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Urban Foods Beyond Urban Food Environments: Reflections From a Rural Village in Western Bhutan

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Abstract

This ethnographic article, based on anthropological fieldwork carried out between March 2024 and March 2025, aims to challenge the concept of urban food environments by focusing on the ways in which industrially produced foods—conceptualised as "urban foods"—and associated negative health outcomes proliferate beyond urban built spaces. In particular, it looks at the ways in which these foods penetrate what is considered a remote and rural village located in the Haa valley of the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, exploring the mechanisms through which local inhabitants incorporate urban foods into their long-established rural practices, shifting them from a capitalist logic of consumption to communal ethics of care. The article illustrates (through three ethnographic vignettes) and discusses how industrially produced foods become embedded in local practices and diets through social, cultural, and affective processes, suggesting that, to capture the complexity of contemporary food systems, we need to examine such processes in our analyses. We therefore need to think beyond urban food environments: firstly, issues associated with such environments have gone well beyond urban built spaces; secondly, by perpetrating the narrative predominance of the urban over the rural, we fail to notice the mechanisms that allow unhealthy urban food systems to exist, proliferate, and cause harm. This article contributes to the literature thinking beyond urban food environments by exploring some of the ways in which food spaces are constantly transforming into a (re)combination of urban and rural elements and relations.

Keywords

1. Introduction

Dualistic ideas about the urban and the rural have been problematised by many scholars since the end of the nineteenth century. Such constructed categories have in fact become increasingly blurred or, in the words of Lefebvre (1974/1992) and Santangelo (2019), "juxtaposed," "superposed," "telescoped," and "absorbed into one another" (Burgos Guerrero, 2022). The general tendency of the past decades has been to conceptualise this blurring as a progressive expansion of the urban, with rurality viewed as a dissolving periphery. Krause (2013, p. 2) talks about "intellectual imperialism of the urbanism," referring to how most processes have been framed through the lens of urbanisation (which is often associated or used interchangeably with terms such as modernisation and development), and to how all types of social problems are now discussed as urban problems. Literature around food seems to have followed "the imperialism of the urbanism," with the predominant and expanding use of terms such as "urban food systems," "urban food spaces," and "urban food environments." Initially, discourses around "urban food" came from the need of bringing food, which had been overlooked until that point, into the urban question, and of developing strategies to achieve urban food justice, sustainability, and health in a context of widening food insecurity and social inequalities (Bedore, 2010; Cohen & Garrett, 2010; Heynen, 2006; Morgan, 2015; Morgan & Sonnino, 2010). Such approaches were fundamental in recognising issues that are still present (and perhaps increasingly so) in cities, but they can be limited in how they restrict the study of issues related to food and urbanisation to urban built environments. The implied assumption behind these kinds of analyses is that urban food environments are absolute spaces denoted by specific characteristics and issues that can be quantified and compared to rural ones (e.g., Bodor et al., 2010; Dean & Sharkey, 2011; Westbury et al., 2021). Such conceptualisation, even though necessary for certain kinds of investigations, fails to reflect the complexity of the contemporary world, where rural and urban food spaces are blurred, deeply entangled, and highly interdependent. Issues that have been associated with the urban, such as disparities in food distribution and access and incidence of noncommunicable diseases, are complex and far reaching, going well beyond urban built spaces.

More recent approaches—rather than only considering food and related issues within the city and thinking about the "urban" and the "rural" as discrete and disconnected categories—urge us to think about urbanity in a broader sense, considering how urban food influences other territories, and placing attention on territorial relationality and urban-rural food linkages (Battersby et al., 2024; Mackay, 2019; May et al., 2022; Tacoli et al., 2025). Burgos Guerrero (2022) suggested that we shift our attention on what he calls "extended urban foods spaces," focusing on the urbanisation of food and eating in terms of social-spatial transformations happening in the broader territories (physical and conceptual) being touched and produced by urban food processes. Battersby et al. (2024) highlight that the urban is crossed by important flows of materials, energy, and resources, that go within and beyond its borders. These compelling approaches allow us to move beyond conceptualisations of the city as a pre-given physical container and of urbanisation as merely physical expansion of the city over the countryside. However, they often focus predominantly on the issues related to urban food systems in what are considered urban, peri-urban, and urbanising areas, due to their rapid expansion and the fact that they are more impacted by the weight of food insecurity and malnutrition (Battersby et al., 2024).

