



# COOKING A CHICKEN CURRY BY TRAVELLING ALL OVER THE WORLD: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC OBSERVATION OF CONSUMPTION AND ENVIRONMENTAL ASPECT

\*CORRESPONDENCE

Aminul Islam  
✉ aminul.islam@eek.ee

Aminul ISLAM

Estonian Entrepreneurship University of Applied Sciences, Estonia

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to develop a consumption diary by being a consumer in relation to our lifestyle and identity. This study was done by using the ethnographic observation method living in Lund, Sweden, with the help of the concept of commodity chain. Hence the main objective of this study reflects our everyday consumption activities and how a specific commodity could be addressed with the concept of commodity chain in a way where a big chain is involved and each chain involves extraction of natural resources, which affects our current discourse of environmental and ecological aspects.

**Keywords:** Ethnographic observation, consumption diary, environmental aspects, natural resources

## Introduction

Today I got up by hearing my door ring/calling bell early in the morning. As soon as I opened the door, I saw a man standing up with a big plastic bag. Yes, this is the bag I was waiting for the last couple of days. The man was from the EMS (Express Mail Service) office to hand it over. I got this bag while staying at my home here in Lund, Sweden, and this bag was sent by my parents, who are living in Dhaka, Bangladesh. This bag contains a lot of stuff, which I am very much used to with my lifestyle or perhaps my identity. Defining identity is not an easy task, considering the fact that different scholars have different views on this concept. The later part of this paper would try to define and analyze lifestyle and identity issues. Stuff which I have got from the bag were coriander powder, green cardamoms, ginger powder, two shirts, and Ponds Vanishing (oil control) cream. Yes, "I am a consumer; as soon as I get out of bed, I start consuming" (Ryan and Durning, 1997:4). This paper would try to figure out what I have consumed over the last week (September 1st till September 8th 2024). One item or object is selected to see its geographical journey by using the concept of commodity chain and how this is connected with lifestyle and identity, how much labor was involved in different points along the chain, identity moments of greenhouse emission, and if there was any power relation involved in production and within the commodity chain.

## Consumption as lifestyle

Thorstein Veblen (1902), in his 'Conspicuous Consumption' stated that "in the earlier phases of predatory culture, the only economic differentiation is a broad distinction between an honorable superior class on the one hand and a base inferior class of laborers on the other hand" (Veblen, 1902: 65). So, the general principle, more or less rigorously applied, is that the base industrious class should consume only what may be necessary to their subsistence.

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In the nature of things, luxurious and the comforts of life belong to the leisure class. After that, Veblen (1902) stated that in the earlier stages of economic development, this restriction tends to disappear, at least formally, after a later peaceable stage has been reached with private ownership of goods and an industrial system based on wage labor or on the pretty household economy. What happened is that the leisure then not only consumes of the staffs of life beyond the minimum required of subsistence and physical efficiency, but this consumption also undergoes a specialization as regards the quality of the goods consumed. Hence, consuming freely the best staff is not because of their subsistence but also because these more excellent goods are evidence of wealth. It becomes honorific.

This could be associated with what Schor (1998) mentioned that consumption has a comparative or even competitive character. "As the workplace replaced by the coffee culture and the backyard barbecue, it becomes a social contact place, like who went where for a vacation or whether their kids were going to the dance class" (Schor, 1998:10). This is the process where people start comparing each other and their desire to consume then depends on others. The thing is that what you consume or are supposed to consume does not depend on what exactly your needs are. What has happened is that in the new consumerism, 'lifestyle' aspirations are now formed by different points of reference, like a neighborhood has been replaced by a community of coworkers, where people always compare, on the other hand, our real life friends have been replaced by our 'media friends', we watched the way television families live, we read about the lifestyle of the celebrities and other public figures we admire; and then we consciously or unconsciously assimilate this information, which affects us (Schor, 1998).

### Visible lifestyle as consumption

New consumerism tends to believe that we can always upgrade ourselves and our things. Here we find the concept of how we buy speaks our volumes. The variations of choices and tastes have been increased in the new consumerism. We could see it from the Roseberry's (1996) discussion on the rise of Yuppie coffee. In the past Coffee in the United States was sold in cans in supermarkets, the roasts were light and bland, the choices were limited. (Roseberry, 1996: 764). The thing is that consumers were limited too. Now in the new consumerism or what Sharon (1998) would say in post modernity, different sort of coffees is widely available in the supermarket and widely consumed (Roseberry, 1996: 774).

