‘Half-Coloured with Turmeric’: The Visual Function of Spices in Early Modern Britain

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Abstract: This paper explores the visual function of spices in early modern Britain through focusing on one specific spice: turmeric. Turmeric was a particularly important spice in this period, and yet, has not been adequately explored by food scholars focusing on the British Isles. Through mainly analysing manuscript receipt books which proliferated during the era, I argue that the use of turmeric in cooking helped perpetuate fantasies of empire within the ‘imperial metropole,’ and created a ‘contact zone’ of empire that existed not only in the burgeoning colonies, but also within Britain itself. Spices, through not only their tastes but also their various colours, represented an aesthetic experience through which ideas about empire could be diffused within the metropole.

‘If you will have a pleasant colour for your frute,’ one c. 1688 manuscript cookbook begins, ‘do thus for a Red boyle[:] Brasil, Turne Soyle or Sanders and for a Yellow use Saffaron or Turmerack.’ It then goes on to describe how to give these colourful fruits ‘a dainty taste and smell,’ instructing the reader to ‘beat Cloves Mace Cinnamon and Nutmegs to powder.’ For this seventeenth-century author, then, colour was an essential part of the eating experience. Indeed, that the manipulation of colour was discussed before the manipulation of taste and smell perhaps even suggests the primacy of colour as an influencer of early modern food consumption.

In the past forty years, colour in the early modern world has emerged as an important locus for exploration among both historians of art and historians of science. These ‘early modern color worlds’, as Tawrin Baker has called them, are critical to understanding how different engagements with and conceptualizations of colour were shaped and practiced in the period. And yet, despite the demonstrated and pervasive importance of colour in early modern life, scholars of food studies have given less study to the importance of colour to food, instead privileging taste and smell in studies of consumption. However, as the above excerpt on colouring fruit demonstrates, early modern eaters were particularly concerned with the colour of their foods, explicitly manipulating the colour through the addition of particular spices. This paper explores the intersection between ‘color worlds’ and ‘foodways’, and demonstrates how a focus on one particular colour can deepen our understanding of these two intertwined facets of early modern life.

In this paper, I probe the ‘early modern color worlds’ of one particular spice: turmeric. Despite the relative ubiquity of turmeric in early modern manuscript recipe books, as well
as the relatively high rate at which it was imported to London during the early modern period, turmeric has received comparatively little attention as an important spice during this era. I explore turmeric as a food colouring agent within the ‘contact zone’ of early modern Britain. I draw on Catherine Molineux’s understanding of this term, in which not only the ‘colonial periphery’ represented a ‘contact zone’ between white British subjects and the empire, but also the metropole, due, in part, to popular representations of colonial topics and subjects in a wide range of metropolitan spaces, from coffee houses and tobacco shops to private art collections. These representations engendered spaces within the metropole which nurtured imperial fantasies, and which allowed Britons to conceptualise a racial other. I extend her argument by demonstrating that what she has called the ‘fantasy’ of British empire was not only forged through the visual arts but also through food-- and, in particular, through spices. I also seek to demonstrate how these fantasies included ideas about Asia as well as the African continent. Through analyzing how turmeric was employed in this ‘contact zone’ of the metropole, I seek to uncover how this specific spice helped create and perpetuate the fantasies of empire.

My focus is mainly on manuscript receipt books, which, unlike printed cookbooks, give a clearer gesture of how the spice was being used and imagined by Britons. My evidence focuses particularly on the early modern English manuscript recipe book held by the Folger Shakespeare Library, the largest such collection in the world, and is supplemented by archival holdings elsewhere. These manuscript cookbooks, as scholars have shown, represented ‘tools of empire’ through which global foodways were ‘appropriate[d], translate[d], and transmit[ted]’. Through the exploration of these tools of empire, I argue that the descriptions of and fascination with turmeric in manuscript receipt books reveal the ways in which spices, particularly through description and use of their colours, were understood as an aesthetic experience through which ideas about empire and imperialism could be defined.

The Role of Colour in Early Modern England

Before delving into how the colour of spices contributed to the ‘fantasy of empire,’ we must understand how colours were understood broadly in the early modern world. The period that this paper treats represents a moment of great change for understandings of colours. In the pre-Newtonian world, colours were understood not only in a shade-focused sense, but also in regard to their reaction, consistency, and brightness. However, it was not until the seventeenth century that the most profound shift in the European conception of colour occurred. During that period, a ‘unified theory of light and colour’ took place, which focused on the prismatic refraction of light. It was then that our present-day understanding of optics-based colour emerged.