Although the rationale for focusing on such spaces is understandable, I argue that even the most "rural" contexts are also increasingly subject to issues related to urban food systems and should therefore be further explored in this body of research, especially in their relationality and complex mechanisms relating to

urban spaces. I therefore adopt Burgos Guerrero's (2022) "extended urban food spaces" approach by focusing on the food-related social-spatial transformations associated to the penetration of the urban fabric in what is considered one of the most rural settings of the Himalayan region, which is itself perceived as remote. Although the village where I carried out my research, located in the Haa valley of Western Bhutan, is characterised by what would be conventionally considered rural food systems and lifestyles (food provision, for instance, consists mainly of subsistence farming, foraging, and cattle rearing), it has witnessed significant dietary shifts and the increasing proliferation of industrially produced food items such as flavoured instant noodles, crisps, sweets, biscuits, and sweet fizzy drinks. Many other rural areas of Bhutan and the Himalayan region—which is denoted by a huge internal heterogeneity of cultures and lifestyles, especially when it comes to food (Ansari, 2017)—are also incurring into issues associated with industrialised diets, such as the high and rising incidence of noncommunicable diseases (Atwood et al., 2014; Chhay et al., 2023; Minot & Pelijor, 2010). Industrial food products, which are generally problematic to define—terms range from "junk food" to technical definitions such as "ultra-processed foods (UPFs)," "high fat, salt, sugar (HFSS) snack food," and "sugar sweetened beverages (SSBs)"—are even more confusing and difficult to understand for inhabitants of such remote contexts, who integrate them into their local food systems and ways of life through informal and unregulated systems, and make sense of them with the limited information they have on such products.

In this article, I call these products "urban foods," to emphasise how they appear to the eyes of villagers, who mostly receive such items from vehicles and relatives coming from the city. Having never seen these products in their rural context before, they immediately associate them with urban areas such as the capital Thimphu or cities bordering with India (e.g., Phuentsholing). I also consider these foods as "urban" as they were originally designed for the city, with the idea of attracting and feeding consumers with busy office work schedules, limited time for food preparation and consumption, and high access to food stores. Although it is in itself a simplification, the expression "urban foods" plays with the urban-rural dichotomy precisely with the aim of stressing that food spaces are not fixed but composed of elements and relations that move, transform, and recombine continuously, and that phenomena and issues that are conventionally associated with the city (e.g., industrialised foods such as UPFs and HFSS snacks) circulate well beyond urban built environments. I therefore explore these foods as parts of an "urban fabric," which, in the words of Lefebvre (2003, p. 3) "grows, extends its borders and corrodes the residue of agrarian life." However, remaining critical about perpetrating the imperialism of the urbanism (Krause, 2013), I conceptualise the urban not as an extreme expanding over a continuum, neither as a centre progressively dissolving the rural periphery, but as a node in which different flows overlap, interchange and interact, creating new flows—such as the movement of UPFs and other products—which then expand beyond what is considered the city. By focusing on the circulation of urban foods in this Bhutanese context, I aim to challenge the very concept of urban food environments, showing that it fails to consider the complex social, cultural, and affective mechanisms that allow urban foods to proliferate not only within the city, but even in what are considered the most rural and remote contexts.

By speaking about the relationship between the urban and the rural in the Himalayas, this article inevitably intersects with discourses around connectivity and remoteness, which are determined by many factors including physical infrastructure as well as social relations. Saxer (2016) discusses how, especially in the Himalayan context, assumptions ingrained in the centre-periphery thinking tend to foreground a singular big transformation from tradition to modernity. Instead, he emphasises that remoteness (just like rurality) is

itself a relational condition and critically engages with the trope of the remote Himalayan village by highlighting the role of mobility, connections, and material-immaterial flows, something that I also aim to do in this article. In the below sections, I introduce the village where I carried out my research, explaining why it is commonly considered as a remote and rural setting, and how it has been transforming in the past decade (for instance, due to infrastructure development). I then delve into villagers' daily relationships with urban foods and how they relate to what are considered local and rural ones. By focusing on the social and affective processes which allow urban foods to penetrate the lives and bodies of village inhabitants, I hope to unveil some of the local practices and mechanisms that are often overlooked, but that actually determine the working of contemporary food systems. Ultimately, this article aims to contribute to the deconstruction of dichotomous assumptions that lie behind the concept of urban food environment, calling for an understanding of food spaces as shaped by social relationships which are constantly transforming in a (re)combination and reconfiguration of urbanity, rurality, connectedness, and remoteness.

