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Bami Goreng for Mrs. Klerks and Other Stories on Food and Culture

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In the *Salle St Jacques* of the *École de Mines* (Paris) you would not want to present a paper in which *culture* figures as an explanatory term.¹ Calmly but firmly the assembled members of the CSI would put you right. This notion is too big, it draws too much together, it is not sufficiently practical, material, situated – what have you. What is more, the fact that someone ‘belongs to culture X’ can never *explain*, say, the food she eats, as eating specific kinds of food is likely to *mark* what it *is* to ‘belong to culture X’ in the first place. All this is very true. But now for some analysis. For even though socio-material practices are not particularly elucidated by *adding* the term ‘culture’ to them, this term is already there. It wanders in the wild. How does it figure? What does it do? What is linked up with it?² Obviously, these

¹ This article seeks to celebrate in style the great many things that, since the early eighties, I have learned at various moments in various rooms of the buildings on Bd. St. Michel 62, entrance nr. 60 these days, in meetings where the non-saintly Michel – Callon – was invariable present. I would like to thank him, as well as the rest of the CSI locals, for an uncountable number of lessons. For allowing me access into their lives, I thank the carers and inhabitants of various anonymised Dutch care institutions. For conversations related to the present paper thanks to Mieke Aerts, Amâde M’charek, Jeannette Pols, Geertje Mak, Nick Bingham and John Law.

² Shifting as a social science analyst from using terms oneself to studying how they are *being used* is a typical CSI move. It is linked up with the idea that one might, as an analyst, ‘follow the actors’. For a great, early example of how this may be done, even if the actors disappear under water, see Callon 1986. For how to handle the study of actors with two faces, see Latour 1987.

questions are far too large to deal with in this short text. But I would like to open them up. In order to do so, I will tell a few stories. They emerge from the multi-sited field work on eating bodies that I am currently engaged in. And they illustrate that while the *relation* between ‘food’ and ‘culture’ is configured in different ways, so, too, is their *reality*.

Bami goreng for Mrs. Klerks

The inhabitants of the friendly, provincial Dutch nursing home that I call ‘Blue’ here, all have dementia.³ They can no longer live with their spouses, if that is what they used to do, let alone independently. At noon, when lunch is being served, some inhabitants have to be fed, spoonful by spoonful. Others are able to move their fork to their mouth, but spill half of what is on it along the way. Some have a hard time keeping track of what, physically, they should be doing. ‘Your apple juice is right there, in your hand,’ a nurse assistant encourages Mrs. Kreefeld – but only when the nurse assistant guides Mrs. Kreefeld’s hand with her own, the juice reaches its destination. Then there are those who can eat alright, but cannot keep up a conversation even if they share a table. Added to these practical problems, most inhabitants have little appetite.⁴ In order to still provide them with sufficient nutrients, a lot of effort is put into making lunch attractive. The tables have been set with colourful placemats. There are serving dishes that offer a choice of two different vegetables and two different kinds of meat with today’s boiled potatoes. All the carers on duty are in the living room, ready to help inhabitants where needed. They produce talk that befits the scenario of a convivial meal.

Amidst all this buzz, Mrs. Klerks is sitting in a relatively quiet corner, bowed over her plate. She neither relates to her neighbours, nor to her carers, but concentrates on her food. Lack of appetite hardly seems to be her problem, she shovels up everything on her plate with impressive zeal, chews it fast, swallows it eagerly. And *she* did not even have a choice between two kinds of vegetable and two kinds of meat today. Instead, she was handed a plate of *bami goreng*. The term *mi* indicates a relatively broad wheat noodle, *ba* implies that meat has been added to this (shrimp and egg are elective), while *goreng* means that these ingredients have been fried up, along with onions, carrots, peas, bean sprouts and/or other

³ In this text I leave open what it *is* to ‘have dementia’. But see Moser 2008 for the tension between enacting this as a hampering brain or, alternatively, coping with it in daily life; and see Taylor 2008 for the question who, when a person has dementia, might give, or deserves, *recognition*.

⁴ The limit of this ‘lack of appetite’ is food refusal. See for an analysis of the relation between medical, ethical and care ways of dealing with this: Harbers et al. 2002.

vegetables. And don't forget the *sambal*, a hot paste made of red peppers, and a few well chosen spices. Before long Mrs. Klerks' plate is empty. One of the nurses tells me that Mrs. Klerks does not eat so well every day, not when she is handed 'ordinary' (i.e. Dutch) food, but she invariably does when the meal she is served with is Indonesian.

