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FINAL REPORT

The Sankofa Report

British Colonialism and the UK food system





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February 2023

“Se wo were fi na
wosankofa a
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*It is not wrong to go
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you have forgotten.*

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The Sankofa Report



Se wo were fi na wosankofa a yenkyi

It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten.

Sankofa is a principle, originating from the Akan people of Ghana, that one should remember the past to make positive progress in the future. The word Sankofa literally means “to retrieve”. This is expanded to encompass the principle that: to know history and your heritage is to know your current self, the world around you, and how to better both.¹

Introduction

Food Justice has been defined as a movement to dismantle social inequalities to create access to healthy, available, nutritious and culturally relevant food. The food justice movement is inherently a social justice movement with the aim of eradicating any form of oppression that may restrain a person’s ability to access and participate in the food system.

Race is severely underrepresented in much of the food system transformation work happening across the UK. Conversations about identity, particularly race, should be at the forefront of every social movement to ensure that everybody is represented, has access and can participate. However, the work of dismantling structures of oppression is often obscured by larger narratives of colour-blind equality or multiculturalism. These narratives erase the often violent and complex realities that many Black and people of colour (BPOC) communities have faced as a result of British Colonialism. It is impossible to address the barriers BPOC people face today when accessing and engaging with the food system without first reflecting on the history of British Colonialism and how its legacy manifests in the present day.

History of British Colonialism in Food Systems

British Colonialism is inextricably linked to the food systems of today. To address inequalities in the British food system, it is essential that our colonial past, present and future is critically engaged with.

During the rule of Queen Elizabeth I, at the beginning of the 17th century, the vision of the British Empire began to take shape with ship and slave raids, piracy and the first colonies laying the foundation for Britain’s rule across the seas.² Throughout the 17th century, Britain was at the forefront of the Atlantic Slave Trade. For 150 years, 3 times as many Africans left their native lands on British ships for the New World

¹ Masterclass, 2022. Sankofa Meaning: What Is the Ghanaian Concept About?
<https://www.masterclass.com/articles/sankofa-meaning-explained>

² Louis, W. R., Canny, N. P., & Low, A. M., 1998. The Oxford History of the British Empire: The Origins of Empire: British Overseas Enterprise to the Close of the Seventeenth Century (Vol. 1). Oxford University Press.

than Europeans. Chattel slavery was a tool of British food systems: if they survived the middle passage, slaves suffered short, fragile lives in poverty, brutalised by British and European colonists to extract and produce sugar.

The abolition of slavery in 1833 did not bring respite for former slaves. The economy of the British West Indies was solely reliant on the labour of the newly emancipated freed people and the production of crops. Former slave masters resorted to coercive measures to prevent freed people from leaving plantations, such as tenancies-at-will that forced plantation workers to pay more rent than they earned thus forcing them to be indebted to the plantation owners.³

With the mass exit of enslaved Africans from plantations, plantation owners looked to a new labour source: India. Over 2 million Indians were transported to work the plantations in the West Indies as indentured servants, allowing the colonial food system to continue.

Within India (and modern-day Pakistan, Bangladesh and Burma) the East India Company⁴ (EIC) defeated the Mughal Empire with its own private military 'twice the size of the British army,' and established a monopoly on the agricultural economy. The EIC was an unregulated corporate entity, albeit with strong ties to the British government and crown, with a large portion of MPs owning company stock. The EIC was indeed the 'world's first aggressive multinational corporation'⁵ forging the way for today's neo-colonial powers (as explored in the next section).

Raw materials such as cotton, tea, sugar and spices were transported from India to Britain. Local farmers had to depend on the whims of the British market, losing land, access to their own agriculture and ownership of public infrastructure. By the end of the 19th century, large scale famines were frequent across India, causing millions of deaths. Britain quite literally excluded Indians from the fruits of their labour and drained the land of its wealth.⁶

British imperialism also had detrimental effects on the food security of colonised nations across the African continent. Traditionally, both South Asians and Africans had relied on the land and raised livestock for their livelihood. At the start of the 1870s, areas in Eastern and Southern Africa faced severe droughts. Some countries were reported to have gone up to 6 years without rain. Drought resulted in famine. Ethiopia (a British controlled area) was particularly hit hard by droughts, with death tolls estimated to have been between 50% and 95%. British forces exploited droughts and launched attacks to acquire land.⁷

In the 1880s, cows that were infected with rinderpest were imported from British-ruled India to Eritrea. Rinderpest eventually spread all up the Atlantic coast, killing almost 90% of cattle. Many Africans had their livelihoods destroyed and were therefore forced to choose between labouring for British colonial forces or facing starvation.

