

CHAPTER EIGHT

Indigenous Food Preparation and Processing Knowledges among Bantu-Speaking Communities in Kenya

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"I cannot read or write. I know nothing, but I know when a cyclone is coming from the northeast" [statement by a Bengali man proclaimed in a documentary: Savage Sea, May 12, 2001].

Abstract

This chapter argues that before the advent of British colonial rule, the Bantu-speaking communities of Kenya had developed highly sophisticated food preparation and processing systems, deeply embedded in their ecological understanding, cultural identity, and social organization. Colonial policies and enforcement have disrupted Indigenous ways of knowing, including sophisticated knowledge of food preparation and processing and replaced them with Western technologies. Consequently, this chapter interrogates how an Indigenous knowledge framework explores how Bantu communities prepared and processed food before colonization. The chapter also highlights the intersection of practical skill, ecological intelligence, cultural meaning and knowledge production. Drawing from ethnographic records, oral traditions, and contemporary knowledge systems, as well as my research in Kenya, to prove the enduring value of Indigenous food knowledge in addressing current challenges associated with food scarcity and environmental sustainability. The chapter aims to capture the tension inherent between Western science and Indigenous knowledge and fluidity between the past and present, recognizing that the former cannot be quarantined from the latter. The chapter asks a key question: how can the engagement of Indigenous Knowledge transform pedagogical approaches taken up by Western-educated scholars, planners, and development agents in their imagination for world food security? To address this question, I examine the concept of knowledge production: who controls knowledge and whose knowledge is valid.

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge, Bantu-speaking people, colonization, environmental sustainability, food processing

Introduction

Before the advent of British colonial rule, the Bantu-speaking communities of Kenya had developed highly sophisticated food preparation and processing systems, deeply embedded in their ecological understanding, cultural identity, and social organization. These practices—refined over centuries—were not only a means of sustenance but also integral to the communal and spiritual life of these societies (Akinyi, 2017; Njenga, 2009). Spanning from the highlands of Mount Kenya to the fertile Lake Victoria basin, Bantu groups such as the Embu, Kikuyu, Luhya, Kisii, Meru, and Kamba cultivated diverse diets shaped by the region's rich biodiversity. Their knowledge systems reflected a profound relationship with land and seasonality, emphasizing sustainability, health, and communal welfare (Kariuki, 2014; Muthee, 2007). Through tools like grinding stones, clay pots, and gourds, and techniques such as fermentation, sun-drying, and roasting, these communities preserved food, enhanced its nutritional value, and adapted to climatic changes long before the term “food security” entered academic discourse (Munyua, 2015; Wanjala, 2002).

Everything about human history is rooted in the earth, which has meant that we must think about habitation, but it has also meant that people have planned to have more territory and therefore must do something about it. “Doing something” means controlling the resources in every imaginable manner. This chapter interrogates how an Indigenous knowledge framework may explore how Bantu communities prepared and processed food before colonization. I also highlight the intersection of practical skill, ecological intelligence, cultural meaning and knowledge production. Drawing from ethnographic records, oral traditions, and contemporary knowledge systems as well as my own research, I make a case for the enduring value of Indigenous food knowledge in addressing current challenges in food scarcity and environmental sustainability (Oduor, 2011; Simiyu, 2010).

The role of Indigenous knowledge and the ways of knowing in teaching, learning, and researching in education does not take place in a vacuum. It takes place within the context of the history of colonialism, imperialism, and neo-colonial, post-colonial and anti-colonial thought. In this chapter, I believe that, for any meaningful solution to be achieved for the food crisis facing the world, it is necessary for all parties involved to rethink or re-imagine how indigeneity may be infused with Western scientific knowledge. The Indigenous approach acknowledges the vital role played by all and the legitimization of Indigenous knowledge, which I believe will play a vital role in resolving the crisis. This is because Indigenous food production knowledges are concerned not just with yield but also with the holistic sustainability of interconnected ecological systems. The social organization of Indigenous ways of knowing is such that both natural and artificial infrastructures should sustain and support themselves. Indigenous knowledges are applied, not abstracted, but in particular to the environment and to other specific needs.