But let me be more specific. The Dutch word used by the nurse, was not the exact equivalent of the English word 'Indonesian' – which would be 'Indonesisch'. It was 'Indisch' instead. Rather than indicating the present nation, this term evokes a colonial heritage. Thus, while we are in a provincial Dutch nursing home, we are also in Dutch colonial history. The term *Indisch* suggests a complex mixture, it always has. Colonisation did not foster purity. Relevant to the case at hand, is that Dutch men settled in 'the East' from the 17th century onwards, while Dutch women only arrived by the late 19th. Thus, Dutch colonialists fathered children whose mothers were local (mostly but not only Javanese). The 'mixed offspring' of those liaisons did not quite belong to either of their ancestral families: they were *Indisch*. The daughters among them were the most likely candidates for further marriages with white men. Later, when Dutch women arrived in the colony, their children were taken care of by local nannies. Thus, albeit in a different way, they got to be *Indisch*, too. A lot has been written about this and every individual's specific history is different.⁵ But I cannot ask Mrs. Klerks about *her* history. After her meal, she shuffles to the easy chair that she was allowed to bring along to Home Blue. One of the nurse assistants smiles at her, puts a hand on her arm and asks: 'Did it taste nice, Mrs. Klerks? Did you have a nice meal?' No reaction, not even a smile back. No chance that she would be responsive to any of my questions.⁶

Even so, this small episode contains a lesson about food and culture. In Home Blue Mrs. Klerks was provided quite often with *Indisch* food, both in order to please her (she obviously liked it) and in order to assure that she got enough nutrients (it increased her appetite). Thus she was performed as someone with culturally specific food preferences that deserve to be respected. In many ways this is an achievement. After all, in the nineteen forties and fifties such cultural sensitivity was blatantly absent in the Netherlands. During that period people like Mrs. Klerks migrated to a 'home country' that most of them had never seen

⁵ See in English e.g. Taylor 1983; Stoler 2002.

⁶ How to do field work in contexts where informants do not talk? They may after all have good 'reasons' (but should we call it 'reasons'?) to do so (see Callon & Rabeharisoa 2004). They may also be 'unable' to talk (but where does willingness stop and ability begin?) while still, with their bodies expressing their 'appreciation' (for instance for their food) (see also Pols 2005).

before, because, being *Indisch*, they no longer ‘fitted’ into post-colonial Indonesia.⁷ In the Netherlands they were encouraged and sometimes coerced to ‘fit’ by adapting themselves. In adaptation classes the women among them were taught how to run a proper Dutch household. As a striking part of this, they had to forget about *Indisch* food. Take rice. Rice, the social workers insisted, is too expensive. It is far more prudent to cook *potatoes* instead. Something has changed along the way. Eating potatoes is no longer obligatory for everyone. The self evidence of a single, coherent social system has faltered. At least when it comes to food, different groups of people may each have their ‘own culture’.⁸

Bami goreng for all

I saw Mrs. Klerk enjoy her bami goreng on a Tuesday when the other inhabitants of Home Blue had an ‘ordinary’ Dutch meal of meat, vegetables and potatoes. None of this food had been cooked on the premises. Instead it came from a kitchen situated in another home, Riverview. Even though the kitchen in Riverview is not particularly large, it serves people in no less than five institutional locations. In Riverview itself meals are eaten on the day they have been prepared. Meals for the other four homes are cooled with a high-tech fast cooling system and then put in a cold storage room, to be carted around the next morning. Menus change in a six week cycle. After six months, as the winter turns to summer or vice versa, a new six week long list of menus is introduced. On Sundays there is always something a bit special. On Thursday the cooks prepare what is locally called *international* food. This may be Italian, Mexican, or something else yet again. But most often it is *Indisch*.