The devastating effects of these disasters are not merely coincidental; the use of cataclysmic events for political and capital gain is a well-documented phenomenon⁸ that can be observed throughout colonial and neo-colonial history.

In 1913, the Native Land Act was passed, denying native Africans the right to own land in 87% of South Africa. Much of the rich farmland that South Africans depended on was divided up between the British and

³ Morgan, P. and Hawkins, S., 2006. Black Experience and the Empire. Oxford University Press.

⁴ Dalrymple, W., 2015. The East India Company: The original corporate raiders. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/04/east-india-company-original-corporate-raiders>

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Stein, B., 1998. A history of India. Blackwell.

⁷ Oswald, G., 2022. Africa During the Scramble: The Years without Food. Sealion Press. <https://www.sealionpress.co.uk/post/africa-during-the-scramble-the-years-without-food>

⁸ Klein, N. (2008). The shock doctrine. Penguin Books.

the Boers. Native South Africans were forced to live in small, isolated areas called homelands, and were excluded from agricultural and skilled jobs, which were instead given to the Boers. Native South Africans were forced into low-skilled jobs that were far from the homelands.⁹

It is impossible to separate the atrocities of the British Empire from the consequences that manifest in the current day. Native and colonised peoples' pre-existing food systems (that came to be through their own geographical and cultural systems of knowledge around land, food and people) were violently disrupted and destroyed, in order to coerce and force populations into Britain's wealth and empire building.

Estimates by University College London indicate that 10-20% of Britain's wealth has significant links to slavery.¹⁰ If the money generated was adjusted to today's inflation, estimates suggest that victims of slavery alone would be owed between £6bn and £264bn in reparations.¹¹

While the British empire itself is no longer active and most former colonies have gained official independence, colonialism is a rupture that cannot be undone. This rupture has left the populations of former colonies poorer, with less agency and sovereignty in food systems. Despite this, there has yet to be any meaningful action taken to rectify the harm caused. In fact, the inequitable power dynamics of the colonial era have only compounded and manifested in newer, more nefarious forms.

Modern Colonialism and the Continued Exploitation

Neo-colonialism has been defined as the continuation or re-imposition of imperialist rule in officially independent nations. Neo-colonialism can take the forms of globalisation, foreign aid, the expansion of capitalism, and cultural imperialism.¹² In the age of Neo-colonialism, colonial powers are no longer simply single-nation governments or monarchies who establish and maintain control through military force. As Ghanaian political theorist and President Kwame Nkrumah wrote in his foundational text on Neo-colonialism in 1965:

*The 'end of empire' has been accompanied by a flourishing of other means of subjugation. The British Empire has become the Commonwealth, but the proceeds from the exploitation of British imperialism are increasing. [...] A recent survey made plain the plunder of British monopolies. It listed 9 out of 20 of Britain's biggest monopolies as direct colonial exploiting companies [...]*¹³

As was first established with the East India Company, multinational organisations, with complex and overlapping interests with state governments, are now the dominant force in global trade, influencing policy and wielding monopolies. Britain and the West perpetuate the colonial relationship with former colonies through trade that caters to the Western market at the Global South's expense. Multinational corporations use global south nations as a supply bank of cheap labour, land and resources. With governmental complicity, these corporations cause irreparable harm to the environment and the people.

⁹ Luscombe, S., n.d. <https://www.britishempire.co.uk/maproom/africa.htm>

¹⁰ UCL Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery, n.d. <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/project/context>

¹¹ Guthrie, J., 2020. Lex in depth: Examining the slave trade - 'Britain has a debt to repay'. Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/945c6136-0b92-41bf-bd80-a80d944bb0b8>

¹² Stanard, M. G., 2018. European Overseas Empire, 1879-1999: A short history. Wiley Blackwell.