I aim to capture the tension inherent between Western science and Indigenous knowledge and fluidity between the past and present, recognizing that the former cannot be quarantined from the latter [Semali, M. & Kincheleloe, J. L., 2010]. I argue that Indigenous knowledge is a living experience that is informed by ancestral voices. I base my arguments on the following question: how can the engagement of Indigenous Knowledge transform pedagogical approaches as it is taken up by Western-educated scholars, planners, and development agents in their imagination for world food security? In answering this question, I will refer to a moment when I was conducting my research on food process in Kenya. It was an Embu/Kikuyu woman's statue. The statue depicts an elderly African woman grinding corn or millet. This image captured my attention for a number of reasons. It represented the women who had participated in my research. However, most rural

women to whom I showed this picture distanced themselves from it. They could not identify themselves with a richly clad woman. The women questioned the authenticity of this colossal statue of an African woman. Behind this status is an iron gate protecting the modern technical devices that the multinational company uses to process cornmeal for the local population.

This statue can be read in multiple ways: It can be read as a site of ideological contradictions in its acknowledgement of Indigenous knowledges. It is a divider and a gatekeeper for both the African women who cannot afford the corn meal made behind the gated building and Western knowledge. The image legitimates Indigenous processing technologies, but it is also elusive because it conceals what and how food is being produced behind the barred gates. It is a powerful imagery for Indigenous ways of processing food. Wolfe (2007) highlights how colonizers appropriate indigeneity to legitimize their practices even when they are aggressively asserting difference. Also, my Ph.D. research provided an excellent opportunity to go back to my roots and learn from Bantu-speaking communities in Kenya, in particular the Ambu and Kikuyu. Today, as a faculty member of a Western university, there is a need to create a dialogue among Indigenous peoples of the world and Western-educated scientists, especially on the question of food scarcity, food security and food production. The Indigenous people have a wealth of knowledge to contribute to addressing food security, health and environmental sustainability. These Indigenous knowledges can be conceptualized as the epistemic saliency of cultural traditions, values, belief systems and world views in any Indigenous society that are imparted to the young generation by community elders. Such knowledge constitutes an Indigenous informed epistemology, which is crucial for the survival of society. This is based on collective understandings and interpretations of the social, physical and spiritual worlds.

Women are connected to the land through their reproductive cycle. When a woman agrees to have a tractor plough her land, she gives up the handling of the soil to something foreign. The machines will uproot any plants, interfere with soil composition and least of all not experience the sacredness of land. As women prepare the land, they talk and question what causes variations in soil structure or the reasons for a poor harvest. Our children embrace Western technology, hybrid seeds without questioning their repercussions. Let me provide some brief background about the Bank-speaking communities' food processing systems in precolonial Kenya.

Food Processing Systems of Bank-speaking Communities in Kenya

The food systems of Bantu-speaking communities in precolonial Kenya were deeply informed by the diverse ecosystems in which they lived. From the highlands of Mount Kenya and the Aberdares, where the Kikuyu and Embu communities thrived, to the fertile river basins and plains inhabited by the Luhya and Kisii, the environment dictated the availability of food and shaped the agricultural practices in each region (Mwangi, 2003; Okoth-Ogendo, 1991). Bantu communities practiced mixed farming - integrating crop cultivation with small-scale livestock keeping - and mixed cropping, growing different crops on the same piece of land. They grew millet, sorghum, yams, bananas, and legumes long before maize became a staple through later introduction by the colonizers (Sang, 2009; Wanjohi, 2012). Banana plantations were particularly prominent among the Kisii and parts of the Meru and Embu communities, while the Luhya people depended heavily on sorghum and finger millet for porridge and beer-making (Gikonyo, 1998; Ochieng', 1985). Rainfall patterns, soil fertility, and elevation guided planting cycles. The oral calendar and local knowledge of seasons determined when to till, plant, harvest, and store.

