Favourite foods: 100 years ago and today

How and why food habits changed in Mwinilunga, Zambia, during the 20th century

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A female British missionary at the start of the 20th century described cassava *nshima* as a: 'big, grayish ball with a consistency of African rubber and smelling like a mass of decayed vegetables in the garbage can.'[1] In spite of its unappealing colour, texture and smell, and at the expense of older-established crops such as sorghum and millet, cassava has become and remained the predominant staple food of Mwinilunga District, a part of Zambia's North-Western Province, during the 20th century. Today the Lunda inhabitants proudly proclaim their favoured food, by saying: 'We are cassava eaters, cassava is our staple food!'[2]

Despite government propaganda to stimulate maize cultivation, coupled with traders favourable pricing policies towards the crop, cassava has not lost its popularity. During the early colonial period maize was still disliked because of its 'strange texture, colour and taste' and people even claimed that eating maize would have 'made them sick'.[3] Nevertheless, towards the end of the colonial period (and especially after Independence) maize gradually became more widespread, particularly among the class of waged employees, at schools and in hospitals.[4] Today the mixing together of cassava and maize flour to cook *nshima* has become common practice for many. Maize has been promoted as a more nutritious alternative to cassava, especially by the government personnel and missionaries present in the district. Increasingly maize gained a 'cosmopolitan appeal', whereas cassava was denounced as a 'backward village crop', the cultivation of which was far from abandoned, though.[5]

These gradual processes of dietary change, from sorghum and millet to cassava and maize, were not simply neutral, but were backed by socio-economic and political interests of the (post-)colonial administration, missionaries and traders in the area. This paper will seek to examine the causes of dietary change, as well as the (contradictory) interests which lay at its base. Why did food consumption patterns change over time? How did political factors, but also marketing and advertising, influence consumer choices – defining what was valued as 'nice' or 'good'? It will be argued that, although external factors played a role, individuals retained a distinct agency to pick their own favourite foods – not only regarding staple crops, but equally so in the case of vegetables, fruits and sources of protein.

The myth of 'makeability'

Ideas about what constituted proper or desirable food, nutrition and diet, were not always shared by government officials, traders and the local population alike. Their differing views could be due to misapprehension and lack of knowledge, as officials or traders might not be accustomed to the uses of certain local crops and plants, whereas producers were oftentimes not used to growing the crops which traders or administrators propagated. Furthermore, the development of nutrition as a scientific specialty led officials to apply their new-found

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[1] H.E. Springer, *Snap shots from sunny Africa* (New York and Chicago, 1909), 167-8.

[2] J.J. Hoover, *The seduction of Ruwej: Reconstructing Ruund history (The nuclear Lunda; Zaire, Angola, Zambia)* (Yale, 1978), 331-2 and confirmed in various oral interviews.

[3] National archives of Zambia (NAZ) SEC2/967, W.D. Grant, Mwinilunga district tour report, No.5/1959 and interview with Mr. Mwangala, Mwinilunga, 8 September 2008.

[4] For interesting comparative literature see: J.C. McCann, *Maize and grace: Africa's encounter with a new world crop, 1500-2000* (Cambridge etc., 2005).

[5] NAZ: Northern Rhodesia department of agriculture annual report, 1954 and interview with Paul Fisher, September 27th 2008, Hillwood farm, Ikelenge.

knowledge of vitamins, minerals and proteins to creating a more 'balanced diet' for the local population and thus preventing (supposed) dietary deficiencies.[6] However, at times recommendations about nutrition were not merely benevolent advices to improve the diet, but also an attempt – through persuasion more often than by force – to control which crops were grown and eaten. Whereas certain foods were promoted, others were discouraged and given an inferior status. Concepts such as malnutrition were not objective or neutral, but socially and politically constructed, and could change over time.[7]

From the earliest inceptions of colonial rule, yet accelerating during the 1930s and 1940s when administrative presence became more firmly established and locally grounded, and continuing after Independence with Kenneth Kaunda's socialist policies of Humanism, attempts were made to socially, politically and scientifically engineer society.[8] Under the pretext of 'scientific colonialism', European social, economic, political and scientific insights were transplanted to African societies, often veiled by an air of superiority, which masked the fact that certain ideas could not simply be copied in the different African setting. The colonial administration held a firm belief in the 'makeability' of African societies, and tried to alter or improve long-standing practices and beliefs which were deemed backward or even harmful.[9] Taking away the racial and cultural connotations of inferiority versus superiority from these recommendations, the policies propagated after Independence under the guise of 'development' nevertheless had much in common with those stemming from the colonial era.[10] Throughout the 20th century local attitudes towards agricultural production, diet and nutrition in Mwinilunga District were continuously questioned, and in the process alternatives or improvements to the 'primitive' state of affairs were persistently proposed.