¹³ Nkrumah, K., [1965] 1974. Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism. Panaf. P. 52.

Though many African nations gained their independence from Britain in the 1950s and 60s,¹⁴ most economies continued to rely on the same commodity crops from the colonial era. Resources and crops were quickly privatised and sold to the UK as cheap raw materials,¹⁵ a model which continues to shape the modern food system. As anthropologist and founder of the Fine Cacao and Chocolate Institute (FCCI) Carla Martin suggests: 'you're going to have to think about how the troubled cocoa supply chain is a relic of colonisation that persists in the present-day.'¹⁶

The chocolate industry is particularly lucrative with an estimated worth of £4 billion per year in the UK alone. While efforts are underway to establish fairer economic standards and working conditions¹⁷, African cocoa farmers scarcely see the profits, with women workers earning 23p a day and men earning 75p a day on average to harvest cocoa - well below the international poverty line of £1.40 set by the World Bank.¹⁸ Child labour is also common practice for the harvest and transportation of cocoa. Between 2013 and 2014, it is estimated that 2 million children were used for hazardous labour in Ghana and the Ivory Coast.¹⁹

While Cocoa remains a vital source of income for farmers in West Africa, it is causing other problems besides rampant poverty and modern slavery. The cocoa industry is linked to deforestation in the region, with farmers opting to clear rainforests over reusing land. It is estimated that 70% of the Ivory Coast's illegal deforestation is linked to the cocoa industry.²⁰

The soy industry is another huge perpetrator of environmental destruction. Major UK supermarkets ALDI, Asda, Co-op, Lidl, Marks & Spencer, Sainsbury's, Tesco and Waitrose use soy suppliers that have been linked to over 27,000 hectares of deforestation in Brazil.²¹ In addition to deforestation, the chemicals used to grow soybeans are a major polluter in lakes and rivers. The estimated carbon dioxide emissions associated with Brazilian soy production are equal to more than half of the total emissions of the UK in 2009.²²

Many commodity-driven agricultural industries also lead to human displacement. Corporate monopolies in the soy industry have caused small farmers and Indigenous tribes to be forcibly displaced from their land and the expansion of soy is estimated to threaten the land of over 650,000 Indigenous peoples in Brazil.²³

The disempowerment of local populations' land autonomy is intrinsically linked to the environmental crisis. The climate crisis disproportionately affects the global south and ex-colonies, who have produced fewer

¹⁴ In the light of Queen Elizabeth II's passing in 2022, it is worth reiterating that former colonies fought against Britain and the monarchy's attempts to pacify them. Their independence was not benevolently granted, but hard won after centuries of oppression and rebellion.

¹⁵ Southall, R., & Melber, H., 2009. A new scramble for Africa?: Imperialism, investment and development. University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

¹⁶ Martin, C., quoted by Carr, T., 2020. The Bitter Side of Cocoa Production. Sapiens.

<https://www.sapiens.org/culture/cocoa-production/>

¹⁷ See for example: Uncommon Cacao's [Transparent Trade](#); Fairtrade's [The Fight For Living Incomes](#) campaign; Voice Network's [Cocoa Barometer](#); the [Regenerative Cacao Manual](#); International Cocoa Initiative's [strategic and community development work to prevent child labour and forced labour in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire](#)

<https://www.cocoainitiative.org/about-us>

¹⁸ Sayid, R., 2020. Exploited female cocoa farm workers are paid just 23p a day. Mirror.

<https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/exploited-female-cocoa-farm-workers-21569248>

¹⁹ World Wildlife Fund, 2017. Bittersweet: Chocolate's impact on the environment. WWF.

<https://www.worldwildlife.org/magazine/issues/spring-2017/articles/bittersweet-chocolate-s-impact-on-the-environment>

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Mighty Earth, 2022. European supermarkets fail to act on deforestation-linked soy.