Over coffee I get to talk with Cisca, who works in the restaurant of Riverview. I ask her if generally the food being served there is *good*. Most of it is good, says Cisca, some of it is delicious. She spontaneously mentions the bami goreng. The cook has a good hand with it. His nassi goreng (fried rice) is not bad either. While Cisca (trying to watch her money) usually has a homemade sandwich for her lunch, she pays for a hot meal when she sees that there is bami goreng on the menu. Never mind that after her shift she will still have to prepare dinner for her husband and children (who, like her, take sandwiches along to work or school: this is the Netherlands). Never mind. Cisca can’t resist the bami goreng. *It is just so tasty.*

⁷ This migration history is again a complex one. It includes ‘voluntary’ travel, civil violence and political force. See for this and other specificities of this history of migration and adaptation, the contributions to Captain e.a. eds. 2000

⁸ For an insightful analysis of how erasing particular food cultures may have devastating effects on the health as well as the sense of worthiness of some populations (which he talks about in genetic as well as cultural terms) see Nabhan 2004.

For all I know Cisca may well have family ties that are *Indisch*, but this does not emerge in our interaction. At no point does she relate bami goreng to ‘my culture’. She tells that it ‘just’ *tastes* good. If we take it that Cisca is deeply rooted in her provincial town, an analyst might conclude that bami goreng has become a part of ‘Dutch food culture’. And so it has. It would be interesting to unravel in detail how this has happened. No doubt Chinese restaurants would be part of that story, as they were among the first affordable restaurants in the Netherlands. Often driven by Chinese families whose migration history had included time in Indonesia, they served a mixture of Chinese and *Indisch* food. Important, too, is Conimex, the firm that put all the ingredients crucial to preparing Indonesian dishes (like sambal and spices) on the market, even when this market was still tiny. And then there is the bami goreng itself: it is adaptable. Except from the *mi* (the noodles) just about anything can be added to it, or, alternatively, left out. It is a great dish for using leftovers (something the Dutch were very keen to do in the post-war decades). And although sambal is a crucial ingredient for bami goreng, it is okay to employ it only sparingly.⁹

However, investigating how bami goreng became a part of Dutch food culture, and how both the dish and the Dutch were transformed in the process, is only one way of drawing lessons from Cisca’s enthusiasm about the way this dish tastes in Riverview.¹⁰ There is another possibility as well. This is to understand a ‘food culture’ not as something tied to a *group of people* (be they Indonesian, *Indisch* or Dutch) but in a different way. Say, as a *repertoire* (of cooking practices, eating skills, tastes) that everybody may potentially learn about, link up with, and attune to. It is this latter understanding of ‘culture’ that surfaces in the habit of the Riverview kitchen of preparing an ‘international’ meal once a week. Why serve people, even very old people, with *Dutch* food every day, why not sometimes treat them to meals that stem from somewhere else? But meals from elsewhere are only a *treat* if eaters find them appealing. If a food culture and a cultural group are too tightly linked, food from elsewhere is just strange, alien and most likely distasteful. However, if a ‘food culture’ is a repertoire, you may yet learn about it. By trying it again and again, you may get attuned to bami goreng and learn to appreciate it as ‘just’ tasty.¹¹ Cultural repertoires may well be attractive to people to different degrees, in different ways, at different moments. But while

⁹ A lot has been published about ways in which food travels and is adapted along the way. From those huge piles, I care to mention here, as we are talking about bami: Wu & Cheung eds. 2002

¹⁰ It is the kind of lesson about mutual enrolment and change that we learned to draw from Callon & Law 1982.

¹¹ Obviously this may take effort. For the kind of effort that goes into ‘learning to be affected’, as well as for the pleasure it may bring, see e.g. Gomart & Hennion 1999; and Teil & Hennion 2004. It is a question in its own right *who* has actually learned to be affected by bami goreng and who doesn’t. I have not traced how many people in the various houses served by the Riverview kitchen actually opt for bami on the days that they can chose it, and how many go for the ‘safe’, i.e. traditionally Dutch, option.

‘group cultures’ belong to a group (making the group members in their turn belong to ‘their’ cultures), repertoires, at least, have the potential to move around. Like a big pan of bami goreng, they may be shared by all.