The transformation of coffee could be understood a broad range of economic and social transformation, which associated with industrial revolution. As Sharon (1998) mention that urban lifestyle that represents both structural change and adaptation. In the early modernity commercial culture has generally shaped the public life of modern cities and these were formed around department stores, restaurant hotel public bar etc. So it was kind of back drop social change. But the period of late modernity or perhaps post modernity that began in the mid of 20th century (Sharon, 1998), shifted the growth of the 'consumer society'. Here in the late modernity all this restaurant, hotel, bar remains but what has happened is that a transformation of symbolic economy which is based on cultural symbol including

offices houses, restaurants, and even streets. So here all these commercial objects were based on what mass people like or perhaps on the basis of lifestyle. Perhaps urban population is now divides by lifestyle, a lifestyle which is visible. So the strategies of urban redevelopment based on consumption focus on visual attractions that makes people spent money (Sharon, 1998: 832). What we have got is that 'visible lifestyle' which has become symbol of status. An example could be found from Schor's (1998) book, cloths, cars, wristwatch, living room furniture, and lipsticks are well known purveyors of social position. Mattresses, bed room curtains, foundation powders, and bank accounts on the other hand not what separates the items in the first list from those in the second. The thing is that first items are visible therefore these items have its exchange value when it comes to the "visible lifestyle". For instance, in the 'visible lifestyle' if we take an example from the academic work like if you write a very good paper which is not published, perhaps do not have the exchange value, or one would argue that it doesn't even have a use value at all even though to write that paper labor was embodied in it. So, it is a 'waste' thing.

The obvious result or consequence is to run for publishing so that people could see what you have written and it gets both use and exchange value. In this process you change your status in way where you become as a scholar to the society by showing that you have got lots of published paper. Even though someone like Veblen (1902) would argue that the use of the 'waste' is a technical term. He stated that an article or object may be 'useful' or 'wasteful' both and its utility to the consumer may be made up of use and waste in the most varying proportion. This could be an example to say that in the postmodern era or rather in the 'consumerism' not only the working class or base class believe that they have a stair to get up but also the educated people whose occupation perhaps according to Bourdieu(1979) is on the up in hierarchy also running for stairs to have their exchange value or perhaps for even more higher status. The major thing is that in the 'visible lifestyle' you can always try to change yourself to be changed and in the post modernity the urban population is now divided on lifestyle rather than race, ethnicity, or social class where consumption is the basis.

### Cultural capital as consumption

Sharon (1998) articulated that during the past 30 years, the meaning of urban lifestyles has changed from fairly stable prerogative of social status to a pursuit of cultural capital. Bourdieu (1979) stated that "knowledge of the social world has to be taken into account, a practical knowledge of this world which preexists and which it must not fail to include in its object" (Bourdieu, 1979: 465). What Bourdieu discovered is that a person's educational level and father's occupation revealed much about that individual, tastes in music, art, what kinds of shops they patronized and the type of cooking they do. So here money itself cannot account for that the preference in music or dressing or posture varies by class. Here from Bourdieu (1979) what we could find is that something contrary from the conscious experience of consumer preferences and testes as something that's just us, what we like and dislike is socially produced. So consumption, tastes create through what Bourdieu(1979) calls cultural capital. The knowledge has been assimilated from the

rich like what good and bad taste is, in this way a systemic or legitimate hierarchy of taste emerged, which is associated with cultural capital.

What Bourdieu(1979) coined is that 'habitus' like individual taste depends on personal experience. Bourdieu's( 1979) ideas of systematic or legitimate taste and also the cultural capital could be found from today's most modern or globalized world. For instance, if you go to any of a McDonalds anywhere around the world you would see that women are working in front or in the cash, hardly you would see any man working in front. This is the systematic taste which comes from the hierarchy that women should work in front. This idea is to somewhat associated with the 'thinking from the above', where idea comes from what 'above' people or perhaps the leaders think. At the same time women who are working in front they fall into the today's visible life style where women are being exposed to show themselves in front. Perhaps it could be associated with the term symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1979).

