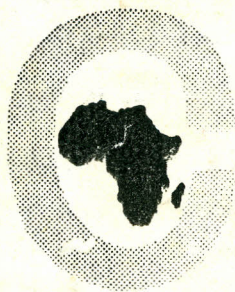


TRADITIONAL AND MODERN FOODS IN KENYA: THE IRONY OF 'CIVILISATION'



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This paper will lay a special emphasis on Central Kenya, the habitation of the Mount-Kenya Bantu-speakers, especially the Enbu, Meru and the Gikuyu- popularly known as Kikuyu. The paper aims at two main issues, namely, to inform and call for a reconsideration especially from the African and other affected 'Third World' countries. Lastly, the paper will take a layman's casual observation, not a technical scientific analysis, highlighting on traditional foods, utility and their modern replacements.

Traditionally six main categories of foods were singled out. First were the staples with several ingredients, second came the sugars and the third were the mineral foods. The fourth place was taken by fruits while animal products took the fifth place with 'famine' foods taking the sixth and last, but most important, place. The above listing is not in order of importance except for the staples.

The staples category was composed of three main ingredients, the cereals, pulses and vegetables which could be utilised separately, in any grouping of twos, or, and the more ideal, all three mixed and mashed together. Often green bananas and edible squashes (*cucurbita* species) like cucumbers or pumpkins could be added to the above. The total mixture formed one dish. Among the cereals were various types of sorghum (*eleusine coracana*) and millets (*pennisetum tryphodium* and *setaria italica*) such as bulrush finger and fox-tail varieties. The pulses included the lab lab beans (*dolichos lablab*) which is regarded as the most ancient historical and the most important in this class followed by the pigeon peas (*cajanus indicus*), a giant white bean called mbumbu, green grams and a small grained reddish bean known as gatunu. The above have been replaced by a variety of beans such as the Indian Wonder bean, haricot and mexican 142 pea bean, Gatunu and cowpeas (*Vigna Catiang*) are today almost unknown in the greater part of their former homes. Unlike the ancient bean varieties, the new brands do not yield green vegetables used as spinach and are mostly sold to international markets, not consumed.

Other green vegetable varieties like pumpkin and arrow root leaves, ndarimukia, thatha and rwoga (*chenopodium opulifolium*), the last three were both growing as domesticated as well as wild plants, have all disappeared and their place taken by a variety of cabbages, lettuce, spinach, all cultivated in an admittedly expensive and delicate way in rural areas. Ironically, the cultivators sell most of their products to urban areas for the vegetables are seen more as cash crops than staples. A popular type of cabbage plant grown for its foliage that lasts for a couple of years as the owner plucks off the fresh foliage has effectively made its impact as a vegetable. It is popularly known as 'sukuma wiki', 'Push the Week' or 'Sukuma' in brief, is seen as a poor man's cabbage when the normal cannot be afforded. All the new brands, except 'sukuma' are of lower food value to the traditional ones, and, ironically again, 'sukuma' is not acceptable to the 'civilized'. A lamentable point is that 'sukuma' has also turned an urban cash fetcher for the cultivators due to the demand caused by the influx of migrants from the rural areas, who cannot afford the 'civilised' brands. Nairobi is the leading consumer where 'sukuma' is the main (or only) ingredient for stew that is used with the most popular town dish, Ugali (posho) or stiff porridge made from maize (corn) flour, which is usually white or yellow at hardship times.

White maize (*zea mays*), it should be pointed out, is a newcomer in Kenya, most areas getting it after they were colonised early this century. Those areas which cultivated maize earliest did so in 1890s, at the end of the Arab/Swahili trade era; even though, the crop was not accepted as a staple, it was a fruit eaten mainly by children. A more accepted 'maize fruit' was a variety that produced small black and white seeds on the same cobb. This was the maize known, for instance, in pre-First World War in Embu and Meru. White maize was unknown then around Mt. Kenya except by the Gikuyu who cultivated it on a small scale. The 'war famine', popularly known as 'the famine of Thika', because relief foods were fetched at the Ihika colonial camp that was soon to develop into a town, effectively advertised white maize which was the main component of the relief food. The people did not know

