

The Journey of Coconut Oil.



THE POLITICS OF FOOD

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Introduction

This research report will trace the journey of coconut oil, looking broadly at its social, cultural, economic and agricultural positionality as a food source. Whilst also looking at the varied ways this food can be used. Assessing in more detail the health, social and environmental impacts coconut oil may have within the world today.

Through this analysis, the journey of coconut oil and its myriad of trajectories may reveal a critical perspective on power relations between the global North and South. By making visible the workers, as well as the actors and stages entangled within the complexity of the production and consumption processes.

The coconut palm is considered one of the most important cash crops in the Tropics, it is the main and only source of many farmers livelihoods in some of the most rural areas of the world. Globally there are more than eighty million people depending directly on coconut and its processing for their livelihoods (Warner et al, 2007). Demand for coconut based products and coconut oil especially, has accelerated over the past thirty years. This has caused many environmental, social and agricultural issues. As many of the coconut palms we see today are close to senility. Many of these coconut palms were planted during colonial era plantations. This issue will be explored in more detail later in this report.

To trace the 'social life' of coconut oil, this report will start by highlighting the historical, social and cultural trajectories of this foodstuff. This will be done by firstly highlighting how coconut oil is produced, looking at the farmers positionality and the environmental impacts this may have. Secondly, this report will trace broadly the consumption patterns of coconut oil both locally and globally, highlighting some of the recent trends that have emerged predominantly in wealthy capitalist societies. Thirdly this report will look at the health benefits and impacts of coconut oil and how its perception has changed historically over time to become a controversial food amongst scientists and populations alike. Whilst tracing the social life of coconut oil, the report will also reflect critically on the future trajectories of this varied foodstuff. And certain adjustments

within the food market may help to create a more equal relationship between those who produce and those who consume.

Production of coconut oil

As discussed in the introduction the coconut palm is arguably one of the most important crops, with over eighty million people depending on coconut palms for the livelihood and food supply globally. One coconut based product that has gained more attention recently is coconut oil. Coconut oil is derived directly from the coconut, which is productively grown within 20 North and South of the equator, particularly along coastal areas (Gustone & Harwood, 2007). We have seen an acceleration in the demand for coconut based produce in both the North and the South. Many subsistence level farmers are struggling to cope with this high volume of demand. This has been proliferated by the many health benefits certain articles have claimed it to have, not to mention the varied uses for coconut oil within the household as a food source, cooking agent, skin moisturizer and teeth whitener. Many celebrities have even endorsed coconut oil as the elixir of life. However, these accounts have been coupled with studies conducted on the unhealthy impact coconut oil may have on the body. These contradictory conceptions of coconut oil, will be explored later in more detail.

The industrialization of this versatile 'tree of life' has a rather troubled history. With many coconut farmers living in extreme poverty, they are unable to afford to plant new palms which means that the current palms which were planted mostly during the colonial era are now at risk of going senile. This leading to farmers being unable to produce enough coconuts to meet the high global market demand. One of the reasons for this is due to the low yielding levels of this oil bearing crop, compared to others. On average, one hectare of coconut yields only one ton. This is compared to the oil palm which usually yields four tons (Warner et al, 2007).

The top three biggest producers and exporters of coconut oil are the Philippines, Indonesia and India. As the demand for coconut oil accelerates, producers and processors of coconut oil are increasingly struggling to cope with the demand both locally and globally (Warner et al, 2007). The varied uses for coconut palm is what makes it commercially appealing. The main commercial use for the coconut, is coconut oil. This is due to its ability to be used internationally as a cooking oil and within the production of snacks, spreads, soaps, detergents and fats. Coconut oil is unique in its ability to be used as both a food source and a beauty product. The product has been

highlighted by both traditional communities for its benefits as being used as moisturizer for skin, teeth care and hair conditioner as well as by capitalist societies predominantly in the West. There has also been research conducted more recently on its most interesting ability to be used as a source of biofuel. Coconut oil has been used as a form of fuel in many of these coconut oil producing countries for some time.