It is also believed that even though these women are trained how to present themselves to the consumer, their everyday life, posture, out of their working place is not changed that much. Which could be associated with the term what Bourdieu (1979) called cultural capital. Perhaps it is true as Sharon (1998) stated that lifestyle has changed from the stable social status to pursuit cultural capital, it could be seen in other way around that people want to pursuit cultural capital is to get or to pursuit social status. Even though Bourdieu(1979) would argue that cultural capital is something which you have got inherently. It is obvious that people in the consumer culture or I would say in the 'capitalism' would try to achieve cultural capital with the help of ever rising advertisement (Featherstone, 1982). Hence, in the ultimate analysis it is inevitable that people would consume to get "cultural capital", to achieve their desire "visible life style". As Schor(1998) mentioned that the "identity of consumption relationship is a two way street, who we are not only affects what we buy, what we buy also affects who we become" ( Schor, 1998: 57). The more we have the more powerful, confident and socially validated we feel.

Mort(1986) mentioned that world perhaps moved beyond the conventional Marxist and socialist analysis and worker appears more consuming than producing, the answer could be found from Miller's(1995) statement that the global spread of the mass consumption of mass commodities means that people increasingly define themselves, their culture and their world by means of these commodities, rather than by means of the older frames such as kinship and ethnicity, which are themselves increasingly defined through consumption.

The idea of defining ourselves through consumption derives us to our current day's environmental crisis. When it comes to solve environmental crisis someone like Schor(1998) who talked about down shifting and then tried to figure out a portfolio of a down shifter like- buys organic fare, repair rather than buys, recycling and so on. What Schor(1998) tried is that to make the change by excepting the idea of "consumer" what we have now. Perhaps we could look at from the Marx's point of view. For Marx the system which has come to dominate is 'capitalism' where things are evaluated by exchange and monetary value. (Gare, 1995). We could see it from Marx's own writing "In the

Bourgeoisie, all fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of an ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify, all that is solid melts into air... the need of a constantly expanding market for its markets chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the glob" (Marx and Engels, 1978:475). To solve our environmental problem perhaps we could rethink about our concept "consumer" by using Marx's notion of 'class' and 'class consciousness' in a way where all "consumer" would be on the whole as a "class" so we would define "consumer" or perhaps human being as a "class" who would essentially feel alienated from the consumption by being rejected or living with the vulnerable environmental condition that we have now these days like increasing hurricanes, earth-quake, flooding, drought. When this "class" would feel themselves alienated from mass consumption then the class consciousness would form (Marx, 1887) so that our social system of consuming could be changed in order to get a sustainable environment.

## Ethnographic observations

*Commodities which I have consumed over the last one week and how I feel of consuming these, messages and meanings*

Tooth paste, Tooth brush, Ponds Vanishing (oil control) cream, Body lotion, Milk, Bread, Orange Juice, Toilet paper, Cloths( T- Shirt, and pajama), Shoes, Laptop, Spices- Ginger, red chili powder, turmeric, cinnamon, coriander powder, Green cardamoms, Potatoes, edges, chicken, lamb, Tomatoes, cooking oil, micro web woven, Electric stove/burner, Bus, Car, books or papers, Gym, Wine, cola. I tried to put these commodities in order in a way by which one could recognize what I used to consume from early in the morning when I get up to later at night when I get down to bed. For instance, Tooth paste, Tooth brush, Ponds Vanishing (oil control) cream, Body lotion, Milk, Bread, Orange Juice, Toilet paper I use these commodities in the morning to get fresh and to have my breakfast. After that I put my clothes on and start using laptop. To prepare my lunch and dinner I use Spices- Ginger, red chili powder, turmeric, cinnamon, coriander powder, green cardamoms, Potatoes, edges, chicken, lamb, Tomatoes, cooking oil, micro web woven, and Electric stove/ burner, then I get out of my home either by car or by bus to go to gym or to hang around somewhere else, then come back home and drink a glass of wine or cola, and then afterwards I go to bed. Except from this consumption, I also used food commodities like Onion, Cake, biscuits, Chips, Milk, Cloths like cap, trousers, jacket, toiletries like soap, shaver, shaving foam, room furniture's like, cot, chair, bed cover, table, spoons etc. Please note that these commodities or objects have been consumed or used by me over the last week from 14th March to 19th of March. What I have noticed is that there wasn't that much variation in my consumption diary it was more or less same during the course of whole week. By using these commodities most of the case I felt that these are part of my everyday activity so I need these to consume, there was just only one or two commodity which I felt I should cut it off by being environmentally friendly. When it comes to messages and meaning of these commodities, I felt sometime I am bound to use these as I am habituated with these, some of these commodities were means to maintain my body,