Vegetarian and Asian

When the cooks prepare bami goreng on a Thursday, they do not serve out everything they have prepared, but put some of it aside in individual portions, that go in the freezer. It is one of those extra portions that I saw Mrs. Klerks enjoy on a Tuesday. While bami goreng may occasionally appeal to everyone (or almost), Mrs. Klerks has a special preference for it. The Riverview cooks try to respect such special preferences despite the large numbers of eaters they have to cater for. *Indisch* is not the only particularity they attune to. There is also, for instance, ‘vegetarian’. However, vegetarianism is not handled as a ‘food culture’. Instead, it is simply equated with ‘not eating meat’. No trace in Riverview of attempts to emulate a vegetarian *cuisine*. No trace either of the advice of vegetarian cookbooks to combine pulses with grains so as to assure an optimal uptake of proteins. No vegetarian favourites, such as mushrooms or nuts. Instead, those who want vegetarian food get ‘ordinary’ Dutch meals without meat. As the meat is taken out, a meat-substitute is added. Thus, instead of boiled potatoes, beans and a meat ball, vegetarians are served with boiled potatoes, beans and an omelette; or boiled potatoes, beans and deep fried cheese-in-dough.

In this way ‘vegetarianism’ is not an interesting repertoire, potentially appealing to a great many eaters at least some of the time. A ‘meat substitute’ merely substitutes for meat, so why (unless you are ‘that kind of person’) to forgo the real thing? Vegetarian food is only meant for ‘vegetarians’, a specific group of people. These people may have *preferences* alright, but their diets (mind the term) are rather configured as following on from their *needs*. In the practice of the Riverview kitchen, ‘not eating meat’ is dealt with in analogy with ‘not eating salt’, ‘not eating lactose’, or having to have one’s food mashed because otherwise it is too difficult to swallow. In Riverview vegetarianism is not celebrated as a food culture, but respected as a deviance.¹²

¹² Respect is fine. But why as deviant? In this context it is good to remember that various groups of people who are widely marked as ‘deviant’ strive to be recognised as belonging to a ‘culture’ instead. This increases their possibilities of a positive definition and a positive handling of their specificities. For the classic example, the ‘deaf culture’, see Padden & Humphries 2005.

This does not just characterise care institutions: there are many places where the boundary between *culture* and *deviance* is conspicuously thin or even absent. Take the list of ‘special meals’ provided by airlines. The *special* implicated may be a *children’s* meal, a *high blood pressure* meal or a *kosher* meal – whatever suits you. Just tick a box. As it happens, I have had some struggles with this list. At home, I usually eat vegetarian food and I always avoid gluten, for which I have developed an allergy. As gluten is present in wheat and wheat is present in bread, pasta and ever so much more, eating ‘what suits me’ while I travel is not always easy. The airplane-lists are a case in point. If I tick the box ‘vegetarian’ I am likely to get pasta with cheese or tomato sauce; while if I tick the box ‘gluten free’ I can expect chicken or beef. This is how the system works: one specification is fine, two is too many. Fair enough, feeding so many people high in the air is difficult enough as it is. I have sought a personal way out, though. It is to tick the box *Asian vegetarian*. The few times I tried this so far, I got a meal of rice and dhal, or rice and chickpeas, accompanied by fairly tasty vegetables, spicy but not too spicy. This fitted my ‘specifications’ and, lucky me, the taste was invariably more interesting than that of average airplane food.

It also provided me with an interesting field work experience.¹³ On one occasion, on a KLM flight, I saw a flight attendant walking around with a special meal in his hands and a puzzled look on his face. Who among the passengers, somewhere around here, might this meal be for? As I was watching him, I began to suspect that he carried my meal. At that point he asked out loud: ‘Anyone here who has Asian vegetarian?’ Raising my hand I said: ‘That’s for me, can’t you *see* that?’ We both laughed. This was a joke. But what was the joke about? As jokes do, it brought out a tension. What went on here was a clash of cultures, or rather a clash of notions of ‘culture’.¹⁴ The flight attendant’s searching eyes had performed ‘culture’ as something tied up with a group. He was looking for visible signs that might indicate Asian vegetarian group-membership, but he found none. His subsequent question as to who his tray of food was for, implied that *anyone* among the passengers might want to eat ‘Asian vegetarian’. Thus ‘culture’ had shifted from a collective identity to a (potentially widely attractive) repertoire. I worked the other way around. In my actions, by having ticked the box, I was appreciating ‘Asian vegetarian’ as an attractive cultural repertoire, but my words marked it as a group-thing.

¹³ Using the self and its experiences as ‘ethnographic material’ is contested, but for some questions, such as those to do with allergies, it is highly productive. See also Star 1991.