It was into this early modern European world, with its newly developed theories about light and colour, which turmeric entered. Turmeric, a plant native to South and Southeast
Asia, was and continues to be deeply embedded within those cultures as a yellow dyeing agent. Indeed, in the *Atharva Veda*, a Vedic book of healing recipes from c. 1200 BCE to 1000 BCE, the herb is referred to in the verse, ‘O colorer, do thou color this leprous spot and what is pale. The leprous spot, what is pale, do thou cause to disappear’. Similarly, in various marriage rites in the subcontinent, bright yellow turmeric paste has long been bedaubed on the bridal couple, in order to protect the couple from evil and bring them favour.

When turmeric was brought to Europe, most likely at first via Arab trading routes and then via European colonialism in the seventeenth and 18th centuries, the importance of its colour was retained, albeit in different cultural contexts. Prominently, turmeric was understood as a powerful dyeing agent. In the cookbook of Jane Dawson from the late seventeenth century, the author noted that to make a dye for cloth, ‘for a lemon coler Turmeric & spannish brown should be employed’. Similarly, in a manuscript cookbook from ca. 1700-1775, the author gave a recipe for how to ‘dye [clothes] French yellowes,’ which called for ‘Turmeric finely beaten’. And a popular artist’s paint pigment in Europe was called ‘Indian yellow,’ tying the colour of yellow directly to the Indian subcontinent. These sources demonstrate how turmeric was explicitly prized for the colour it could impart to other goods in the contexts of art and fashion.

The importance of turmeric’s colour extended to its use in early modern medicine. In the period, Paracelsus championed the idea that ‘health must grow from the same root as disease, and whither health goes, thither also disease must go’. In other words, early modern cures often mirrored the symptoms of their diseases. In the early modern English manuscript receipt books held by the Folger, turmeric often appears as a cure for yellow jaundice. For instance, in an anonymous late seventeenth-early 18th century manuscript receipt book, the author gives a cure specially for ‘yellow Iandise’ containing ‘powder Turmeric’. This book contains many other cures for jaundice, but only in the case of yellow jaundice that is turmeric employed. Here, we can see that, for this anonymous author, turmeric was specifically understood as a medicinal agent laden with the properties of the colour yellow.

**Turmeric in Foodstuffs**

While turmeric’s ability to dye medicine and clothing was clearly significant, its application as a dye to foodstuffs was critical to the ways that early modern people thought and learned about the world around them. Turmeric’s colour was understood as a means through which British people could enact the fantasy of empire, taking in the supposedly ‘exotic’ aspects of this ingredient while simultaneously translating foods into British contexts.

Turmeric was heavily associated with both foreignness in general and the Indian subcontinent in particular. This can be inferred from the recipe for ‘Frangas incapadas’ given in an anonymous recipe book created c. 1690-1750. ‘Mrs. Wills’ contributed this...
foreign-named recipe to the book, which is an adulteration of the Portuguese for chicken soup. It instructed the owner of the receipt book to ‘half colour’ the rice upon which the soup is served ‘with Turmeric’.18 That the instruction is not to flavour the rice, but rather to ‘colour’ it suggests the importance of turmeric as a dye for early modern foodstuffs. In a recipe explicitly marked as ‘exotic’ due to its Portuguese-language title (which is somewhat rare in the manuscript receipt books and perhaps represented a gesture towards Portuguese colonization of the Indian Ocean), the use of turmeric as a colouring agent suggests the ways the British eaters could experience the ‘exotic’ from the comfort of their dining rooms.

The importance of turmeric’s colour, as a way to allow Britons to participate in the spoils of empire from their own homes is made even more explicit by the prominence of two types of recipes in particular. Excluding its uses as a fabric dye and as a cure for yellow jaundice, the Folger recipe corpus shows that turmeric was mainly employed in two types of recipes: for various types of pickles as well as curry powder.19 In both of these examples, turmeric appeared in recipes marked as Indian both explicitly and implicitly. Early modern pickles were often described using the eponym of ‘Indian’. Both pickles and curry suggest that, through its very colour, turmeric allowed Britons to participate in the imperial project from their own home.

