



Corn Mothers and Meal Culture

Ecofeminist Alternatives to Food and Soil Security

Roxanne Swentzell and Parto Teherani-Krönner in conversation
with Alexandra R. Toland

Roxanne Swentzell is an artist, permaculturist, builder, seed collector, author, community organizer, mother, and grandmother based in the Santa Clara Pueblo region of New Mexico. Stemming from a long line of renowned potters and sculptors, Swentzell has devoted her life to making art that reflects the complete spectrum of the human spirit. Swentzell focuses a lot on interpretative female portraits attempting to bring back the balance of power between the male and female, inherently recognized in her own culture and hopes that her expressive characters will help people get back in touch with their surroundings and feelings. Swentzell is well known for her prolific practice as a ceramic and bronze sculptor, having exhibited pieces at the Heard Museum, the Denver Art Museum, the Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian, and many other museums and galleries across the United States. She is the cofounder and president of the nonprofit Flowering Tree Permaculture Institute and teaches courses at

the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe. In an effort to keep local art at the Pueblo and encourage the creativity of young artists she founded the Tower Gallery and Studio and helped establish the Poeh Cultural Center & Museum in Pojoaque, New Mexico.

Parto Teherani-Krönner has worked as a lecturer at the Faculty of Agriculture and Horticulture in the division of Gender & Globalization and is now a guest scientist at the Faculty of Life Sciences at Humboldt University of Berlin. She holds an MA in development and rural sociology and a PhD in environmental sociology. Since the early 1990s she has established women and gender studies in rural areas as a field of study in Germany. Her areas of research are the sociocultural dimensions of sustainable development, the engendering of agricultural policy, and the cultural ecology of meals and food security. She has conducted a number of field studies in Iran, Sudan, and Germany, and has organized within the last decade international summer school programs in Omdurman, Sudan, and Berlin, Germany, with participants from countries in Africa and Asia. She is a member of the scientific board of the German Society for Human Ecology and is currently working as a consultant to the research project Diversifying Food Systems: Horticultural Innovations and Learning for Improved Nutrition and Livelihood in East Africa (HORTINLEA).



Discourse on the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal to end hunger focuses on issues of food security, which has led some scientists to argue for soil security as a fundamental prerequisite. Soil security is defined as “the maintenance and improvement of the world’s soil resources to produce food, fibre and freshwater, contribute to energy and climate sustainability, and maintain the biodiversity and the overall protection of the ecosystem.”¹ While the maintenance of soil ecosystems is at first an obvious goal, the language of both terms—food security and soil security—is inherently defensive, conjuring up militaristic measures to prevent some kind of assault. What is often missing from the soil and food security debate is reflection on the cultural contexts in which food is grown as well as the agency of those who farm, distribute, and finally cook or otherwise prepare the fruits of the earth. As Parto Teherani-Krönner points out, it is largely women who farm and prepare food in many rural communities around the world. Local and geopolitical decision making regarding food production and soil conservation policies need to therefore recognize the relevance of meals and meal culture as well as food and soil. Roxanne Swentzell’s work demonstrates how artistic tradition plays a central role in meal culture, from the way food is planted and sown to how and where it is cooked to the vessels that hold it and the rituals surrounding its consumption and enjoyment over generations. I interviewed Roxanne and Parto via a series of e-mails and telephone calls in a kind of virtual round table discussion about the role of meals as they relate to the food and biomass production function of the soil.

Title image: Tamales pictured in *The Pueblo Food Experience Cookbook: Whole Food of Our Ancestors*. Roxanne Swentzell and Patricia M. Perea, Museum of New Mexico Press, 2016.

Alexandra R. Toland: To begin the conversation, I'd like to hear a little bit about the different practices that influence your work. Roxanne, maybe you could go first. You are well known for your artistic practice with ceramics and bronze. I was fascinated to read about your practice as a permaculturist, seed collector, cookbook author, adobe builder, and community organizer, not to mention mother and grandmother. How do all these different practices relate to one another? For example, are there certain things that you have learned as a sculptor that helped you in your pants oven-building project, or have there been moments in your garden where you have developed new ideas for sculptures?