There are several different types of coconut oil. Firstly, there is crude oil which is one of the basic and common forms of coconut oil which goes through the process of refinement. The process involved in making copra, is to split the coconut to collect the coconut meat that will then be dried and ready for refinement to be made into crude oil, which is widely used in many regions of the Tropics and in most coconut oil market products. The second type of coconut oil is Virgin coconut oil, which is characterized as being unrefined.

Tigloa (1981) analysis of the coconut oil production process, concludes that ““generates substantial profits for the landlord and capitalist classes as well as revenues for the state”, it has not made a significant impact on the lives of most small coconut farmers. Castillo (1977) also notes that those who are the lowest earners within this process of production are those who; gather tuba, pluck coconuts, husk, and the corpa-makers. Concluding that those who earnt the most were the haulers.

The tall variety of coconut palm can reach over thirty meters tall, and has a lifespan of well over fifty years (Canapi et al, 2005). Therefore, coconut farming can be particularly hazardous, as individuals would need to climb these rather large palms to pluck the coconuts, this job is even more dangerous during the rainy seasons. In order to complete such a job one needs to be skilled in dehusking and physically strong. This as Castillo and Quebral (1996) point out is not only an extremely dangerous job, but a grossly underpaid one.

Once the coconut has been plucked, the traditional means of extracting coconut oil is from the corpa, this is achieved through crushing in an expeller, then by solvent extraction which recovers the residual oil from the cake (Canapi et al, 2005). What follows next is the refinery of the crude oil, by physical or sometimes chemical refining to remove impurities, which in turn contributes to making it suitable for human consumption and prolonging the shelf life (Gunstone & Harwood, 2007).

Virgin coconut oil trend

One interesting trend that is emerging is the consumer demand for coconut oil that does not go through the RBD process (Amin et al, 2009). However, this method yields even lower content of oil, which is a huge disadvantage for its commercial usage (Rosenthal et al, 1996). This is commercially marketed as Virgin coconut oil, there is also an additional appeal added to the marketing of this product through their organic certification (Warner et al, 2006). To the health conscious, wealthy, 'ethical consumer' this has a greater appeal and value. There is however a significant price premium for Virgin coconut oil (Warner et al, 2006), giving the product an added prestige to wealthy consumers, as a high-end food produce.

Marx argues that human labour is no longer apparent in the process of production. This is apparent within the realm of branding and the advertising of food. Which is a key factor within the Fairtrade movement, which was conceptualized in order to deconstruct the process of production and consumption, in order to make visible the individuals and conditions in which the process of cultivating and producing food within the global south, to later be imported to the global North.

Environmental concerns and implications

deforestation of tropical areas that support coconut palm growth limits biodiversity, promotes soil erosion, alters soil nutrition composition and creates a rift in the regional ecosystems that can affect life-giving ecosystems, such as water filtrations and land arability.

One major concern as of recent within the coconut industry is the emerging lethal yellowing disease. The disease leads to the yellowing, wilting and deaths of palms (Danyo, 2011). The disease has recently been discovered in Papua New Guinea coconut palms, which poses a great economic and social implications. As demonstrated coconuts are a key source of staple food and income for many households (Bourke and Harwood, 2009). The lethal yellowing disease will result in the loss of hectares of coconut palms, causing many to lose their means to economic survival. According to the Arocha-Rosete et al (2014) an outbreak of the disease in Cote d'Ivoire wiped out over 350 hectares of plantations with a great loss of 12,000 tonnes of copra, with a further 7000 hectares under threat.