Indigenous knowledge also supported crop rotation and intercropping practices, which enhanced soil fertility and minimized pest infestation (Mbogori, 2016; Mugendi, 2007).

Among these Bantu-speaking communities, diets were heavily starch-based, accompanied by leafy vegetables and occasional animal protein. Common staples included: millet and sorghum grains, which were pounded or ground into flour using a mortar and pestle or grinding stones, then prepared as uji (porridge) or ugali-like stiff cakes (Aloo, 2018; Ngethe, 2009). Additionally, the communities also had root crops such as yams, arrowroots (nduma), and cassava (introduced later by the colonizers as a provision for enslaved people on board the slave ships). These were peeled, boiled, or roasted. Some communities mashed them with beans or greens (Okello, 2004; Karanja, 2010). Also, bananas (Matoke) were peeled, steamed, and mashed—often cooked with vegetables or legumes for a complete meal (Ndegwa, 1995; Onger, 2001). These communities were very conscious of a balanced diet. They ensured that the meals had Indigenous vegetables such as African shades (managu), kunde (cowpea leaves), terere, and osuga, which were steamed, sometimes sun-dried for preservation, and often mixed with groundnut paste (amaranth) or animal fat for flavour (Mutua, 2013; Wamalwa, 2006). Beans and legumes were cooked slowly over low heat, often combined with maize in dishes like Githeri (Kikuyu/Embu), a food still popular today (Gitau, 2017; Ndungu, 1997). Preparation of the food was meticulous, and women, often with the help of children, would spend hours shelling, cleaning, and soaking food before cooking. Preparation was not just functional, it was also spiritual and social, done in groups, with storytelling and song (Muthoni, 2005; Kibet, 2010).

Food Processing Techniques of Bantu Speaking People

There were several techniques that these communities used to process their foods, such as fermentation, which was an important technique for both food preservation and enhancement. Millet and sorghum were often fermented to make uji (fermented porridge), which was easier to digest and more nutritious, especially for children and the elderly. Milk was also fermented and stored in calabashes. Among the Luhya and Kikuyu, sour milk was a common breakfast item, often taken with sweet potatoes or porridge (Nyariki, 2004; Ouma, 1999). Other techniques were pounding, grinding, and Milling. Traditional food processing began with manual pounding of grains to remove husks, followed by stone grinding to produce flour. This method retained nutrients that modern milling often strips away. Grains were sifted through woven baskets or sieves made from reeds or bark (Kimani, 2008; Makau, 2002).

Preservation was critical for seasonal survival. The Bantu-speaking communities used such methods as sun-drying sliced bananas, yams, vegetables, and even meat were dried on mats or rooftops to prolong shelf life (Mwiti, 2011). Smoking was particularly used for meat and fish, common among lakeside communities and those in forested areas. Smoking added flavour and prevented spoilage (Onyango, 2000). Ash was used as a form of treatment for specific plants by mixing them with water to soften beans and tubers or used in the nixtamalization-like treatment of maize to improve digestibility (Ngugi, 2003). Granaries and clay pots were stored in well-ventilated raised granaries or sealed clay pots to protect against insects and moisture (Mutiso, 2012). Precolonial Bantu food systems were designed for resilience and sustainability, with storage techniques that ensured food security during dry seasons or periods of scarcity (Muthoni, 2016). For instance, granaries (made from grass, twigs and cowdung) were built on raised wooden or mud-walled structures with thatched roofs, used to store dry grains. These were often treated with ash or local herbs to repel pests (Mutiso, 2012). Earthen pits were used to store root crops like

yams and sweet potatoes, particularly in highland areas (Mungai, 2009) while clay pots were used to store fermented milk, porridge, water, or dried vegetables and grains (Wainaina, 2007). The Bantu speaking communities also used natural preservatives such as ash, smoke, and certain tree leaves (Mbogori, 2016). Salt, though limited in inland areas, was traded from the coast and used in preserving meat and fish (Ndegwa, 1998). These techniques demonstrated a profound understanding of microbial activity, moisture control, and food chemistry, despite their informal, non-written transmission (Langat, 2005; Wambugu, 2014).