First, pickles. Indian pickles as translated into British cuisine, later sometimes referred to as ‘piccalilli,’ were a preserved condiment characterised by the use of ginger, garlic, and especially, turmeric. One prototypical recipe for Indian Pickles from an anonymous manuscript cookbook from ca. 1700-1775, for instance, gives the recipe as such: ‘1 pound of peeled, Garlick, 1 pound of raced Ginger cut thin, 2 ounces of long pepper 4 ounces of the best flour of mustard 3 ounces of Turmarick in powder, six quarts of Crab vinegar, put all into the vinger, it must be cold’. Mrs. White of Stoney Lane, England, in her 1700s recipe book, gave a similar recipe ‘To make Indian pickle’:

> Take four Gallons of the best Vinegar and one lb of Ginger; lay it in Salt & Water night, take it out & cut it in thin Slices & lay it in dry salt for 3 days; then take it out & put it in the Sun to dry, & when ready put it in the vinegar; a lb of Garlic; pickle it & lay it in dry Salt 3 Days; then take it out & wash it & lay it in dry salt for 3 Days more; then put it in the Sun to dry; long Pepper & turmerick 1 1/2 oz.; 1 lb of white Mustard Seed; cut Cabbage in Quarters & put it in dry Salt for 3 Days, then put it in the Sun for 3 days more; cut Cucumbers in large Slices & do the same Way.20

These recipes for Indian pickles, almost all of which call for turmeric, show how the spice was important in dishes associated with the subcontinent.

Why was turmeric used in these dishes? One sixteenth-seventeenth century recipe for ‘The Pickle’, suggests an answer. In this anonymous recipe, the author calls for ‘1 ounce of
fresh Capsicum either green or Red.’ The manuscript cookbook author was usually quite specific in their prescriptions -- why, here, would either red or green capsicum be prescribed? One possible answer lies in the next line of the recipe, which notes that the pepper should be covered with 1/2 an ounce of ‘Turmeric root powder’.21 Here, we see how the colour of turmeric takes primacy in the recipe, even potentially over the flavours produced by different types of capsicum.

Other types of preserved foods-- in particular, pickled mangoes-- demonstrate how the participation in the empire through food was based on (mis)translations of presumed Indian originals. During their time abroad, British colonizers came across tropical and subtropical fruits like the mango, which were not able to be cultivated in Britain’s climate. However, upon return home, they sought to recreate these dishes. Soon, the urge to recreate mangoes in Britain spread beyond those associated with the East India Company, appearing in the manuscript receipt books of lay men and women. As such, many recipes for pickling foods ‘like Mango’ proliferated in the early modern period. For instance, one 1750-1780 recipe ‘To Pickle Mellons like Mangoes’ calls for small melons, and prescribes that after ‘par[ing] off the green Rine’, ‘take an oz & half of Tumerick’ and ‘rub it over Mellon with your finger’.22 While it is unclear what colour mellons would have been used for this recipe the fact that the mellons were ‘rub[bed]’ all over by turmeric gestures towards the spices role in dyeing the fruit bright yellow.23 This colouring of turmeric allowed British eaters who may or may not have ever been to the subcontinent to emulate presumed Indian originals. While some mellons used may have been close to mango in colour, other early modern recipes call for cucumber24 and turnips25 to be pickled ‘like Indian mangoes’. Turmeric, as the colouring agent which gave these alleged ‘mangoes’ their yellow-orange hue, thus became a tool through which Britons could imaginatively participate in the imperial project from home.

Early modern people used turmeric not only to translate foods, but also to mark them as visually different.26 This becomes clear in the case of curry powder. Most curry powder recipes in early modern Britain were laden with turmeric. Indeed, one curry powder recipe from a c. 1700 English cookbook called for a full pound of turmeric, alongside only 4 ounces of ginger and white pepper, 2 ounces of cayenne, and 1 ounce of fenugreek and coriander. This immense amount of turmeric would have imbued what food it met with a vivid orange hue. Indeed, in Susanna, Elizabeth, and Mary Keller’s printed 1780 recipe book, the authors give a recipe for ‘A Curry of Chickens’. In this recipe, ‘a small table spoonful of curry powder’, which, as scholars have noted, presumably contains turmeric is added. However, at the end of the recipe the authors call for an additional ‘two small teaspoonfuls of turmeric’ to be added, specifically ‘to colour’ the curry.27

It was important for curry powder and curry recipes to contain so much turmeric because colouring the food made it distinctly ‘foreign’ and ‘exotic,’ as an alternative to ‘traditional’
English food. A similar trope emerges in manuscript cookbooks. For instance, in one 1700s receipt book, the author Mrs. White gives a recipe ‘To Make Curry’. She calls for the fowls in the curry to be seasoned with ‘a little Pepper, Salt, & Turmeric, Coriander Seed & a little Ginger sliced & a clove of Garlic’. However, at the end, she writes, ‘if you think it is not yellow enough put in a little Turmeric Juice’. Turmeric thus becomes a tool to deem a foodstuff as ‘foreign’, allowing Britons to participate in the orientalised exoticism of empire from the ‘imperial metropole’.