<https://www.mightyearth.org/2022/07/11/european-supermarkets-fail-to-act-on-deforestation-linked-soy/>

²² World Wildlife Fund, n.d. Soy. <https://www.worldwildlife.org/industries/soy>

²³ Ibid

carbon emissions than former colonial powers.²⁴ The devastating floods in Pakistan in 2022 are indicative of this continuing reality: Pakistan contributes less than 1% of greenhouse emissions, yet is ranked as the 8th most vulnerable region in terms of climate change.²⁵

The social, economic and environmental conditions imposed in poorer countries have caused an influx of people into the UK in search of a better life. Seasonal farming is a major industry in the UK that is directly reliant on the work of migrants. Despite the invaluable work of feeding the nation, many migrants face abusive work conditions including a lack of health and safety equipment, unfit and unsafe accommodation, racism and unfair work terms. In 2019 the UK launched a working scheme to address the labour shortage caused by Brexit, recruiting workers from abroad. Many workers were coerced and deceived when signing contracts and now face discrimination, racism and human rights abuses on these farms.²⁶

That the UK relies on the work of migrants whilst simultaneously exploiting them comes as no surprise when contextualised within British history: the Windrush generation were invited to Britain to help rebuild public services after World War II, were rewarded with economic and social discrimination and mistreatment,²⁷ and now face the threat of undocumented status and deportation.²⁸

Britain established its empire in virtually every corner of the world, building wealth through the exploitation of people, their labour and resources. Countless societies and individual lives were destroyed, and that harm is still being passed down intergenerationally. Since little has been done to remedy Britain's colonial legacy, the same injustices of the past are replicated in the modern day. The food system is intrinsically linked to the colonial histories of many communities of colour, who have produced a significant proportion of Britain's wealth. Very little work has been done to understand the barriers BPOC face when interacting with the food system in the UK.

Barriers for BPOC within the UK Food System

Lack of greenspace and land ownership

Inaccessibility of certain physical and geographical areas of the food system in the UK has a major role in perpetuating social and economic inequalities within racialised communities. Racialised people are more likely than white British people to live in the top 10% most deprived neighbourhoods.²⁹ Overall, the most economically deprived areas have the highest population of racialised individuals and the least amount of access to quality greenspace.

²⁴ Ritchie, H., 2019. Who has contributed most to global CO2 emissions? Our World in Data. <https://ourworldindata.org/contributed-most-global-co2>

²⁵ Al Jazeera, 2022. 'Never seen climate carnage' like Pakistan floods, says UN chief. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/10/never-seen-climate-carnage-like-in-pakistan-un-chief>

²⁶ Levitt, T., & Wasley, A., 2022. 'No running water': Foreign workers criticise UK farm labour scheme. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jan/12/no-running-water-foreign-workers-criticise-uk-farm-labour-scheme>

²⁷ Morgan, M., 2018. 'We Wi likkle but wi tallawah': enduring NHS cuts and Windrush deportations 70 years on. gal-dem. <https://gal-dem.com/we-likkle-tallawah-nhs-cuts-windrush/>

²⁸ Gentleman, A., 2017. 'I can't eat or sleep': the woman threatened with deportation after 50 years in Britain. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/nov/28/i-cant-eat-or-sleep-the-grandmother-threatened-with-deportation-after-50-years-in-britain>

²⁹ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019. English indices of deprivation 2019. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019>

Access to greenspaces also correlates to inequitable land ownership. In England alone, 50% of land is owned by 1% of the population.³⁰ Class disparities are intersected by racial disparities, with white British households being more likely to own their homes than households from ethnic minority backgrounds.³¹

Besides the aforementioned experiences of racism and othering that migrant agricultural workers face in the UK, farming is made impossible for BPOC and minority ethnic populations when the British farming sector is completely reliant on the inheritance of land as a requisite of your career.³² Even when communities of colour have physical access to green spaces, other barriers remain. A study by Public Health England recognises the feelings of social exclusion and cultural differences as a determinant for communities of colour spending time in greenspaces. Many people of colour report experiences of racism, fears of being bullied, feeling unwelcome or out of place, and not having the cultural background of spending time in nature.³³

With the dominance of white land ownership and a predominantly white population, the British countryside has traditionally been seen as a white space. People of colour experience feelings of alienation when they are in these spaces because of the history of being excluded from them. The need or desire to spend time in green spaces is diminished as a result of intergenerational trauma within communities of colour. The idea of a day in the park could be a pleasant experience for their white counterparts, but a stressful and ostracising experience for a person of colour. This directly impacts the amount of time people of colour spend in green spaces.³⁴

Positive action to challenge the white/green space association, dismantle access barriers and host healing spaces is being taken by a growing number of groups in the UK, including: Land In Our Names; Wanderers Of Colour; Black Girls Hike; Peaks of Colour; Muslim Hikers; Walk4Health (previously 100 Black Men Walk for Health); Rooted in Plants; All The Elements; We Go Outside Too.