Social lives and economic poisoning of coconut farmers

When it comes to social issues, coconut oil is not just affecting communities and farmers economically but there is also cause to believe that in some areas where coconut is

produced there has been an acceleration of violence. One interesting study conducted by Yancey Orr, among coconut farmers in the Tausug of the Southern Philippines, has suggested just that. The article 'Coconuts and the emergence of violence in Sulu' (2012) demonstrates that within this region agricultural patterns are entangled with the distribution of violence. As after the introduction of the popular cash crop shortly after the second world war, where minimal labor and startup capital was needed for the population to commence coconut farming, has in turn lead to confusion and disputes over land ownership amongst farmers. One reason that Orr has proposed this is due to, is that unlike cash crops such as coffee beans, coconuts does not require daily care and annual labor amounts to seven hundred hours. Where as coffee requiring 2,500 hours per year. Within this region the main use of coconut is the for producing coconut oil or copra. The oil is exported and the charcoal that is made from the shell of the coconut is used locally. The more free time that the coconut farmers have for non-economic activity in this case lead to a proliferation of violence in the area over territory.

Hastorf et al (1998) hypothesis in 'The cultural life of early domestic plant use' that within certain cultures a plants and agricultural production may heighten a cultural characteristic of 'nurturing'. Relating particularly to plants with a shorter life cycle, allowing farmers to relate to their life cycle (Hastorf et al, 1998; 773-82). Within this conceptualization, plants which have a longer life cycle and require less care; such as coconut trees may perform socially in the opposite manner. Orr's (2012) analysis demonstrates how in some contexts, environmental conditions may have an adverse effect, acting as a catalyst for violence, the social stratification of a community and cause competition for resources.

Another important social aspect of the production of coconut oil, is its ability to benefit local communities in a positive manner by acting as a means of economic development. This has been researched by Ansong et al (2016), within the context of sub-Saharan Africa. The authors draw on the potential for the production of coconut oil and palm oil, for helping countries and the communities living in these areas, to elevate poverty through this means and in addition ensure food security. Highlighting both the functional and nutritional benefits of producing coconut oil. What is most appealing is its ability to be used as a primary source of dietary fat as well as for traditional medicine. The agricultural production in sub-Saharan Africa, according to this report employs 65% of the workforce. Which makes the cultivation of coconuts and the production of coconut oil, crucial for the reduction of poverty. Within the region of Western Ghana, coconut oil has made large contributions to the households and livelihoods of the communities, particularly in the 'Nzemaland' of that region. As almost every household will be involved in some way or another with the production of coconut oil, along with using it

as a cooking agent in their diets. This has acted as a major economic activity which has generated employment for many (Asong et al, 2016).

Consumption of coconut oil

Coconut oil, is globally a popular alternative to other vegetable based oils. It can be utilized as a cooking agent, hair conditioner and teeth whitener. The varied uses of coconut oil are what makes it a commercially appealing food product. Consumption has proliferated over the past decade, this is due largely to the medialization of coconut oil as a healthy food source. This is apparent both online, when one looks up 'coconut oil' there is a vast number of articles, health and lifestyle magazines and blogs, all championing coconut oil as a healthy alternative to oils such as olive oil. These media extracts also highlight the varied uses of the oil. What is most interesting from a researchers prospective, is the journey coconut oil has made to become this media sensation. As many health nutritionists deemed coconut oil to be high in saturated fats, making it a rather unhealthy food product, now research has developed to consider the oil to be healthy. Although this is still not clear. What is clear however is the need for further research into the exact health benefits and implication of the oil. Along with looking closely at the social and environmental consequences that the consumption of the oil has within this ever-globalized world. What is important to note is that the 'craze' surrounding coconut oil is not an entirely new phenomenon, as this oil has been consumed for centuries in many countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia and India to name a few. For this reason, the palm has been deemed by many cultures as 'the tree of life'. In India, the traditional name given to the coconut palm is 'kalpauriksha' meaning 'the all giving tree' (Moldeerkutty, 2005). As within this population, similarly to many tropical cultures, every part of the coconut is used in some way or another in daily life. This making it a very important crop to the population not just as a food but as a product.