and some were means to make my meals. Overall, what I felt is that I am in a process to consume these commodities, so I am just running with the motion to consume these commodities. At a glance when I looked at my consumption diary I felt, no I am not that much consuming, perhaps it is because I am not that much financially sound to consume more, as Ryan and Durning, 1997, stated by using one of their respondents view like "I don't usually think of myself as a consumer, though I don't spend much time worrying about environment"( Ryan and Durning, 1997: 4), but as soon as I heard the doorbell from the EMS(express mail service) man I started thinking about the commodity chain issues therefore I decided to pick one commodity from the above mentioned consumption diary, which is Green Cardamoms.

The reason behind of picking this spice of Green Cardamoms is that I believe this is connected with my lifestyle and it would be interesting to see its geographical journey by using the concept of 'commodity chain'. Before describing from where this commodity originally comes from and where this is being consumed, it would be conducive to see the definition of 'commodity chain'. A commodity chain is a method for tracing the origins of materials and labor that are embodied by everyday commodity goods. It considers the sequential processes used by manufacturing firms to gather resources, transform them into goods and finally distribute them to consumers. It attempts to reveal the concealed histories and geographies of the product before it has use value to the customer. It also illustrates clearly global inter-relations and dependencies. The analysis of commodity chains has developed within the framework of world-system theory, which was originally conceived by Immanuel Wallerstein and his colleges in the 1970s. The chain metaphor captures the separate yet interdependent nature of linked production processes that are needed to produce a final commodity for consumption (CPS, Lund University 2010 on commodity chain).

### Green cardamoms and its geographical journey

I come from Bangladesh and studying Lund University, Sweden. In my country I used to have spices foods and curries to have lunch and dinner. Green Cardamoms is one of those typical spices which we normally use almost all of our curries. When I came here in Sweden, I wanted to get green cardamoms from my nearby super market 'Willys' but they do not have this, I had to go to Malmo, which is the nearest big city from Lund to get this Green Cardamoms from one of very few Indian or Arabic Shops in Malmo. But somehow, I wasn't satisfied with the green Cardamoms which I got from Malmo. So, I asked my parents to send my special Green Cardamoms from my Country Bangladesh which I got from the bag handed over by the EMS guy this morning. When I got the packet of the Green Cardamoms, I tried to figure out its geographical journey. The chart below shows the geographical journey of a packet of green cardamoms.

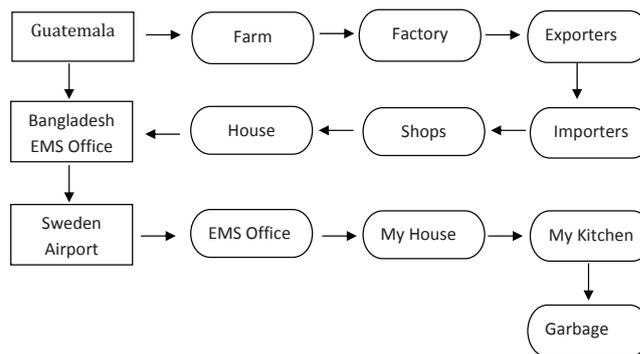


Chart shows that a journey of a pack of green cardamom's origin to my kitchen & garbage. I will elaborate the geographical journey in section of natural resources and green house involved in the chain.

### Green cardamoms, lifestyle and identity

I was born and raised in Bangladesh. I got my food habit from my social and cultural system. As Egan and his colleagues in Wilk(2006) found it more like a process of combination where food is richly cultural. In my culture, we have foods with spices especially with green cardamoms. Even though I have been living here in Sweden, but somehow, I wasn't able to change my food habits so spices, specifically is more like related to my lifestyle and perhaps my ethnic identity where I come from. Ethnic Identity or Identity has been defined in many ways in various researches. It is difficult to find a widely agreed upon definition of ethnic identity, so there is still confusion about this topic. In a number of articles, ethnic identity is defined as the ethnic component of social identity. Tajfel(1981:225) has defined it as "the part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership". Some writers focus on self-identification, while other focus belonging and commitment (Sing, 1977, Ting-Toomey, 1981). Some other definitions focus on cultural aspects of ethnic identity, like foods, values, languages ( Rogler et al 1980). For me, green cardamoms are a spice which I need to make my curries or foods, and I got this food habit from my family or society so it's more like related with my identity and lifestyle which I have had before, somehow I am not able to get out of this belonging even though now I belong to this (Lund, Sweden) society. So, I was desperate to get those green cardamoms and asked my parents to send it off to me from all the way back to Bangladesh as Cardamoms which I get from Bangladesh tests as it is which I like or I had before when I was in my country.