Bantu-speaking communities had cooking techniques, and they used utensils for doing this. Most cooking took place over open fires using the three-stone fireplace, still visible in rural homesteads today. This method allowed for multiple pots to be heated at once and minimized firewood usage (Kareithi, 2016). Clay pots were preferred for boiling and slow cooking. These pots preserved flavour and were environmentally sustainable (Wainaina, 2007). Calabashes were used to ferment milk, store liquids, or carry water (Munyua, 2010). While grinding stones, which were hand-cut and passed down through generations (Mutuku, 2013), were used for grinding grains as mentioned above. Wooden ladles, banana leaves, and reed baskets were used in cooking, steaming, and food presentation (Kimotho, 2009). Roasting was used for maize, groundnuts, and meat. While steaming, using banana leaves or reeds, was common in banana-growing regions like Kisii (Mugambi, 2008). Food processing and preparation processes were the domain of women, who held rich Indigenous knowledge about plants, cooking methods, and food safety. Men participated in livestock slaughter, hunting, or ritual cooking, particularly where meat was involved (Njeri, 2013).

Cultural and Social Aspects of Food

Among Bantu-speaking communities, food was more than sustenance—it was a social, spiritual, and cultural cornerstone. Every aspect of food preparation and consumption was tied to communal values, identity, and ritual (Amukowa, 2011). Meals were typically eaten communally from a shared bowl or platter, reinforcing values of unity and equality. Children, women, and elders all had roles in the mealtime structure, although gender and age hierarchies often influenced who was served first or given certain foods (Demi, 2014; Mwikali, 2007). Additionally, specific foods were associated with life stages and ceremonies. For instance, at birth, porridge or special herbal soups were prepared for new mothers. During initiation ceremonies, special foods like roasted meat or millet beer were shared to mark a transition to adulthood. Marriage rituals often involve the exchange and preparation of specific food items, such as bananas, grains, or slaughtered animals. While at funerals, food preparation became communal, with neighbours contributing supplies and labour (Okello, 2015). Among the Kikuyu/Embu, irio (mashed potatoes, green peas, and maize) was served during ceremonies, while the Luhya prepared special chicken (ingoho) dishes for honoured guests (Kariuki, 2014).

Seasonal Planning

The Bantu communities were careful to plant and harvest in tune with the rainy and dry seasons. They maintained a variety of crops to ensure some would survive unexpected weather conditions or pest infestations. The crop diversity reduced total dependency on one staple, a principle central to traditional ecological knowledge systems (Okoth-Ogendo, 1991; Mugendi, 2007). The transmission of food-related knowledge in precolonial Bantu societies was oral,

practical, and intergenerational. Mothers taught daughters to cook, process, and preserve food; elders passed on planting calendars and preservation techniques to younger members (Amukowa, 2011; Njenga, 2009). Oral traditions involved songs, stories, and proverbs that reinforced the importance of farming or food production and consumption practices. For instance, a Kikuyu proverb about food that states “a full stomach does not remember an empty one” highlights communal responsibility and empathy (Mwikali, 2007). Apprenticeship and observation were key methods of knowledge transmission. Children learned by watching and helping, gaining firsthand experience. This method ensured experiential learning that adjusted to local conditions annually (Muthoni, 2005). There was innovation within tradition because these communities were not static. When new crops like maize and cassava were introduced via trade or migration, Bantu societies quickly adapted them into their diets. They experimented with fermentation and mixing techniques to process these new foods using existing Indigenous frameworks (Sang, 2009; Ouma, 1999). These demonstrate that African Indigenous knowledges about food production and processing are not static but change to accommodate varying environmental conditions and readily available resources.