Roxanne Swentzell: I am a person who has always seen the way everything in life seems connected. To call myself an artist, or builder, or farmer, only seems like saying the mountain is a rock. What about the trees and the birds and the grass and the dew and the spiders and the deer and the sounds and smells and fog? They are all the mountain. I seem to have many hats but it's all one head I put them on. I think this is what attracted me to permaculture. I understood the part about patterns and how everything is connected. In permaculture, you don't just see a chicken; you see the whole system that happens to have a chicken part of it. So, when I build an oven or house, sculpture or pie, I am still coiling up walls with dirt/clay/dough to shape a container ... what the container is holding affects the shape of the walls whether it be a person, bread, or a figure to tell a story. As I'm weeding the field of corn, I watch corn leaves blow in the wind, their roots dig down in the wet soil. I love this dance of corn, air, water, sunlight, desert heat, grasshoppers, birds, and me standing in the dirt, sweat pouring off my face, thoughts drifting into food thoughts, prayers for rain to quench all our thirsts. My whole life is studying how it all goes together and how to be part of as much of it as I possibly can. What I

know for sure is that the more I connect to all the parts of my life, the deeper the mystery becomes and the more it matters. Everything starts to be part of a bigger picture instead of objects disconnected to place and time.

Alexandra R. Toland: Parto, you have a diverse research background with interests in the fields of feminist studies, cultural ecology, agricultural science, food systems science, environmental justice policy, and sustainable development. Could you tell us how these different theoretical schools of thought have influenced your concept of "meal culture"? In your book, you propose that eating is more than the ingestion of food, but a cultural and social phenomenon.³

Parto Teherani-Krönner: It is quite obvious that people usually do not eat raw agricultural products like rice, corn, and barley, but prefer to eat prepared meals. "All living species need food for survival, but human beings are governed by cultural norms and taboos regulating this process of incorporation of natural products. Even under difficult circumstances, human beings will not accept and eat anything just to supply their need for calories, vitamins, proteins and minerals, even if they are hungry. ... This process of human accommodation is tied to the normative system of a culture, no matter how economically wealthy or poor its people are" (Teherani-Krönner 1999).⁴

So, as a rural sociologist and human ecologist, I try to acknowledge human activities and thus put people first in developing my thoughts about meal culture. This means that in order to understand agricultural production and rural development and the whole environment for that matter we should not only concentrate on crops, animals, and technology but also look at those who fulfill that work. From an ecofeminist and gender studies perspective, it is important to recognize that much of that work is carried out by women, especially



Dishes pictured in *The Pueblo Food Experience Cookbook: Whole Food of Our Ancestors*. Roxanne Swentzell and Patricia M. Perea, Museum of New Mexico Press, 2016.

*Said one among them—"Surely not in vain
My substance of the common Earth was ta'en
And to this Figure molded, to be broke,
Or trampled back to shapeless Earth again."*

*After a momentary silence spake
Some Vessel of a more ungainly Make;
"They sneer at me for leaning all awry:
What! did the hand then of the Potter shake?"*

*Whereat some one of the loquacious Lot—
I think a Súfi pipkin – waxing hot—
"All this of Pot and Potter—Tell me then,
Who is the Potter, pray, and who the Pot?"*

*As under cover of departing Day
Slunk hunger-stricken Ramazán away
Once more within the Potter's house alone
I stood, surrounded by the Shapes of Clay.*

From the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam (1048–1131)²
Translated by Edward FitzGerald (1859)

Next pages:

The Corn Mothers are Crying. Original clay sculpture by Roxanne Swentzell, 17" H, 16" W, 16"D. This piece was created in response to being asked, "Using your art to speak for you, what would you say to our tribal leaders?" First, all information is seeds, so the symbol of a seed pot seemed appropriate. I come from a pueblo tradition so corn is essential to who we are. My seed pot holds corn. It is not only a seed pot but a prayer for the healing of our communities. The Corn Mothers face their directions as they watch over the world. The pot is symbolic of the Earth. The Corn Mothers lean outward trying to reach the turned backs of "the children."