Britain's history of systemic racism cannot not be ignored when understanding the rates of poverty, land ownership and access to greenspaces.

Agriculture and intergenerational trauma

For many BPOC, working the land is reminiscent of ancestral experiences of slavery or indentured servitude. Working in fields is backed by the landscape of centuries of exploitation, violence, displacement, isolation and subjugation. Some people of colour may view working the land as a way to heal intergenerational trauma and reconnect with their ancestral experiences. However, many do not have the

³⁰ Evans, R., 2019. Half of England is owned by less than 1% of the population. The Guardian.

<https://www.theguardian.com/money/2019/apr/17/who-owns-england-thousand-secret-landowners-author>

³¹ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019. English Housing Survey 2017 to 2018: home ownership.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/817623/EHS_2017-18_Home_ownership_report.pdf

³² Zagata, L. & Sutherland, A., 2015. Deconstructing the 'young farmer problem in Europe': Towards a research agenda. *Journal of Rural Studies*. Vol 38, pages 39–51. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2015.01.003>

³³ Public Health England, 2020. Improving access to greenspace: A new review for 2020.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/904439/Improving_access_to_greenspace_2020_review.pdf

³⁴ Collier, B., 2019. Black absence in green spaces. *The Ecologist*. <https://theecologist.org/2019/oct/10/black-absence-green-spaces>

resources and capacity to redefine their relationship with agricultural land as it is still tied to systems of oppression, thus preventing them from even considering farming or growing as a career or hobby.

As Rebekah A. Williams, co-founder of the non-profit Food for the Spirit, reflects on her visit to a former slave plantation:

Because our Black ancestors were enslaved for agriculture, future generations of Black folks may have shunned natural places and land that reminds us of agriculture... We can't forget how white slave owners accumulated land and wealth through agriculture, that they were able to benefit from the enslavement of Black folks, and that their future generations of white children were passed down that wealth and land, while Black folks who were enslaved got nothing.³⁵

Land justice is an essential tool in healing the trauma related to land and breaking down systems of oppression. Creating safe spaces for people of colour to reflect on their trauma and establish a healthy relationship with the land could have a huge effect on their willingness to work with it. Many BPOC do not have the luxury of defining their relationship to land as it still tied to systems of oppression.

Food insecurity and food deserts

Besides time spent in nature, living in deprived areas affect BPOC's ability to access high quality, nutritious foods. In the UK, Black households are up to four times more likely to suffer from food insecurity than the national average.³⁶ According to the Food Foundation's most recent Food Insecurity Tracking, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups were more likely be food insecure than White ethnic groups, with 26.9% of BAME households experiencing food insecurity against 18.5% of white households.³⁷

Food deserts are defined as urban areas where residents do not have access to an affordable and healthy diet. In the UK, more than 1.2 million people in deprived areas live in a food desert which equates to 1 in 10 low-income communities.³⁸ This makes eating healthily challenging, especially when the same ingredients cost more in low-income areas than in affluent areas. In urban areas, convenience shops are the only option available for people to do their weekly grocery shop. A 2021 study shows that smaller convenience shops charge anywhere from 8%-10% more for the same ingredients.³⁹ Furthermore, from our own community research in Brighton & Hove we know that many ingredients simply aren't available in low-income and urban neighbourhoods.

When budget and time constraints are already an issue, living in a food desert can have detrimental effects on the overall wellbeing of communities of colour. When BPOC households are suffering from food insecurity, living in a food desert only exacerbates the insurmountable task of putting food on the table.

