

Favourite Foods: 100 Years Ago and Today How and Why Food Habits Changed in Mwinilunga, Zambia, during the 20th Century

Iva Pesa¹

¹Leiden University, (African) History, Leiden, The Netherlands

i.pesa@hum.leidenuniv.nl

Today the inhabitants of Mwinilunga district, in the Northwestern Province of Zambia, eat in a way which is radically different from how they ate at the beginning of the 20th century. Whereas previously the area relied mainly on sorghum and millet as staple food crops, cassava became the dominant crop during the 20th century and recently maize has been making more and more headway. Next to this, local vegetables and fruits gathered from the forest have increasingly been replaced by 'Western' style vegetables such as cabbage and rape.

Why did these food consumption patterns change over time? Which power relations lay at the basis of changing consumer choices? Political factors played a role, as the (colonial) state tried to influence what individuals grew and ate (they attempted to 'colonise the cooking pot'), but marketing and advertising also influenced which goods consumers valued as being 'nice' or 'good'. Due to the influence of traders and state policies, cabbage is valued more than sweet potato leaves today. Local agricultural practices influenced the availability and types of food, but in turn, consumer choices also influenced which crops were grown and which cultivation techniques were used. In addition factors such as the depletion of game meat and the tightening of conservation measures could influence what individuals chose to put in their pots.

Although dietary choices have changed over time, it is remarkable to look at what has been conserved as well. Individuals could choose to keep consuming certain types of food, despite the fact that government or marketing advised them otherwise. In spite of the multiple external factors influencing food choices, individuals maintain a distinct agency to pick their own 'favourite foods'.

By adopting a long-term perspective, this paper proposes to examine the reasons behind dietary change and/or continuity in Mwinilunga district.