### List of located natural resources and the green house emission involved in the chain and Ecological aspects

If we look at the figure above, it says that the journey began from the farm in Guatemala, where poor farmer plants and grows trees and to plan they have to use chemical pesticides, and to make the soil soft they have to use tractor. Using tractor or chemical pesticides both are associated with energy and fuel, so it's the fossil fuel they use which is a natural resource. Once

green cardamoms are picked to go to the factory to get labeled and packed it goes by track which is made by Steel, and most probably comes from Korea. In the factory Green Cardamoms are packaged into plastic bag which is made by polyethylene, nylon, aluminum foil and polyester. Once it is packaged it goes to the exporters by big trucks which is again made by steel and run by either petrol or diesel. On its way to Bangladeshi importers, it comes through either Ships or airplane. These ships and airplanes are made by Steel and run by huge amount of fossil fuel, then it comes to the small shops in Bangladesh through small track, which is again made by steel and run by oil and these oils come from Middle East through Big ships. My parents bought green cardamoms from the shop, they went there by their private car, which is again made by steel and run by natural gas. As in Bangladesh most of the private vehicles run by natural gas. Then my parents went to EMS office to send it off to me in Sweden by car. EMS office send it through Airplane, so it reached to Swedish EMS office and then was distributed to the local EMS office through car, finally the EMS man who came to my home in the morning hand it over to me, he also came by car. When I got green cardamoms in my hand I started cooking at my kitchen, I was cooking chicken curry which needs chicken, onions and cooking oil, chickens came from Brazil, cooking oil and spices came from Bangladesh and definitely from long chain, Onions came from Australia, and the Electric stove/burner was made in China. I realized, to make a curry in Sweden, Europe I had to visit all over the world in this planet. When it came to cooking, I turned on my eclectic stove/burner, which needs huge amounts of energy. Once I am done with my cooking, I went to throw my waste into garbage and the garbage bin was made by either very hard steel or road. In the process of making a curry I had to use lot of natural resources, more specifically each time this single 'green cardamoms' traveled it consumed a lot of greenhouse gas which is completely against of our current and future ecological and environmental aspect.

### Labor involved in different points and manifestation of power relation along the chain

My 'green cardamoms' trees were planted in Guatemala and were picked by the farmers in the farm. Most of the case they earn less than 30 cents an hour. These farmers have very limited freedom when they grow trees as they need to use chemicals and sometimes these chemicals are harmful for their health as Ryan and Durning(1997) mentioned that " Some of the chemicals entered the farm worker's lungs" (Ryan and Durning,1997: 9). In each chain there were some other labors involved, track drivers, EMS guy for instance.

The thing is 'green cardamoms' is one of the most expensive spices in my country Bangladesh, considering the fact that it has a long chain to come down to my own country. But the fact is when we compare earnings of farmers, which is too less, with the finish product price which is too high, it suggests that the owner of the farmer or the exporters they are the one who decide what should be the finish products price and how much they are willing to pay for the farmers This is the power the owners have which they practice in real. It reminds us the Marx's notion of surplus value (Marx, 1887) where labors don't get the extra amount of money which is added for the final price. This is the financial or

the economic power the owners have which they practice with their farmers or in each chain of a certain commodity which also extract natural resources when it comes to exports and imports business and ecological aspect as well. Like the exporters some time can be a multinational company and they never care about the soil and the chemicals which they are using for the sake of soil, land and labor of the local area or region, which could be associated with ecological aspects and power.

### Conclusion

This was an attempt to see how our lifestyle is associated with our consumption which leads us to see our current discourse of environment and ecological issues. This was quite evident that a specific and very simple spice could have a big chain as green cardamoms were the case for this study. And this chain has something to deal with our natural resources and how they are being used in each chain. It has been a discourse that scholars have now been thinking about subsistence sort of consumption for the sake of our environment and ecology, this study would not suggest that this could be a solution to get rid of a big chain, perhaps this could be an idea from where scholars could go on to think something which could be more sustainable to sustain proper consumption.

### Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

### Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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