2. Materials and Methods

The material presented in the article comes from ethnographic fieldwork carried out between March 2024 and March 2025 in a community of villages located in the lower part of the Haa district of Western Bhutan (see Figure 1). The community is formed of 16 villages in total; in this article, I focus on one of them, where I stayed with the same host family for over six months. During this time, I carried out participant observation with my host family members as well as with their neighbours and other villagers, focusing on their local food systems, namely on how they carried out their crop cultivation, farmwork, foraging, care of cattle, food shopping, cooking, eating, religious food offerings, and anything else concerning food. I conducted around 50 personal interviews, also focused on local food systems. This article draws on some of this material to analyse villagers' relationship with industrially produced products—which they receive from the "city" and I therefore conceptualise as "urban foods."
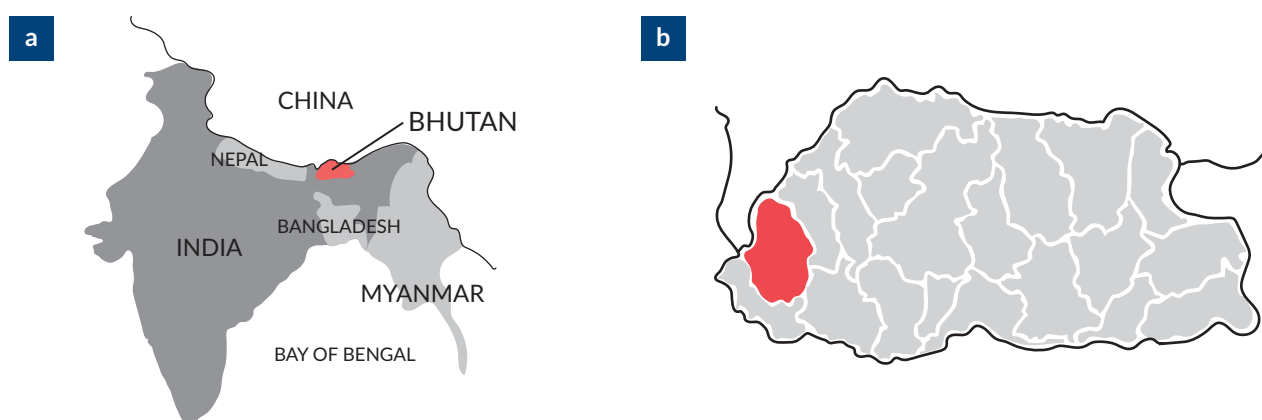
Figure 1. Map of Bhutan's bordering countries, with Bhutan (a), and Haa, the district where I carried out my research (b), highlighted in red.

In the below sections, I present this material in the form of three vignettes. Vignettes are thick descriptive narrative accounts used in ethnographic writing to zoom into details while also conveying a general picture of the field site. Beyond a dissemination form, they are "a layered practice of reinterpretation" (Bloom-Christen & Grunow, 2024, p. 798), namely a method of anthropological analysis (Creese & Takhi, 2016). I opted for

this form as it better allowed me to vividly describe and reflect upon processes that are material and affective at the same time. Such method was also useful in combining my own participant observation notes with the responses of single research participants, with the aim of imparting a broader and interconnected picture of the role of industrially produced snack foods in the village, and of how local inhabitants perceive and make sense of these products. While the proliferation of urban foods is relevant, with some differences in levels of access, to all 16 villages where I circulated during my research, I only focus on one of them for the purpose of making readers more familiar with the characters of my vignettes. Furthermore, having spent most of my time in this village, I can back up my observations with much larger and detailed quantities of data.

The research was carried out with the help of Bhutanese research assistants Chandra Kala Ghalley, Karma Choki Dema, and Mon Kumar Rai, who translated everyday conversations and interviews, facilitating discussions with villagers and helping me explore their understanding of and relationships with urban foods. In order to protect our research participants' anonymity, I refer to them using pseudonyms. I also call the village where I carried out my research the fictional name "Chimna" (which, in Dzongkha, literally means "at home").