where the colonial authorities had got it from in large quantities and bought it grudgingly. However, this became the firm introduction of maize cultivation. The cultivation became popular and overwhelming through the colonial state who employed agricultural advisors, or instructors as they were popularly called, as well as the seeds. By 1930s, it was implicitly compulsory to grow maize and discard the earlier mentioned cereals. In a word, the scheme turned a very successful agrarian revolution - maize turned King. Today, in most of Kenya, even dry areas, the other cereals are more of historic relics than the staples and maize has made its way there, in such brands as Katamani, a special brand bred for such areas which matures in three months. The former cereals were consumed in a variety of ways in addition to the mash discussed above. They were chewed as green or raw grains, boiled to form various dishes when mixed with other foods like milk of different types; ground to form beverage types, consumed raw, boiled, fermented or as alcoholic when used alone. Mixed with other ingredients, more food varieties were obtained. The traditional cereals could be stored in special containers and places for two or more consecutive seasons so that the last harvest was mostly in stock at the time of the next harvest and in good condition. Unfortunately although hybrid maize is growing in abundance when under demanding conditions to the farmer, its storage is a problem - insects such as grain weevils seem to be immune to the application of the insecticides advised because, farmers hold, the crop is infested before harvest! Yet, in most rural areas of Kenya today, not the 'traditional' West Kenya as previously believed, and all urban regions, maize is the staple - maize flour forming both porridge as the main drink especially for children and those who cannot afford 'imported' beverages such as coffee, tea, cocoa and milk and the Ugali, the main daily meal. Central Kenya, maize boiled together with beans was a popular substitute for the mash until late 1960s but, there being no more beans for consumption as said above, ugali has taken over.

The sugar category of foods had both domestic and wild sources. Sugar canes, supposed to be indigenous <sup>was of</sup> of three main varieties - stripped, black and white - all

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very rich in sugar content. These were chewed raw, pounded for beer brews and used for medical purposes especially for expectant and newly delivered mothers. Honey was an indispensable source of sugar, supplemented by wild plants like the sweet shrubs, minthethukwa whose leaves and the succulent stalk were eaten. The introduction of a thick succulent white variety of sugar cane in the early 1920s was an appreciable addition - the traditional white brand being thin, though too sugary, and taking too long to grow. The new variety was termed Mbombo, 'pumb' due to its fastness in growth and hence the boost in beer making. In the 1950s and 1960s, the four brands gave way to 'hybrid' canes like Kampala or Kambara, the former being suggestive of a Ugandan origin and the latter of its quality that induced fighting among those who drank its beer. It yielded rather coarse beer - in texture and taste - that intoxicated easily and was even rumoured as being capable of killing quickly. But it was accepted at the exclusion of the former brands. This was replaced in the 1970s by another brand called 'nylon', the name is self explanatory, which is currently the survivor, almost the only, of the sugar canes, beer being brewed from commercial sugar mainly. The sugar cane is edible but unpopular. Commercial white sugar has taken the place of sugar canes with much government encouragement. Consequently big tracks of land like Muhoroni in West Kenya have been turned into sugar estates to be able to supply the country. Brown sugar is unpopular and, though the wage earners can afford the white sugar and take great pains to get it, great portions of the country in rural regions are unable to afford it and so suffer physically and psychologically from lack of the sugar.

Mineral nutrients for humans and livestock were regarded as an important ingredient of foods. These, not being available as evenly as the staples became the prominent commodities of traditional barter trade. However, for domestic consumption, mineral water, mined salt lumps, types of varied reeds and parts of other plants like banana bunch stocks were used as sources of the necessary salts and other minerals to supplement those available in the different foods, like calcium in finger millets. Apart from the coloured maize, only bananas were usually

grown as fruits - when eaten ripe - in mainland Kenya. The coast produced various nuts like the coco and cashew nuts, in addition to fish, which were also trapped from big rivers like Nzoia and lakes like Nyanza (Victoria) and Turkana (Rudolf), to add to mineral nutrients. Plenty of wild fruit trees were, however, preserved as a part of the ecology and were mainly owned communally so that many had access to them when they had fruits, such would be micuca, the various types of nuts, mitoo and mikambura (*doryalis abyssinica*) which produced apricot-looking like fruits. Berries such as brambles and creepers like Passion would be let grow by the hedges to provide the fruits. Cedar, keiapple and Euphobia hedges have taken over the hedge functions while citrus fruits like oranges and mangoes provide the fruits.

The bananas which used to serve the purposes of fruits and mash ingredients have been replaced by the varieties, two mainly, which are used as fruits only - the sweet or sugar banana and miraru. An effort is underway for establishing Ugandan brands of bananas. It should also be mentioned that on the arrival of the modern common salt - sodium chloride - traditional minerals - Igati and munyu - were condemned as unhealthy or actually health hazards, 'because they weaken the body joints' being the common symptom. Minerals are today bought for humans and the mid 1960s brought livestock minerals in the commercial market. Fishing is licensed and, needless to say, the fisherman's catch, like the farmer's fruit products end up in markets and urban areas, not consumed.