One "child" is suffering from bad nutrition and health. Living in a world of fast foods overprocessed ingredients, products grown using pesticides and herbicides, and now GMO foods, we are truly in trouble for our health. Diabetes, cancer, birth defects, are just a few of the symptoms of this tragic choice, And the Corn Mothers are crying. ...

The second figure has turned his anger toward the world. Trying to pretend that he doesn't care, he destroys and vandalizes. The need to hurt those around him is a reaction to how he feels hurt. And the Corn Mothers are crying. ...

The third figure has turned the destruction on himself. Using drugs and alcohol, he tries to escape a world and a self that he is not happy with. And the Corn Mothers are crying. ...

A mother hides from the screams of her child left to fend for itself. How is it possible for unwanted, abandoned, and abused children, to grow up and raise children of their own? This has become a generational crippling of our society. And the Corn Mothers are crying. ...

I asked tribal leaders of our communities to help bridge the gap that exists between our cultural ways and our lost children. The sense of belonging and spiritual fulfillment that are essential to our cultures can help heal the wounds of our people.





in countries of the Global South. Women are the ones who nurture the world. In many agrarian societies in African and Asian and Latin American rural areas women still shoulder most of the fieldwork. In her book *Kitchen Politics*, Silvia Federici⁵ mentions that 80% of what is consumed and eaten in Africa is produced by women. And let us not forget that nearly all over the world it is usually women who take responsibility for everyday preparation of meals at the household level. Unfortunately, modern agriculture and the implementation of new technologies in food production have not taken these vital social dimensions into much consideration. Women's contribution to agricultural production and indeed the whole care economy is mostly ignored or even overlooked. The gender order can be seen as a key to understanding our food system, or as I prefer to call it our meal culture.

From an anthropological point of view, cooking is a primary innovation of human kind that helped make it possible to save our energy for digestion and allow us to spend our time on other inventions.⁶ Our cultural development is in other words based on the art of meal preparation. Cooking is only one aspect of this development. Ingredients are important elements, but from a sociocultural point of view the processes and rituals around the meal are equally important components of eating and sharing meals. Human interaction is deeply seated in the social construction of meals. Human relations start with drinking and eating together.⁷ If we were to lose this everyday ritual we would lose an important cultural space for socialization and building relationships. The question will remain as to where that loss might be compensated. Thus, meal culture is not about what we eat only, but about the greater cultural context, the social setting, and the structure of a meal as a communication system. Meals are the materialized symbols of social networks⁸ and women have been and

somehow still are the masters of this social interaction system. Adam was born when Eve started to cook.

Alexandra R. Toland: Roxanne, you bring a lot of these ideas to life in your artwork. In 2010 you created a symbolic sculpture titled *The Corn Mothers Are Crying*. One of the figurines in the sculpture suffers from obesity and diabetes, food-related diseases that disproportionately affect Native Americans. Last year, you published a cookbook and series of essays with Patricia Perea about the food preparation practices of Pueblo peoples: *The Pueblo Food Experience Cookbook: Whole Food of Our Ancestors*.⁹ The cookbook was based on an experiment you and other members of your tribe made in which you adopted a precontact diet for three months to see if native foods could improve health issues such as diabetes, heart disease, and even depression. It worked! The experiment illuminated deep connections between place and individual and community health as well as the need to protect and support the intangible cultural heritage of food preparation.