3. Rural Villagers Incorporating Urban Foods

Chimna is a village composed of 13 households. It is located at an altitude of around 1,800m and characterised by a fertile subtropical climate, which allows its inhabitants to grow several garden vegetables, crops such as buckwheat, maize, millet and red rice, and their only cash crop, cardamom. Villagers predominantly live on subsistence farming and on the income gained from cardamom exports; most of them have a few cows on which they depend for milk (used for making their own butter and cheese); and, depending on the season, they forage various items from the forest, such as mushrooms and edible ferns. The official religion is Buddhism (which is also the national religion of Bhutan), which coexists and is mixed with animistic and shamanic practices deriving from Bon, an indigenous spiritual system that was present in the Himalayan region since before the arrival of Buddhism (Tashi, 2023). Chimna gained access to electricity in 2016, and the first road was constructed only a few years later (2018)—infrastructural developments that have enabled circulations and their accelerations, especially to and from what are considered urban areas (Chimna and the new road can be seen in Figure 2).

Before the construction of the road, it took villagers at least three days to reach the closest market on foot. This meant that most people grew almost everything that they ate and only went to the market for essential goods such as salt and to sell cardamom seeds. Road access has deeply transformed the lifestyles of most villagers, who can now ride vehicles and reach the closest market in a few hours, having easier access to cheap imported fruits, vegetables, rice and industrially produced foods. Many young people have started looking outside of Chimna for education and work opportunities, now being able to easily circulate between cities and their village. When they come to the village during breaks and holidays, they usually bring instant noodles, sweets, snacks, imported fruits and other items from the city, which they gift to their parents, relatives, and children within the family. In the past year, a hydropower project was initiated in the area, with hundreds of workers coming from all over Bhutan as well as India. A few villagers have taken this opportunity to open small shops along the newly constructed road, selling industrially produced alcoholic drinks, snack food, and other discretionary products to both workers and villagers. Following the views of local villagers, I conceptualise all the above items—namely, imported products that are not grown or produced within the village and that are

Figure 2. Road leading to Chimna, built in 2018 (a), and houses and fields of Chimna (b).

brought there from the city—as "urban foods." This article will focus specifically on the recent and increasing proliferation of the UPF category, which includes products such as sweets, instant noodles, and SSBs.

The concept of urban food environments emerged to characterise the issues faced by many built city environments, where what are considered negative urban characteristics—in particular, the high presence and accessibility of UPFs—lead to the consumption of unhealthy diets (Westbury et al., 2021). The increasing presence of such foods in people's eating habits is often attributed to the time, price, and access constraints of urban lifestyles—such as busy office schedules, the low cost of ultra-processed products compared to what are considered to be healthier ones, and the impossibility of growing one's own food—as well extensive marketing efforts and consumer unawareness of what is a healthy diet. To understand why urban foods penetrate rural and remote settings such as Chimna, where time, price, and access variables play out in completely different ways (Chimna's inhabitants can grow and make most of their own food products), we need to examine the socio-cultural practices and affective dynamics in which such foods become embedded. In the below vignettes I therefore explore some of the ways in which urban foods—with a focus on UPFs or "junk foods"—are incorporated into Chimna's local food systems. In particular, I show how they have become an essential part of foraging, farmwork, and cattle work (Section 3.1), rooted in villagers' relationships of love and reciprocity (Section 3.2), and offered in religious rituals and other spiritual practices (Section 3.3).

3.1. Urban Foods in Rural Work: A Typical Day With Namgay

Namgay, my host mother, is in her late forties. Originally from a neighbouring village, she now lives in Chimna, where her husband Sonam is from. Her children (in their late twenties) are currently living in urban areas: Dorji is staying in Australia (Perth), while Pema has moved to the closest small town within Bhutan, where her husband works as a teacher. Namgay spends her days working in the fields, looking after her two cows, foraging, and cooking. Sometimes her husband Sonam goes to work in the cardamom fields, and, when he