Creation of dependency

Biodiversity prospecting involves the exploration, extraction and screening of biological diversity and Indigenous knowledge for commercially valuable genetic and biochemical resources. Bioprospecting is a modern-day gold rush in which scientists are combing the farms, rainforests and jungles to look for ways to modify natural processes. When agricultural extension workers visit the farms to advise women, they must recognize the limitations of their knowledge of the local environment. Before environmentalists, energy conservatists, ecologists and agriculturists began to propagate their Western knowledge, local farmers had experimented with their immediate environment and therefore accumulated vast knowledge of farming and cultural practices. For instance, planting is not random, nor intended only to fill available spaces; inter-cropping is a way of eliminating insect damage, sustaining forests, preventing soil erosion, and adding nutrients to the soil through a symbiosis relationship.

Impact of British Colonization on Food Systems

The arrival of the British in Kenya in the late 19th and early 20th centuries disrupted Indigenous ways of food processing in profound ways. Colonization imposed cash crop economies, altered land use patterns, and introduced Western dietary norms that marginalized traditional foods (Anderson, 2005; Elkins, 1993). The colonizers introduced cash crops and encouraged the cultivation of tea, coffee, and cotton, often at the expense of food crops. This led to reduced food diversity and dependence on imported or monetized food systems (Demi, 2014; Kinyanjui, 2003). This also led to loss of land and food sovereignty. Large-scale land alienation displaced many Bantu communities, particularly the Kikuyu in the Central Highlands. Without land, traditional farming and storage practices were lost or diminished (Okoth-Ogendo, 1991). This led to the marginalization of Indigenous Knowledge because the colonial authorities promoted western agricultural models, viewing Indigenous practices as backward. Fermented milk, millet porridge, and wild vegetables were often stigmatized as “poor people’s food” (Ochieng', 1985). However, some knowledge survived in rural areas and among the elderly, where traditional foods continued to be used in ceremonies and informal economies (Kariuki, 2014).

Ironically, these Indigenous foods and practices that were demonized are repackaged today as healthy foods and sustainable practices. It suggests Indigenous food systems were not static relics of the past but dynamic, adaptive, and highly efficient. These Indigenous knowledges present valuable lessons for today's challenges in food security, climate adaptation, and cultural preservation (Amukowa, 2011; Oduor, 2011). As scholars and practitioners, we must revisit the importance of Indigenous knowledge systems, it is imperative to recognize, document, and revive these culinary traditions—not as museum artifacts, but as living systems with relevance for the present and future (Njenga, 2009; Kariuki, 2014).

Conclusion

This chapter explored the Indigenous food production and processing practices of Bantu-speaking societies of Kenya. It highlights the fact that while some ignore and disparage Indigenous ways of knowing, others continue to conserve these knowledges, thus creating a push-pull factor that has reduced cultural appropriation but also resulted in inadequate support to Indigenous Kenyans. The aggressive pursuit of formal education and its inherent rewards has devalued Indigenous knowledges, especially related to food production, processing and consumption practices in the minds and hearts of people, even though Indigenous knowledge systems predate colonialism (Wane, 2014). I have realized the importance of becoming increasingly self-reflexive to move beyond critiquing the other. As an author, therefore, I believe that, moving beyond attempts to de-centre objectification of the other knowledges, I must stop spending my time critiquing the totalizing forms of modern science and engage in the discourse of possibility by centering and validating the missing voices and knowledges.

The chapter revealed that before the British colonization, the Bantu-speaking communities of Kenya had developed rich, sustainable, and culturally embedded systems of food preparation and processing. Their techniques—rooted in ecological knowledge, community values, and practical innovation—ensured nutritional sufficiency, social cohesion, and resilience in the face of environmental uncertainty (Munyua, 2015). It is quite clear from my discussion that knowledge should not be owned or controlled. Rather, there should be avenues in which knowledge can reinvent itself and exhibit itself in various forms. As such, this discussion is not static but one that evolves. It evolves to meet the needs of a specific group of people who respond to the context of the local input.

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