Conclusion
By analyzing recipes for pickles and curries, it becomes evident that turmeric served many functions in early modern Britain. It was a flavouring agent. It offered its metropolitan users senses of exoticism. But primarily, it was a colouring agent: in paints, in fabric dyes, and most especially in foods. Turmeric helped Britons to ‘translate’ foods from abroad. As scholars and food writers such as Susan Zlotnick, Uma Narayan, and Nupur Chaudhuri have shown, when Victorian Britons consumed foods from India, they participated in a ‘domestication of empire’ which allowed upper-class women and men to exploit their connection to the empire and reimagine and exoticized India safely within their own British homes. As this essay has shown, a different, but no less critical, process took place when turmeric’s golden hue was employed in early modern British kitchens. The history of turmeric in early modern Britain suggests the ways in which these women and men participated in imperialism in ways that were small but significant: through this golden-yellow hue, early modern Britons could create an imaginary ‘contact zone’ with India inside of their own British kitchens.

Notes
1. Anon., Miscellaneous collection of receipts [manuscript], 1688?, Bd.w.A1767, Folger Shakespeare Library
4. For a glimpse at the rate at which turmeric was imported to England by the East India Company, see: East India Company Cargo Sheets, 1700s, 214215, Folger Shakespeare Library.
6. Ibid., 12-17.
9. I am grateful to Bénédicte Miyamoto for pointing this out to me.
14. Anon., Cookbook [manuscript], ca. 1700-ca. 1775, W.a.317, Folger Shakespeare Library, p. 8
19. For recipes on curry powder, see, for example, Jane Staveley, Receipt book of Jane Staveley, 1693-1694, V.a.401, Folger Shakespeare Library, p. 35 and 37, ff. 1; see also: Anon., English cookbook, 1700-1710, Szathmary Culinary Manuscripts and Cookbooks, Special Collections, University of Iowa. For recipes on Indian Pickles, see: Mrs. Knight, Mrs. Knight's Receipt Book [manuscript], 1740, W.b.79, Folger Shakespeare Library; Anon., Medicinal, Household, and Cookery Receipts [manuscript], seventeenth-18th centuries, V.a.563, Folger Shakespeare Library; Anon., Receipts [sic] in cookery, copied from a M.S. Book belonging to Mrs. White of Stoney Lane, etc., 1700/1799, Szathmary Culinary Manuscripts and Cookbooks, Special Collections, University of Iowa Libraries, p. 36.
20. Receipts [sic] in cookery, copied from a M.S. Book belonging to Mrs. White of Stoney Lane, etc., 1700/1799, Szathmary Culinary Manuscripts and Cookbooks, Special Collections, University of Iowa Libraries, p. 36.
22. Anon., English Cookbook, 1750-1780, Szathmary Culinary Manuscripts and Cookbooks, Special Collections, University of Iowa Libraries, p. 129.
24. Miss Caldwell, Miss Caldwell cookbook, 1757/1790, Szathmary Culinary Manuscripts and Cookbooks, Special Collections, University of Iowa Libraries.
25. Anon., Yorkshire cookbook, 1799-1837, Szathmary Culinary Manuscripts and Cookbooks, Special Collections, University of Iowa Libraries.
26. This process mirrored the way the imperial gaze created a racialised other in the ‘contact zone’ of the metropole. For more on this, see: Catherine Molineux, *Faces of Perfect Ebony: Encountering Atlantic Slavery in Imperial Britain*, Harvard Historical Studies (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012).
29. Anon., Receipts [sic] in cookery, copied from a M.S. Book belonging to Mrs. White of Stoney Lane, etc., 1700/1799, Szathmary Culinary Manuscripts and Cookbooks, Special Collections, University of Iowa Libraries p. 65.