does, she wakes up earlier in the morning and prepares him a packed lunch in a bamboo basket: she cooks some white or red rice (sometimes homegrown and sometimes imported from India) and wraps it in a cloth, accompanied with a packet of biscuits (Parle-G, Marie Gold, or Good Day) and a bottle of homemade tea or Fanta. I often accompanied her into the forest, where we looked for ferns, mushrooms, bamboo shoots, and wild chestnuts, and worked with her in the fields, where we would weed and harvest various crops. When we got tired, we would sit crossed legged in the grass, and she would take some goodies out of her sack: we enjoyed fried and flattened corn flakes (homemade by her), Parle-G biscuits, Lay's crisps, and raw WaiWai noodles, broken into pieces and mixed with flavouring powders inside their plastic bag. We would also drink tea or Coca-Cola. She then used the empty plastic bottles for all sorts of things: she would fill them with fresh milk from her cows, make pickles in them, or use them as containers for homemade liquor. Sometimes, while foraging together with her cousins from the village, we would stop at one of the new small shops near the house and treat ourselves to a bowl of soupy instant Koka noodles and, occasionally, we would even share a can of beer (Druk Lager or Druk 11000). Later in the afternoon, we would go back home and Namgay would feed the cows. They usually ate leaves that had been foraged in the forest, harvested crop stalks and leftovers from our own food, such as Indian imported white rice and instant noodles. In the evening, she would cook dinner for us, mostly with vegetables picked from her garden and crops from her fields but also with a few imported items (e.g., onions and tomatoes). Sometimes we would mix our rice with Lay's crisps from the shop—which made it savoury and crunchy—or we would accompany our curries with processed bread, brought by visitors or relatives who had been shopping in nearby cities.

Accompanying and helping my host mother working in the fields, foraging, taking care of cattle, and cooking for the family revealed how different kinds of UPFs (as well as other imported food items) have become an important presence in most of her daily chores. Such foods are usually gifted from her daughter and other relatives when they visit from town. Many of them are also bought from the nearby shops, which have all opened in the past year, with the start of the hydropower project. This means that urban foods have entered her practices only recently, due to the development of infrastructure that enables and accelerates connections between Chimna and urban areas (e.g., roads and vehicles). While such products have been circulating, normalised and incorporated into her daily food practices within a short period of time, they don't seem to have changed (or "urbanised") her way of living and working. Instead, they coexist with local foods such as homemade snacks, tea and homecooked meals, are fed to cows (just like other local leftover foods) and their packaging is (re)used for local food practices. Variables that are usually considered in research on urban food environments (such as time constraints, restricted access to fresh products and high price of healthier options) do not apply to Namgay's reality, who receives and incorporates urban foods into daily tasks, which—rather than transforming according to narratives of modernisation—continue to consist predominantly of long-established rural practices. These products have been embedded and adapted to the ways in which Namgay carries out her rural work (Figure 3) through mechanisms which involve predominantly affection, sociality, and culture, such as accepting gifts from her daughter and reusing packaging for other local practices.

Figure 3. Tea, biscuit, and pastry breaks from farmwork and flour grinding.

3.2. Urban Foods as Rural Tokens of Love: Yishe and Her Family

Yishe lives in the house below Namgay's. She is her sister-in-law and best friend. Her first daughter has married a man from a village a few hours away (where she currently lives), while the other works in the same town as Namgay's daughter. Nevertheless, they often visit her and stay with her for long periods of time whenever her grandchildren are off school (mostly during their winter holidays). When they come to see her, they bring chocolate and crisps in shiny packaging, fizzy drinks, and other foods that cannot be found there, such as pasta, cake, and colourful fruits imported from India (for instance, dragon fruits, pomegranates, and different brands of apples). Yishe is happy to receive these gifts from her loved ones. She likes it especially when they bring biscuits in fancy tins such as "Danish butter cookies," as she can then use the container to store other homemade snacks, like freshly popped corn and roasted red rice. She also loves treating her grandchildren while they stay with her. Although she would rarely make instant noodles for herself (she told me she doesn't really like them), she would make them for the kids, taking the time to cook them together with spinach from her garden and eggs from her chickens. One day during the winter holidays, we all gathered at one of the houses nearby, to celebrate the birthday of the oldest lady in the village, grandma Dem, who was turning 100 years old. Everyone was present: her 6 sons and daughters, her 18 grandchildren (including Yishe and Namgay's husband), and over 50 great grandchildren and great great grandchildren. Chocolate, sweets, beers, sweet beverages (which had been brought by her relatives, who had come together to organise her party), and a homecooked meal—prepared by some of the granddaughters—were shared in the garden.