³⁵ Gilbert, J. L., & Williams, R. A., 2020. Pathways to reparations: land and healing through food justice. *Human Geography*. Vol 13, issue 3, pages 228–241. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1942778620951936>

³⁶ White, N., 2022. Black households up to four times more likely to be starving than national average. *The Independent*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/black-cost-living-households-food-b2051285.html>

³⁷ The Food Foundation, 2022. Food Insecurity Tracking. Round 11. <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/initiatives/food-insecurity-tracking#tabs/Round-11->

³⁸ Corfe, S., 2018. What are the barriers to eating healthily in the UK? *Social Market Foundation*. <http://www.smf.co.uk/publications/barriers-eating-healthily-uk/>

³⁹ Walsh, H., 2021. The cost of convenience: how much extra will you pay at Sainsbury's Local and Tesco Express? Which? <https://www.which.co.uk/news/article/the-cost-of-convenience-how-much-extra-will-you-pay-at-sainsburys-local-and-tesco-express-arOQq7k73hf4>

Immigrants' access to traditional foods and food cultures

A study by Cauldron Foods revealed that 60% of the foods eaten in Britain are not from a traditional British background and many of the dishes commonly eaten in the UK today have roots in British colonialism.⁴⁰ Immigrants have had an immeasurable influence on the British food scene.

Despite having such culinary influence, the UK can still be a hostile place for immigrants, and many communities struggle to access to their cultural foods. Food is a central part in the construction of our cultural identities, and a way to understand how ethnic groups define their traditions, values, beliefs and interpersonal relationships. Culturally appropriate foods are essential for the mental and physical health of people who migrate to the UK.

Due to the abrupt changes in the food available to recent immigrants from low- and middle-income countries when they arrive in high-income countries, many suffer from poorer lifestyles and poorer health outcomes than the general population.⁴¹ In larger urban areas it is much easier to access cultural foods than in more rural areas. Outside of the UK, people often acquire their food through fresh food markets or home gardens. Foods in packaging make familiar food unfamiliar, as well as methods for storing foods. As a result, many immigrants report feeling distrustful of the host country's food.

Many immigrants express that they want high quality, fresh and unprocessed foods, reporting that the processed, preserved, canned and frozen food found in Western countries were at odds with their dietary customs. They viewed the food in supermarkets as being old, filled with chemicals and unhealthy. Fruits, vegetables and meat in particular were reported as having less taste than in their home countries thus being perceived as having poorer quality and less nutritional value.⁴²

World food shops are essential for providing access to culturally specific foods and produce from an immigrant's home country. World food shops are also able to develop a personal connection with their customers thus helping them understand products and to navigate food labelling. This kind of support is particularly important for communities with language needs and religious dietary needs. Furthermore, world food shops have been found to fill nutritional and accessibility gaps in areas that qualify as food deserts.⁴³ These shops play an important role in the food system by supporting marginalised communities that are often overlooked by traditional supermarkets in the UK.

Social networks are crucial to the acquisition of food for immigrants, especially those who have newly arrived. Resources are pooled within immigrant social networks, and they support food shopping by providing rides or childcare. Having support from others in their ethnic community provides immigrants with a much easier experience when food shopping. Members of their social circle can provide advice on where to shop, the use of various food products and different ways of eating. Particularly for those on lower incomes, social networks help with finding affordable foods that are also culturally and religiously relevant.

⁴⁰ Barrow, H., 2021. The impact of multiculturalism on British Food. Immigration News UK. <https://immigrationnews.co.uk/the-impact-of-multiculturalism-on-british-food/>

⁴¹ Berggreen-Clausen, A., Hseing Pha, S., Mölsted Alvesson, H., Andersson, A., & Daivadanam, M., 2022. Food environment interactions after migration: a scoping review on low- and middle-income country immigrants in high-income countries. *Public health nutrition*. Vol 25, issue 1, 136–158. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980021003943>

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Ibid

Racism within agricultural education programmes and farming

A 2017 study by the Policy Exchange shows that farming is the least diverse sector in the UK with only 1.4% of farmers being from ethnic minority backgrounds. They also noted that ‘the least diverse jobs all tend to be tied to animals or the outdoors or skilled crafts.’⁴⁴ The lack of diversity in the industry has led to many instances of racism reported by BPOC farmers and those trying to enter the sector.