The consumption of coconut oil is not just limited to local traditional cultures, with many countries around the world importing the oil annually. In a 2005 report, the European Union was indicted as the destination for the highest imports of coconut oil exports, with 88 million tonnes being imported, which accounts for a remarkable 42% of the total world import of coconut oil (Warner et al, 2007). The growing trend, amongst ethical consumers is the want for 'Virgin coconut' oil which is unrefined. This is also

inline with the increasing number of consumers, becoming more ecologically and ethically conscious. By this I mean a growing number of people, with expansion of telecommunications are becoming increasingly eager to know where exactly their food is being sourced from? Who is growing and producing the food? And is my consumption contributing in a negative way to other people's lives?. These are all questions that the Fairtrade certification and ethical consumer movement, hope to address.

What are of any the health benefits of consuming coconut oil?

Coconut oil, has been conceptualized and deconceptualized over the past few decades, it has caused much controversy within mainstream media, health nutritionists along with scientists. The reason for this being that there have been many studies conducted on the health benefits and implications of coconut oil, however the findings have been left rather inconclusive. Broadly speaking coconut oil is viewed by many as healthy vegetable oil, as Foale (2003) has highlighted through his research that there may be antibiotic effects of the lauric fatty acids, which coconut oil is rich in. Within his own study of the produce he has hypothesized that 'derivates of lauric and rapir ocl supplies bacterial, frugal and viral pathogens of humans including HIV' (Foale, 2003 pp130).

Previously coconut oil had been viewed as unhealthy due to it containing a high level of saturated fatty acid (SFA). However, in 2000 Pehowich et al showed that coconut oil contained saturated fats that were primarily comprised of medium chain saturated fatty acids. When compared to long-chain saturated fatty acids, medium chain saturated fatty acids are smaller in molecular which follow the lymphatic system for absorption, they in short absorb faster than the saturated fats that contain long chain fatty acids. Which are then carried to the liver to be oxidized. This process then in turn reduces the amount of free MCFAs in the blood circulation and has been speculated to be a potential cardioprotective mechanism of coconut oil according to Eyres et al (2016). Pehowich et al (2000) argue that moderate use may in fact reduce susceptibility rather than being a risk factor for coronary heart disease.

This proliferation of demand has been characterized largely by 'health nutritionist' in the South commodifying coconut oil as a healthy alternative to other oils, along with its varied uses. One of the reasons this has been presented as such is due to epidemiological evidence gathered by nutrition researchers from the tropical populations who consume coconuts and corpa (oil) frequently in their diets, this showed that there were no negative effects on cardiovascular health. These finding one finds

somewhat problematic, since most of these indigenous populations would have consumed coconut produce as part of a traditional diet which would have been characterized by a low intake of processed foods. Meaning that the finding may be vastly different when applying the same research methodology to a population which consumes coconut produce regularly, along with a Western diet which is largely made up of processed foods.

Conclusion

Coconut oil has been and will continue to be of great important to many rural and substance based farmers globally. Its potential to be used as a means of economic development is great, this is proliferated by the increasing consumer driven demand within the global market of coconut oil. As discussed there are several issues that may affect its ability in being able to yield productively and gain capital, these issues can be summarized as; the ambiguity surrounding its health benefits, palm based diseases such as yellowing disease and the low wages and poor conditions in which the coconut farmers are suppressed in. Upon reflecting on historical, social and environmental trajectories of this foods journey to the mass consumer market place, it has become clear that there is a real need for further primary research to be conducted under the same premise, to increase our understanding of the politics surrounding this food. In order to raise consumer consciousness, and make known the multiple actors and agents involved in the production process of coconut oil. The power relations that are entangled within the relationship between the production process in the global South and the consuming patterns of those within the global North, can be renegotiated through deepening the consumers understanding of these relations, which will in turn create a great want for products that are sustainably and ethically sourced.

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