Given the genetically diverse “melting pot” of the Americas, do you think contemporary hybrid cultures and peoples could benefit from the *Pueblo Food Experience Cookbook*, or in Parto's terms the Pueblo meal culture? What wisdom can the Corn Mothers offer a country hungry for nourishment at many levels?

Roxanne Swentzell: *The Corn Mothers Are Crying* is a piece about heartbreak concerning our Pueblo people. It shows how broken and lost we have become. My attempt was to show the pain so we can start the healing process. We have to look at it and cry to figure out what happened. I believe it is because of the disconnect from our culture, due to colonization, genocide, disease, and Western culture's views on objectification and worth. When we forget who we are and where we came

from, we are like uprooted plants. We slowly die. The Corn Mothers are our original mothers who took care of us for so long. They are shown leaning toward their children but the children have forgotten them and no longer hear their songs. I created this piece as a seed pot, not just seeds of corn but seeds of knowledge and remembering. It's about finding our way back home. So, the mythology of the Corn Mothers is absolutely affecting my journey to finding my way back to our traditional diet. I prayed and they came.

The interest in the cookbook and the message behind it has been very well received. I keep hearing about other organizations trying similar things, so I believe it is right time for it. We are starving in more ways than food. What I tell people at my talks on the Pueblo Food Experience is not to copy our ways but to find their own. Everyone is indigenous to this Earth somewhere. I ask them to find out where that was. Where was the last place your genes were some place for more than 20 generations? What did they eat? What did they do? Feel your ancestors in your blood and how they were connected to place. The Pueblo Food Experience is our example of what that was for us. It's a map for Native peoples of the Southwest and Northern Mexico. The deeper we go "home" the more nourished we will feel.

Alexandra R. Toland: Nourishment looks a lot different when it is framed, as Roxanne says, in terms of "finding our way back home." Parto, could you talk about where nourishment fits into the overall idea of meal culture and its accessibility to those who have forgotten their proverbial Corn Mothers? I'm thinking about elderly people in poor rural communities with no access to organic supermarkets, or to low-income youth in cities who acquire most of their calories from fast food chains, or urban singles who consume "Community Supported Agriculture" products alone in their kitchens, posting plate-selfies to

share with friends on social media. Would it be fair to say there are "sustainable" meal cultures and "unsustainable" ones, or is there something to be learned in any context in which people gather, physically or virtually, to sit and consume food?

Parto Teherani-Krönner: Coming and joining a meal together is the key to a healthy diet and social well-being. Eating is one of the first forms of sharing and an important step in human socialization. This has been underlined more than a hundred years ago by the sociologist Georg Simmel (1910) who wrote an article about the sociology of the meal (*Soziologie der Mahlzeit*). So, I would say meal culture is everywhere—even in fast food chains, but there are meal cultures that are closer to sustainable practices than others. For example, there is general agreement that too much meat consumption is neither suitable to human health, nor is it compatible to environmental protection (Worldwatch Institute 2017).¹⁰

Some generations ago most communities were dependent on their own direct environment for nourishment. There were moral barriers to killing animals in most societies. It was often combined with rituals to legitimize the slaughtering of animals; not seldom combined with symbolic sacrifice and meat distribution (Rappaport 1967).¹¹ But globalization has changed the way we eat dramatically. Now societies can transport commodities and waste from and to other regions without borders. The direct connection to environmental resources at "home" gets lost and becomes no longer immediately perceptible. It takes some time before people get confronted with the consequences. But then it might be too late.

In European countries as well as in the Global South meat consumption is increasing with processes of industrialization and modernization of agriculture. Meat consumption was once a matter of prestige, dedicated to special occasions,

whereas now it has become an everyday expectation in many parts of the world. This development is accompanied by overstressing environmental resources and consuming huge amounts of energy. Producing a unit of meat needs eight to nine times more plant-based energy. There is also the social context to consider. Nutritional recommendations focus mostly on telling us what to eat and what to avoid. But this is a too narrow view on meal culture. From my cultural background, I would say: “Eating alone—having no one to share food with—is a sign of poverty.” This is reflected in the structuring of meals as well as their nutritional ingredients. Hamburgers are not only nutritionally deficient, they are also just designed for one person, whereas a soup or a stew is much more amenable to sharing. This means that the composition and the structure of a meal give us the scope of action for our social interaction and communicational opportunities around our meals.