¹⁴ For the argument that the social is filled with non-coherences, see Law 2004; for the argument that is worthwhile to attend carefully to and study them and the clash of ‘cultures’ they may point at, see Law & Lin *to appear*.

But that is only the first layer. The dangerous part of the joke, the uncomfortable bit, had to do with the term 'see'. This suggests that group-membership is visible. But if so, what are its visual signs? What exactly did the flight attendant *miss* when he overlooked me as the likely candidate for 'Asian vegetarian'? He missed nothing at all. On my body (how to put this without marking it in some other way?) there was nothing to *see* of the signs that we both knew he had been furtively looking for. Visual signs of (alleged) group membership are casually read on many occasions. They are composite and complex. I guess that in the well trained eyes of a flight attendant I may have looked 'vegetarian' enough, although it would deserve further analysis what it is to 'look vegetarian'. The twitchy point on this occasion was the 'Asian' bit. In this context this does not mean Indonesian, Chinese or Thai. *Asian vegetarian* is (a regionally mixed as well as a diluted version of) Indian food. With some effort I might have managed looking sufficiently 'Indian' to qualify for an Asian vegetarian meal. If I had left my jeans and t-shirt at home, and put on a sari instead, that might, at least in the context of the airplane, have been enough to 'pass'.¹⁵ But I did not wear a sari. Which leads us on to visual signs of group membership that are suspect because they are racial. Hair colour, skin, features of a face. In the Netherlands (and thus on KLM flights) it is *not-done* to look for racial 'traits'. That is to say: it *is* done, but it is not appropriate. It cannot be spoken.¹⁶ This is what my joke, inappropriately, brought out and played on.

Conclusion

Rather than using the term 'culture' to explain anything whatsoever, I have presented you here with a few examples of how 'food' and 'culture' may relate and inform each other in practice. Although the tone of my stories is descriptive, they are, so much is clear, far from neutral. This is not to say that I argue for any one thing, any one meal, or any one norm. All along, I have rather sought to differentiate between notions of 'culture' in a way that brings out the specific, situated tensions between them. Nothing is ever self evident, something is always at stake. But *what* it is that is at stake is far from general. It is specific to a site and it

¹⁵ This kind of 'passing' resembles that of belonging to one sex or rather the other. See Hirschauer & Mol 1994.

¹⁶ Race in the form of visible bodily features, is presently (re?) emerging in a variety of contexts. In court, for instance. For an attempt to 'speak it', see M'charek 2008. And for a wider range of examples, Moore et al. eds. 2003.

may change over time.¹⁷ A text like this leaves a lot of work to its readers. What to draw from it and what to ascribe to the specificities of the situations portrayed here? Which part of all this is relevant where *you* are?

To conclude, let me add a personal note. Let me add what is relevant about this text where I am. As I write, I seek to acknowledge the historically grown specificities of ‘my’ place. There is enough to eat. The self-satisfied and xenophobic sentiments that circulate here, though, make me all the more grateful to not be irretrievably caught up in this place. Put in food terms: I am grateful that (by now and at least for the time being) I am not condemned to eating meatballs, beans and boiled potatoes. Accordingly, I seek ways of theorising that strengthen that freedom. Having access to *bami goreng* and to *rice with dahl* is obviously a luxury. But for all that, it is still a *good*. Thus, it seems worthwhile to me to increase our sensitivity to cultural specificity, while simultaneously disentangling ‘culture’ from ‘groups’ and their ‘identities’ and to experiment instead with ‘repertoires’ that are, to some extent, transportable. Translatable. Questions to do with the ‘translations’ implied, present themselves. Who is lucky enough to get attuned to different foods, what about them alters along the way and where do adaptations, mixtures and interferences stop short?

But of course, if you are really hungry, you may not care all that much about taste. You just dream about filling your stomach.¹⁸

¹⁷ Things keep on changing. Checking the KLM website to be sure that I give a truthful rendering of the various boxes to tick, I find: “Asian vegetarian: **Please note:** this meal will be **replaced** by a **Hindu vegetarian meal** on 1 June 2009.” More material to analyse: what exactly is going on there? See: http://www.klm.com/travel/gb_en/travel_information/travel_planning/special_meals/index.htm. Accessed Sept. 2009.

¹⁸ For a numerical and spatial overview of global hunger, see: <http://www.wfp.org/hunger/map>

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