The above insights into the life of Yishe shows the ways in which industrially produced foods are gifted, received, and shared amongst inhabitants during family visits and village gatherings (Figure 4). While such foods also proliferate in this setting, they do not change the ways in which village relationships are formed and maintained, but instead are adapted to village ethics of care, gift exchange, and reciprocity amongst Chimna's inhabitants. Literature around "junk food" in urban settings shows how this kind of products is usually fed to children in contexts of limited economic and time resources and marketed-induced desirability (Chen, 2016; Namie, 2011). The above vignette, on the other hand, shows once again how time, price, and advertising are not variables that apply to Chimna, where such products are prepared together with homegrown foods (e.g., spinach and eggs) and other homecooked meals; where people have plenty of time

(children's winter school holidays coincide with villagers' time of rest from fieldwork); and the marketing of such foods is near to absent. Still, industrial food items are able to penetrate villagers' lives and diets through affective relationships and other social mechanisms, which transform them from urban foods into rural tokens of love.

Figure 4. Sharing "urban foods" (e.g., instant noodles, colourful finger chips, and crackers) and homemade snacks (beaten maize and freshly popped corn). Snacks are stored in recycled biscuits tins and containers.

3.3. Urban Foods as Rural Ritual Offerings: Namgay's Loche and Yishe's Shamanic Practices

While I stayed at Namgay and Sonam's house, I attended their annual ritual (which they call "Loche"), during which blessings are given to the family and luck is attracted for the new year. All households carry out such rituals in the winter season. During Loche, a dozen monks come from the local temple to pray in the family's altar room (every house has a room dedicated to religious practices) and the entire village gathers to eat a meal prepared and offered by the hosts. Several deities are worshipped with food offerings, consisting of local grains, milk, fresh fruits (both local and imported from India), locally distilled alcoholic beverages as well as savoury snacks, instant noodles, and chocolates wrapped in shiny packaging. Bright coloured crisps (which often come in long cylindrical shapes that Namgay, Sonam, Yishe, and other villagers call "finger chips"), also imported from India, make up for beautiful offerings and decorate the altar. At the end of the ritual, all the offerings, sweet and savoury, are mixed together in a big plate (called "tso") and shared amongst relatives and friends. Since it has been offered to the altar, the tso is believed to bring good fortune, so nobody ever refuses to take a bite. Tso is usually composed of fresh fruit slices, packaged sweets, local rice, and cheese, and, of course, yellow, pink, green, and orange finger chips, all mixed together into a colourful plate of blessings.

After staying in Chimna for several months, I also discovered that Yishe is one of the shamans of the village. Each family has in fact a female shaman who is identified by the local astrologer. The shamans must make food offerings to placate animist deities that live in the local forests at least once a year, or they might bring illnesses to their families. In December, I followed Yishe for two days, as she made offerings to several local deities located in different villages of the region. She used to take longer when she had to walk, but since the construction of the road she can go by car and complete all offerings in only two days. She brings all the necessary items in her backpack: each deity has in fact different and specific food preferences that must be respected. When I accompanied her, Yishe offered fresh local products but also branded biscuits, sweets, and chocolates that she had brought from the city. When I asked her how she knew that the deities would like

snacks like chocolates and biscuits, she gave me the following answer: "Deities are like us. Packet foods are not essential like local butter and cow ribs, but they are tasty. They are not needed, but they might like them." Some of offerings are also eaten by people at the end of the ritual, some fed to the cows, and some left in the forest for birds, insects, and other animals.

This final vignette shows how industrially produced items have become embedded even in cultural and spiritual practices that have been historically characterised by the offering of locally grown foods. A similar phenomenon has unfolded in Mexico and other countries with similar religious practices, where SSBs such as Coca-Cola and other "junk foods" (which, in Spanish, are called "Comida chatarra") have been incorporated in local rituals and offerings to deities for decades (Pliego, 2019; Théodore et al., 2023). These products become in fact invested with culturally specific meanings that make sense in the context of the local religion and spiritual practices, like in the case of Namgay and her Loche, or Yishe and her offerings to the deities of the local forests (Figure 5). Such cases show how urban foods become embedded into daily habits through context-specific mechanisms and processes, that are often overlooked and that transcend the logic of consumption presented by most literature on urban food environments. In the below section, I discuss this logic, expanding on the socio-cultural and affective mechanisms that enable the proliferation of urban foods even in spaces that are not urbanising in the way that is imagined by mainstream narratives of modernisation.