So, the challenge is organizing and designing new ceremonies around meal cultures with delicious dishes without or with only little meat; not only in vegetarian or vegan restaurants but in schools, in canteens, and home for the elderly. We need a more holistic approach when it comes to understanding our nutritional practices, customs, and taboos. Our nutrition and meal preferences are deeply rooted in our cultural traditions and normative systems, and our rituals for eating together are ideally accompanied by some sort of social control that can help avoid things like swallowing fast, obesity, and waste—the cultural disconnections Roxanne’s Corn Mothers were lamenting. We need to rediscover or create new sustainable consumer habits in meal culture. We need to find new spaces to cook and enjoy our eating together and communicate and socialize around meals.

Alexandra R. Toland: This challenge is grounded in aesthetics as much as it is grounded in social

practice and knowledge transfer. Roxanne, I wonder what your response to this might be as an artist. You have not only compiled recipes in your cookbook but planted gardens, saved seeds, and erected a cooking house with traditional millstones and an adobe oven. What role does aesthetics play for you in the practice and protection of meal culture? Why is it important to consider beauty in the planting, tending, harvesting, storing, preparing, processing, and consumption of foods? And how do specific practices, places, and people provide an aesthetic framework for meal culture, in Pueblo cultures and beyond?

Roxanne Swentzell: I believe everything matters, especially our intentions behind our actions. They create energy, good or bad, life producing or life killing. When we do things with care and mindfulness, respect and gratitude, we can’t help but nurture life. Doing things “artistically” is something that is a great gift we have as human beings. We can create things of great beauty (or not), but we have that choice. In the Native world, when you walk with a good heart, and be respectful of all Nature’s creations, you will be taken care of. It is very reciprocal. The more you give, the more you get. To take the time to make something carefully is to love it. That love becomes embedded in that clay, or dough, or wall or dirt, or each other. So, it is very important to practice creating beauty.

Alexandra R. Toland: Parto, I had the honor of eating a shared meal with and by you at the Kreuzberger Salon last year.¹² This was an incredibly aesthetic experience. Over rice pilaf with barberries you talked about the cultural differences in meal preparation and consumption in Germany, Iran, Sudan, and Ecuador. Could you talk about some of the specific practices that are passed on and embedded in cultures over generations, despite trends toward globalization

and loss of agricultural knowledge? Could you perhaps offer an anecdote from your own background in Persian meal culture? Are there certain foods or meals that represent an ancient terroir for Iranians around the world, perhaps like the corn recipes of the Pueblos?

Parto Teherani-Krönner: There is a special art of cooking and preparing food in Persian culture. It is not only the quality of rice, but the way it is prepared which is somehow “Persian.” Those who have had the chance to eat a Persian meal might be familiar with the very special crunchy part of the rice. This is known as “tahdigh” (the end of the pot) and is in a way the pride of Persian cuisine (Zubaida and Tapper 1994).¹³ In fact, we name all the different ways rice is prepared with specific terminologies. The white and plain one is called “Chelo—Kateh—Dami” according to the method of preparation. “Polow” is a rice dish mixed with ingredients like barberries or green beans. All these dishes are prepared with raw rice, but specified according to the way it is cooked and served.

