poet Santos Perez suggests, it "means stay away from white flour, white rice and white sugar. I have felt so much healthier, anti-American and energetic. I've even lost some colonial poundage" (in Fresno Calleja, 2017: 10). Indeed, given the high level of hybridization of the foodscape which is continuously subject to change, many interlocutors have noticed how difficult it is to appreciate "pre-colonial recipes" and underutilized resources, such as seaweed. However, this process will also force communities to reach a better understanding and agree on what is perceived as colonial food given the high level of hybridization of each context. Is, for example, rice colonial?[7] The discussion is ongoing.

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6. On this issue I have elsewhere analyzed the role of the Tv Show Pacific Island Food Revolution and of Rober Oliver's cookbook *Me'a kai*, which is contributing to such valorization process (in Cottino, 2023).

7. For a deeper understanding of the Chinese food presence in the Pacific, see Pollock, 2009.

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