Figure 5. Food offerings of finger chips, other branded biscuits, imported fruit (watermelon), and local foraged products (potatoes and other root vegetables) (a); food offering for a shamanic ritual, composed of local items (e.g., cheese and fermented alcohol) as well as ultra-processed products (e.g., biscuits). In the background, local milk for the spirits is stored in a plastic Coca-Cola bottle (b).

4. Thinking Beyond Urban Food Environments

The vignettes show how foods that are usually associated with the city—such as confectionary, processed savoury snacks, and other imported products—have been embedded into villagers' work (crop cultivation, foraging, and cattle rearing), interpersonal relationships (sharing and exchanging food), and spiritual practices (food offerings for gods and local deities). Industrially produced UPF items, contrary to the home grown and produced foods that people are accustomed to eating in the village, originate from logics of commodification, convenience, and individualism, which are usually associated with processes of urbanisation, modernisation, and development. However, once such foods enter Chimna, they are (re)appropriated through villagers' communal ethics of reciprocity and care. Rather than being eaten

individually and with the purpose of saving time, they are cooked together with local ingredients and shared during extended family and community gatherings. Instead of being bought and sold as commodities, they are gifted and accepted to show love and reciprocity between elders and young people that leave the village but also continuously come back. Their colourful packets are not used to attract consumers but to make spiritual offerings more enticing to gods and local deities. Rather than becoming waste, leftovers are fed to cows while plastic and tin packaging is reused for local food practices (e.g., containers for fresh milk, pickles, homemade alcoholic beverages, and snacks). Anthropologist Tsing (2009, 2013, 2015) explains how capitalist commodities, such as these kinds of foods, come in fact into value through non-capitalist social relations, which allow them to become part of particular and heterogeneous ways of life. Rather than focusing only on the commodity value of ultra-processed snack foods in urban areas (e.g., convenience, timesaving, and affordability), we therefore also need to pay attention to the local, socio-cultural, and affective processes which allow industrialised foods to penetrate and become embedded into different diets. Contemporary food systems are in fact complex processes where rurality and urbanity, as well as capitalist and non-capitalist relations entangle, overlap and transform continuously into one another.

Battersby et al. (2024) highlight the need to consider the unique contexts in which food systems operate, denoted by size and location of the setting, existing infrastructure, residents' age, and other demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. According to their report, informality should also be understood as a fundamental part of urban food systems, such as the ways in which UPFs are sold and distributed in Chimna (through informal stalls and gifted by visitors), without any traceability nor systems of control. Far from operating within enclosed urban environments, urban food systems are highly dynamic, variegated, heterogeneous, and differentiated processes (Brenner & Schmid, 2014; Robinson & Roy, 2016). May et al. (2022) observe that people and communities have divergent experiences that may not mesh with top-down narratives of urbanisation, with each group having a different experience of each mode of food circulation. Food systems that are understood as formal, traditional, informal, or alternative overlap continuously in complex ways. While physical infrastructure allows urban foods to expand beyond the city's imagined boundaries and into the village, it is "interpersonal relationships, social obligations, and cultural ties" (May et al., 2022, p. 30) that allow them to penetrate and integrate into people's lives and practices, becoming a key part of local food systems in urban and rural areas alike.

Our personal interviews clearly showed, despite most villagers' low levels of education and inability to read food product labels, a general awareness of the poor nutritional properties and health impacts of an excessive consumption of UPFs, which many of our respondents defined as "not good for your body," "causing sickness," "making people weak," and "being digested quickly and making you hungry." Nevertheless, in Chimna as well as the rest of Bhutan, nutritional and food security problems persist, while the incidence of noncommunicable diseases (one of the leading causes of death in the country) is rising due to shifting diets and other lifestyle changes (Atwood et al., 2014; Ministry of Health, 2020; Minot & Pelijor, 2010; World Health Organization, 2022). An attentive observation of villagers' "rural" daily food practices and the ways in which they make meaning through social, cultural, and affective processes beyond the opinions around foods stated in personal interviews allow us to understand how the urban fabric—in the form of urban foods—is able not only to circulate but to sneakily penetrate into people's lives and bodies, despite having easy access to locally grown foods and homemade meals. Thinking about urban food environments simply as food environments that are located within urban built spaces and that are determined by time, access, price, and education variables, ignores and diverts attention from these kinds of mechanisms, that take place in

Chimna but also within cities. Instead, we need to explore and understand the relational ontology of urban food systems and the broad socio-spatial transformations of food spaces entailed in the urban process (Burgos Guerrero, 2022). Food insecurity and malnutrition should not be understood simply as occurring within urban areas, but as shaped by food systems and their relationships to what are considered rural ones (Battersby et al., 2024; Moragues-Faus & Battersby, 2021). Tacoli et al. (2025, p. 2) suggest that, rather than speaking about rural or urban spaces, we focus on the rural-urban linkages, namely "the complex web of connections across a specific space that can be described as local but is also, increasingly, shaped by translocal linkages reflecting what is happening in other, often distant, places (Zoomers, 2018)."