In Iran, we also differentiate everything that you can eat with the categories of “cold” and “warm.” This classification belongs to an old philosophy and is a basic concept of traditional Persian medicine still alive in everyday knowledge. Everything we eat is either “warm” or “cold” and this dichotomy can be applied to our illnesses and diseases as well. Our well-being and recommendations for recovery will correspond to the rehabilitation of the warm and cold equilibrium in our body. A good meal is supposed to keep these two components in mind. A very typical Persian meal like “Choreshte Fesenjun” is a stew prepared with walnuts that are warm in combination with grenadine syrup, which is cold. This classification of local knowledge is still omnipresent in everyday life. Restaurant servers, for example, are usually not willing to serve fish

together with yogurt or a yogurt drink as both are classified as cold. Recently a colleague and I were on our way to the Caspian Sea in the northern part of Iran and were confronted with such a recommendation: it is better not to eat fish and yogurt together, else we get a stomachache the next day.

This dual system of cold and warm is not only well known in Iran; it is similar but not identical to yin-yang principles in China. This philosophical principle can be followed throughout the Silk Road and found in far away destinations. Obviously, the cultural connections and exchange of knowledge about foods existed way back in historical periods. In Nepal, for example, we can learn from the ethnomedical wisdom that the first question of the medical doctor is not where do you have pain but what did you eat yesterday (Heller 1977)¹⁴

Alexandra R. Toland: I’m going to make a jump here from meal culture to agriculture, from food to soil.¹⁵ I was hoping you could both weigh in on the issue of soil security, Parto coming from a perspective of feminist rural sociology and Roxanne from your perspective of community work and permaculture practice in indigenous communities in present-day New Mexico. Is “soil security” an important concept for either of you and how would you define it in other terms? For example, some have balked at the term “security” and suggested “sovereignty” or “sustainability” or simply “care” instead of invoking a term nuanced with militaristic self-defense. What does this mean to you?

Parto Teherani-Krönner: I believe that our perceptions of eating and nourishment will change tremendously by having “meals” in mind instead of “food.” Changing the food security debate, highlighted by the SDGs, into a meal security debate will have consequences with regard to

discourse on hunger and malnutrition as well. So, we need to think about meal politics and meal culture, as well as food systems and agriculture. But these terms are rarely used within the scientific community, even though their practice is culturally embedded in our everyday lives. I have introduced the concept of meal culture in my research because I felt a strong need for a new view—a new paradigm that reflects the social, cultural, and environmental embeddedness of our gender relations in the nutritional and agricultural sciences (Teherani-Krönner and Hamburger 2014).¹⁶

On the one hand, I have followed the food security debate within the agricultural sciences on the international level. I realized that the discussion was mostly about how much wheat, rice, or corn is produced. The raw products were figured in yields per hectare or by calculating in kilocalories. For the most part, the agricultural sciences concentrate on increasing yields by using pesticides and fertilizers, and legitimizing themselves by referring to the pressures of population growth. But that what people eat, and how they eat, is more than a matter of quantity of raw products.

On the other hand, the nutritional sciences look at the substance of content, analyzing the ingredients and the vitamins, minerals, and chemical composition of foodstuffs, but this again is too narrow. The meal culture concept harbors a human and cultural ecological perspective in which the whole process of producing and preparing, serving, and eating a meal is included. The ingredients, the raw agricultural products, are but only one component of the social and cultural construction of a meal.

The food sovereignty approach has taken care of environmental as well as regional cultural aspects of agricultural production systems and

seeks to support local communities. The meal culture approach approves these ideas, though I think it pays additional attention to the unattended practical requirements of everyday life. It encompasses the whole dynamic cycle from field to plate, including all the necessary rituals and side effects (like leftovers). Looking at the gender dimensions, from the production to the preparation and serving of meals, is a fundamental part of our meal culture concept as a social construction that encompasses labor power relations and social stratification.

So, in light of the food security debate, we also have to recognize that meal preparation requires clean water that is not always available everywhere. It also requires utensils to wash, cut, chop and grind ingredients, as well as the fuel source for actually cooking. Therefore, a whole set of technologies is necessary in addition to a person who spends time with the required knowledge, recipes, and formulas for using the right ingredients and spices. And last but not least there are always cultural criteria for eatables and enjoyables. Our normative system is part of the social context and cultural space that matters. Such a broader concept of meal culture security will definitely help us to understand our perceptions of eating habits as well as our connection to food and soil.