Livestock was regarded as a supplement to the staples in basically agricultural areas where mixed economy was - and is - practised and as a staple in pastoral areas like the Rift Valley region of the Maasai and the dry areas of the Turkana, Boran, Rendile and Somali. 'Civilisation' not having penetrated in the pastoral regions, the functions of livestock are still in operation though a strong onslaught of traditional culture is already thrust in each of the areas, spearheaded by missionaries and the Kenyan government. Here, milk, blood and flesh are among the sustenance of life with the livestock being composed of cattle, goats, sheep and camel. The mixed economy regions have run short of land and have been advised - or forced -

to abandon or change their livestock breeds (mainly cattle, goats and sheep being 'dangerous' to soil conservation). Consequently, people keep a western or 'grade' cow or two for milk only. As with the other foods above, the milk turns into a cash crop, not sustenance. Then the mothers resort to tinned brands of milk - Hun's, Safariland, Cowgate, etc for the newborns. Meat comes almost all through from the butchery for slaughters at home are rare due to health hazards, and the livestock. Wild animals are by law not hunted - this being punishable as 'poaching'. Chickens have taken over as hospitality foods from the he-goat which did the job. Edible insects of the termite and locust families today are non-available since all or most land is owned by individuals who sell them exorbitantly when they have the time to trap - and even then, they are unacceptable due to 'health hazards' to the 'civilised' sectors of the population. All this results in livestock <sup>products'</sup> deficiency for non-wage earners who are the majority, and poor rations for the rest.

Special or famine foods were mainly root crops. They were consumed as staples with patches preserved for the hard times. Their edible sections were underground and so affording to resist the onslaught of the common causes of famines, the droughts and the insects of the locust family. They grew on dry land, such were yams (dioscorea) sweet potatoes (impomea batatas) and lately Cassava. Others grew by water banks, for instance, arrow roots (Maranta arundinacea), which grew by river or marsh banks. Each crop had many varieties. Traditional arrow roots have almost wholly been replaced by Indonesian taro, wrongly termed 'European arrow root' which is only one variety, grows much faster and cooks more quickly but has a shorter duration in the soil before going bad. Yams have mainly disappeared. Cassava in Central Kenya, except a portion of Kambaland has also disappeared. Parts of West Kenya grow considerably reduced quantities of cassava. There does not appear to be a replacement for cassava in Central Kenya. Perhaps, like sweet potatoes, it was replaced by the Irish - popularly called 'English' potatoes. These are seasonal crops while the cassava and sweet potatoes last for a couple of years, with yams being considered as 'permanent'. The Irish potatoes which replaced the above in grain mainly in a



section of Meru, not all over Central Kenya as the traditional predecessors, and, as all the other 'modern' crops, it makes its way to the urban areas, mainly Nairobi, to be converted into the popular 'chips' - for lunches for the civilised. Of late, the Meru potato has become an export crop - there are neither cooperatives nor 'chip' hotels in Meru!

To this writer, the above is a lamentable picture attributable to three main factors. First, the colonial 'migration' labour' system which drew men from the rural areas to salvage the colonial economy in settler estates and serve as soldiers and domestic servants with meagre wages in urban and other areas. These vacated the rural areas <sup>abandoning</sup> the planting of such crops as yams, bananas, cassava, etc, regarded as 'men's crops' traditionally. The same was true for livestock. Second, the cash crop mania. Coffee, tea, cotton, black wattle, rice, tobacco, wheat and sugar canes head the list of priority crops. Everyone endeavors to plans one or more of these for cash, even today when the cash from them is more illusory than real, due to the brain washing done to the population from colonial days to the present. This makes Kenya's agriculture and economy in general almost wholly tied to the Western World and fully to the West's mercy. The final factor is the attitude the so-called educated or civilized individuals have on traditional foods, definitely due to brain washing mentioned above through the colonial education which mainly regarded whatever was traditional as savage, primitive, etc. and so unfit for consumption by 'civilised' people, hence the discouragement and perpetuation. These, coupled with the parcelling of land in the 1960s as per Swynnerton Plan of 1952 which changed the systems of land tenure, creating classes of landlords and landless people make it even more difficult to avoid malnutrition, Kwashiorkor and tuberculosis cases as well as great sufferings over short droughts which bring famines (like 1981) which would otherwise not have been felt. More lamentable is the continued educational system which still lays much emphasis on Western values, apparently blind to what should be considered historic lessons of the Colonial era. However, of late, the Ministry of Agriculture began recognising the importance of

traditional foods by re-introducing cassava and creating a section of "nutrition" that encourages, within the 'balanced diet' context, traditional foods. Its impact has not been felt, it being too young, but a positive gesture.

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