This exploration of Chimna's villagers' relationship with urban foods within their rural village can hopefully bring new insights and perspectives to the question. Corbett (2016) reminds us that we should not theorise the disappearance of rurality in view of a progressively urbanised modernity but understand the "complex relationships and interdependencies between different spaces within modernising societies that are connected in increasingly complex ways" (pp. 153–154). Rather than perpetrating the imperialism of the urbanism, researchers have started to talk about "rural transformation" (Battersby et al., 2024) or "new rurality." In her work on food security and translocal livelihoods in Ladakh, Dame (2018), for instance, uses the latter expression to refer to the changing circumstances of many rural places in the Global South, increasingly characterised by translocality and off-farm employment.

> While it may be true that the most remote places are connected to and through market forces, it is also true that we have never been urban in the way urbanists imagined us to be: informal social relations, the natural, the problem of food and livelihoods, the need, complex dependencies that nevertheless enable survival. (Krause, 2013, p. 9)

In order to understand contemporary food systems, we need to think beyond space as an absolute and fixed entity (and cities as pre-given sites or containers), but as socially produced through heterogeneous practices and relationships, which involve people as well as other beings. The urban is in fact an agglomeration of overlapping, entangled, and transforming flows, which continuously circulate to and from rural areas. Paying attention to the ways in which the urban fabric circulates and penetrates rural and local contexts such as Chimna can therefore advise our analysis and inform our understanding of the global (Tsing, 2009).

5. Conclusion

While most food issues are now framed around the idea of urban food systems and spaces, the urban is a highly controversial concept (Cabannes & Marocchino, 2018), with the borders between urban and rural having become increasingly blurred. This article aims to challenge the concept of urban food environment by focusing on what Burgos Guerrero (2022) called "extended urban food spaces," namely on how the urban fabric—in this case, urban foods—proliferates beyond urban built spaces. In particular, the article explored how the urban fabric—in the form of industrially produced food items that have been associated with cities and negative health outcomes such as the incidence of noncommunicable diseases—circulates to and in what is considered one of the most remote and rural villages in the landlocked Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan. While the world is presented as increasingly urban, shifting our attention to what is considered rural is a way to pay attention to local practices that are often overlooked and obscured but that actually play an important role in global food mechanisms (Krause, 2013). The way in which Chimna's inhabitants incorporate urban

foods into their supposedly rural practices, shifting them from a capitalist logic of consumption to communal ethics of care, shows how urban foods are able to penetrate local food systems through complex social, cultural, and affective processes (Tsing, 2013). The idea of urban food environments presumes the existence of an external space in which individuals are situated and make their decisions about acquiring, preparing and consuming food and where health outcomes are determined by factors such as spatial distribution, education, time, and affordability of certain food products compared to others. This approach can suggest interventions based on these variables but does not consider the socially constructed aspect of space nor the complex social mechanisms that allow problematic food systems to operate. Frameworks and theoretical lenses such as "extended urban food spaces" (Burgos Guerrero, 2022), "relational territories" (May et al., 2022), and "rural-urban linkages" (Tacoli et al., 2025) can help us to think beyond urban food environments. Issues associated with urban food systems have in fact gone well beyond urban built spaces. Furthermore, by perpetrating the "imperialism of the urban" (Krause, 2013, p. 2), we fail to notice the particular, local, and, in this case, rural processes that allow unhealthy urban food systems to exist, proliferate, and cause harm. Tacoli et al. (2025, p. 1) remind us that a large proportion of people, especially in the Global South, lives in contexts where urban and rural elements are combined, "with high levels of mobility between locations and the diversification of income sources from farm and non-farm activities." The ways in which Chimna's inhabitants engage with urban foods show how urban-rural relationships unfold in complex ways.

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Conflict of Interests

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