Roxanne Swentzell: For me, “soil security” sounds so cold and militant. It says a lot about the mindset of the people who speak about their mother in those terms. For indigenous peoples, the soil, the dirt, the ground is our Mother. ... I know Western minds think of it as dirt that can be moved around and done whatever they like to do with it next, but truly if they stop and feel Her, she is not a resource to devour and spit out like everything else they touch. Nothing has been more disrespected in Western culture than the female. This includes, women, the Earth,

containers of all sorts (look at our disposable packaging sickness) and communities. As long as the individual is placed above all else and the consumption of whatever the individual wants without thought about where and how it came to be, we will be on a suicide journey.

I know I cannot convince many that the Earth is a living being and She will get rid of us if She finally gets tired of how we treat Her. Maybe creating laws to try and protect the biodiversity and health of the soil is the next best thing. But I still believe if people can remember how to feel the world around them again, they naturally, without rules and laws, cannot hurt something they are empathic with. It hurts to hurt our world, so you just don't do it. This makes me wonder why we are so afraid to feel. This fear has disconnected us so dangerously with our beautiful world that we may not survive ourselves. I do believe, if we even have a chance to continue, that women will have to lead the way to healing. No computer, no scientific calculations will have the answers. We are organic creatures living on an organic living planet and we need to feel our way through this darkness. We have to find our own roots again and start growing ourselves in soil that is able to nourish us. I suppose when the main culture takes care of its women better, we might have a chance to speak our knowledge and our wisdom as containers of the Mother energy, the intuitive, the soil, Home.

Parto Teherani-Krönner: In her book *Death of Nature*, Carolyn Merchant¹⁷ introduces an interesting ecofeminist position toward science and modern technology that has destroyed the holiness of our soil and earth. The exploitation of nature for economic interest is seen as a fundamental reason for this. Mining and digging in the earth with heavy machineries made it necessary to give up the former worldview of the sacredness of soil and worship of Mother Earth.

But the ethical and aesthetic care for our natural elements is fundamental to human life. This is evident in all cultures, from the Greek mythology of Gaia the Mother Earth to what Roxanne has described of the Corn Mothers in the Pueblo tradition. In former times, according to the old religion in Persia soil was holy and one of the four elements that needed to be kept carefully neat and clean. Cleanliness of the elements of nature—soil, water, air, and fire—are the religious and ethical principles of Zoroastrians, the ancient religion of the Middle East and Persia long before Islam. Believers still live in some parts of Iran like in the town of Yazd and in some communities in India, where they are called “Parsi.” They do not even bury their dead in the soil to avoid polluting it.

In the Islamic tradition, the Koran states that humans were even formed of clay: “And indeed, we created the human form from dried (sounding) clay of altered black mud [min hama’in masnoon]” (al-Hijr 15:26). Clay pottery also has a high symbolic value in Persian literature and in poetry besides being one of the oldest arts known to human kind. Coincidentally, this was also likely a domain where women played an important role. Pottery vessels for serving and storing food have been found from ten thousand years ago in the Middle East and Iran with artistic designs and patterns on them. In terms of food culture and soil culture, Roxanne is really at the heart of an everlasting human activity and artistic tradition!

Alexandra R. Toland: Indeed. I think if we all stored our food in clay vessels and ate from handmade plates we would immediately reconnect to the meal cultures of our past, wherever that might be.

Thank you both so much for sharing your insight in this chapter.

Endnotes

1. Koch A et al. 2013. Soil security: solving the global soil crisis. *Global Policy* 4(4):434–441.
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9. Roxanne Swentzell and Patricia M. Perea, Museum of New Mexico Press, 2016.
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