Josina Calliste, co-founder of Land in Our Names (LION) details her experience with the lack of diversity in the agricultural sector:

Having taken introductory permaculture courses, participated in “Permablitzes”, and spent a month on a food forest course in Portugal, I was experienced in being in environments where racial justice was rarely mentioned, all teachers were white, and there was zero mention of African or indigenous farming practices which influenced modern, regenerative or sustainable farming practices. I’d felt previously that I was screaming into the void when it came to recognising the roots of oppression or racial injustice in these spaces.⁴⁵

Often tied to traumatic histories of slavery and exploitation, working in agriculture is an undesirable profession and work environment for many BPOC. However, the industry is not only undesirable for its history, but also the *current* realities that people of colour often face. The agricultural industry is a hostile environment for people of colour and land is still being used as a tool in their oppression.

Since the time of writing this report, Ecological Land Cooperative, Land in Our Names and Landworkers’ Alliance have published a report on the experiences of BPOC in British farming and agriculture: *Jumping Fences: Land justice, food justice and racial justice in Britain*. We thoroughly recommend reading and sharing this invaluable piece of research and decolonial analysis on the context of race, food, farming and land, and the experiences and recommendations of research participants.

Underrepresentation and racism in public and third-sector institutions

Little effort is being made to address the lack of diversity in food systems maintenance and transformation work in the UK. At the higher levels, such as governmental work, there has been a lack of BPOC politicians in the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). At the time of writing this report, there has never been a BPOC Secretary of State for DEFRA.

The charity sector, including organisations that work in the food sector, are failing to reflect the diversity of the communities that they serve. Just 9% of employees in the voluntary sector are from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds; lower than 14% in the UK as a whole. In higher executive levels of leadership,

⁴⁴ Nori, R., 2017. The Two Sides of Diversity: Which are the most ethnically diverse occupations? Policy Exchange. <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/The-two-sides-of-diversity-2.pdf>

⁴⁵ Calliste, J., 2020. Why we need racial justice in farming. Landworkers’ Alliance. <https://landworkersalliance.org.uk/land-in-our-names-reflections/>

⁴⁶ Terry, N., 2023. Jumping Fences: Land, food and racial justice in British farming. Ecological Land Cooperative, Land in Our Names, Landworkers’ Alliance. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5eece00ee6780d38b9fb012f/t/63b599ddb28c5936edc62cff/1672845804758/Jumping+Fences+2023+Web.pdf>

representation becomes much scarcer. In a study of the top 500 charities in the UK, only 5.3% of people in senior leadership teams were from BAME backgrounds.⁴⁷

As well as being underrepresented, staff from ethnic minority backgrounds who do work in the charity sector experience discrimination and harassment. According to recent surveys, 68% of BAME respondents had experienced or witnessed racism in the charity sector. 45% of respondents said they face microaggressions and ignorant questioning about their culture or religion. A further 30% reported being treated as intellectually inferior.⁴⁸

Dominance of Western epistemologies in food research

Another area of underrepresentation (and misrepresentation) in the UK is academia. Much of the contemporary research and discourse surrounding food systems is dominated by Western systems of knowledge production, which often have roots in colonialism. This is particularly true of research on agricultural methods; white settler and European food production is represented as the inception of agriculture. This research completely erases centuries of Indigenous land cultivation and alternative systems of knowing, using, and relating to land, food and nature.⁴⁹

The very foundations of many British academic institutions are directly linked with imperialism and colonialism. As Bradley and Herrera note:

Over five centuries colonizing forces have included many forms of destruction, for example, through [...] enlightenment notions of rationality, science, dominion, and civilization; the positional superiority of European knowledge; the dismissal of indigenous spirituality; and imposition of what is 'human' and what is 'Other'.⁵⁰

White superiority in the food system has manifested as the romanticisation of agriculture, racial exclusion in alternative food places, assuming the right to speak for or with authority about BPOC and the exotification of food from certain ethnic groups. Hegemonic Western methods of research perpetuate colonial power dynamics by limiting the ability of research subjects to control how they are presented, creating limited transparency about research methods and researcher-subject relations.

Lack of cultural sensitivity in nutrition programmes

The final area of the food system that is not representative of the UK's diversity is nutritional advice. The field of Nutritional Science has a history of producing nutritional information based on universalist notions of health, society and culture. These generalisations about diverse populations of people ignore important differences in diets, geography and cultural practices.

⁴⁷ ACEVO, 2018. Racial diversity in the charity sector. <https://www.acevo.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Racial-diversity-in-the-charity-sector.pdf>

⁴⁸ Lingayah, S., Wrixon, K., & Hulbert, M., 2020. Home Truths: Undoing racism and delivering real diversity in the charity sector. ACEVO. https://www.acevo.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ACEVO_Voice4Change_home_truths_report_executive_summary_v1.pdf

⁴⁹ Kepkiewicz, Chrobok, M., Whetung, M., Cahuas, M., Gill, J., Walker, S., & Wakefield, S., 2015. Beyond Inclusion: Toward an Anti-colonial Food Justice Praxis. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*. Vol 5, issue 4, pages 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2015.054.014>

⁵⁰ Bradley, K. & Herrera, H., 2016. Decolonizing Food Justice: Naming, Resisting, and Researching Colonizing Forces in the Movement. *Antipode*. Vol 48, issue 1, pages 97–114. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12165>

The Eatwell Guide is the government standard for healthy eating. It models which foods to eat and how they should be eaten to have a healthy diet. The current Eatwell Guide does not consider the diversity of ethnic foods or eating cultures. Though some individuals and organisations have attempted to modify the Eatwell Guide (both in its content and presentation) to be more culturally relevant, the UK government has not published cultural adaptations.

Race is a common parameter often used to tailor nutritional advice. Historically, attempts have been made by the scientific community to attribute race with biology. While race itself is a socio-political construct and not a science (race science has been used as the basis of colonial atrocities based on notions of white superiority), the effects of social and medical racism have clear and demonstrable links with poorer health outcomes. The stress faced by BPOC who experience racism has a role in metabolic function and a person's perceived race has a huge role in determining their quality of life. With this in mind, considerations of racialisation become a tool to create a more holistic approach to nutritional science.⁵¹

The delivery of nutritional information to ethnic communities is extremely important in supporting proper nutrition. Language barriers and varying cultural beliefs on health have been noted to affect the willingness of BPOC communities to engage with healthcare professionals. The National Patient Survey showed that South Asians and Chinese people report poorer experiences with the NHS.⁵² They were also less likely to use healthcare services and follow medical advice. Cultural difference, such as belief in traditional medicines and treatments, made it difficult to communicate with healthcare professionals. Lack of culturally sensitive nutritional advice feeds into health disparities in many communities across the UK.

For nutritional advice to be effective, it must be informed by the cultural dietary habits of a particular ethnic group. Advice must also be delivered in culturally informed ways, with considerations around *who* is delivering and *where* the delivery is taking place. For all individuals working in the field of nutrition, there must be a willingness to engage in dialogues about non-Western methods of wellbeing and dietary habits.

Conclusions

The Black Lives Matter movement brought to the forefront issues that communities of colour have been dealing with for centuries. The UK's food system receives its raw goods and labour from poorer countries and marginalises individuals from those countries accessing the food system in the UK. People of colour have been starved, traded, worked to death, have had their rights taken away and are excluded from the food system that is dependent on them. Many of these issues intersect with each other creating complex webs of oppression.

Establishing normative values of restorative justice is essential for improving the relationship that people of colour have with the UK food system. If we as people working within food organisations really want to pursue food justice, reflecting on our history and undoing the legacies of British Colonialism that are built into the food system are important next steps.

In the words of Martin Luther King Jr.,

⁵¹ Duggan, C. P., Kurpad, A., Stanford, F. C., Sunguya, B., & Wells, J. C., 2020. Race, ethnicity, and racism in the nutrition literature: an update for 2020. *The American journal of clinical nutrition*. Vol 112, issue 6, pages 1409–1414. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ajcn/nqaa341>

⁵² Leung, & Stanner, S., 2011. Diets of minority ethnic groups in the UK: influence on chronic disease risk and implications for prevention. *Nutrition Bulletin*. Vol 36, issue 2, pages 161–198. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-3010.2011.01889.x>

For it is obvious that if a man is entering the starting line in a race 300 years after another man, the first would have to perform some impossible feat in order to catch up with his fellow runner.

Fixing the damage done to create more inclusive food systems must be prioritised. Only then will everyone have a place at the starting line.