A focus on external factors and the propagation of a European point of view has permeated many historical studies of the African continent. Such studies presume that it is only through contact with European imperialism, and later colonialism, that change was brought to (otherwise changeless) African societies. Whereas modernisation theories argue that the contact between Europeans and Africans was positive, encouraging progress and development by bringing technological, socio-economic and political advances, dependency theories argue that Europe has 'underdeveloped' Africa, by mechanisms of unequal exchange and domination.[11] More recently these external views have been countered by an approach which pays attention to African initiatives, ideas and agency. The power of the (post-)colonial state to dominate every aspect of daily life has increasingly been questioned, whilst weaknesses and imperfections of the state have come to light. More attention has been paid to processes by which power is continuously negotiated, and in fact shared, by the state, individuals and other actors, such as traders. Rather than viewing African individuals as pawns of the colonial state or

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[6] M. Vaughan, 'Nutritional research in colonial Malawi', *The journal of African history*, 45:1 (March 2004), 149 and J.M. Hodge, *Triumph of the expert: Agrarian doctrines of development and the legacies of British colonialism* (Athens and Ohio, 2007), 271-7.

[7] B. Freund, 'Nutrition, science and racial politics', *The journal of African history*, 43:2 (July 2002), 341.

[8] H. Tilley, 'African environments & environmental sciences: The African research survey, ecological paradigms & British colonial development, 1920-40', in: W. Beinart and J. McGregor (eds.), *Social history & African environments* (Oxford, Athens and Cape Town, 2003), 112.

[9] Hodge, *Triumph of the expert*, 7.

[10] F. Cooper, 'Possibility and constraint: African independence in historical perspective', *The journal of African history*, 49:2 (2008), 173 and 183-4.

[11] For a review of such work see: F. Cooper, 'Africa and the world economy', *African studies review*, 24:2/3 (1981), 1-86, A. Isaacman, 'Peasants and rural social protest in Africa', *African studies review*, 33:2 (1990), 1-120, and T. Ranger, 'Growing from the roots: Reflections on peasant research in Central and Southern Africa', *Journal of southern African studies*, 5:1 (1978/79), 99-133.

the world market economy, their agency in moulding the various aspects of daily life, at times even successfully questioning and countering official policies, has been underlined.[12]

Individual choices, official policies and trade advertisements concerning food, nutrition and diet in Mwinilunga can be viewed in the light of these broader debates. At the basis of dietary choices and agricultural policies lay social, economic and political power negotiations between government, traders and the local population.[13] These power negotiations, in which no single party proved to be hegemonic, will be the main focus throughout the following examples. It will be examined how dietary change was negotiated, which interests lay at its base and how individual agency was expressed in the process. Attention will be paid to which foods and which ideas about proper nutrition were promoted and with what outcome. These issues will be tackled by looking at three groups of food, namely fruits and vegetables, sources of protein (meat, dairy, fish, beans and groundnuts) and staple crops (millet, sorghum, cassava, maize and rice). It will be illustrated that government or traders recommendations concerning improved nutrition were not always well-founded or effective, and furthermore that the local population did not react to them in an unequivocal manner.

Fruits and vegetables

> '...only a very small minority of the villages could boast of tomatoes or potatoes and none had green vegetables; and few had more than an odd mango tree, if that, in the way of fruit.'[14]
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> 'For a large part of the year hardly any fruit and vegetables appear to be eaten and it is surprising that the lack of vitamins A and C which must result does not cause more disease.'[15]

Colonial officials in Mwinilunga District often voiced complaints against the lack of fruits and vegetables in the area, which does not seem to be in line with the great diversity of wild and cultivated varieties that can be found in villages today. For example, wild fruits from the surrounding forest are gathered in order to add nutritional diversity to the daily diet and to offer food security in times of scarcity.[16] Each season offers its own variety of fruits, providing important vitamins and other nutrients. In most cases, however, government officials only recognised these gathering practices as hunger strategies, recording people who were living in the bush on wild fruits due to food scarcity.[17] As a consequence, traders neglected to buy these fruits. *Incha*, *nshindwa* or *kabwengenengi*[18] are not included in the buying repertoire of traders, who regard them as village food, lacking an outside market (although the highly seasonal and perishable nature of these fruits, as well as the difficulty experienced in significantly expanding production, also contribute to their poor marketability). However, the gathering of wild fruits is by no means a mere hunger strategy, even though the practice might be intensified in times of

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[12] See: W.M.J. Binsbergen, R. van Dijk (eds.), *Situating globality: African agency in the appropriation of global culture* (Leiden etc., 2004), M. de Bruijn, R. van Dijk and J-B. Gewald (eds.), *Strength beyond structure: Social and historical trajectories of agency in Africa* (Leiden etc., 2007) and J. Lonsdale, 'Agency in tight corners: Narrative and initiative in African history', *Journal of African cultural studies*, 13:1 (2000), 5-16.

[13] For a recent publication on this topic see: J.C. McCann, *Stirring the pot: A history of African cuisine* (London, 2010).

[14] NAZ: SEC2/957, R.N. Lines, Mwinilunga district tour report, January 1949.

[15] NAZ: NWP1/2/17, R.C. Dening, Mwinilunga district tour report, No.6/1947.

[16] C.B.L. Jumbe, S.M. Bwalya and M. Husselman, *Contribution of dry forests to rural livelihoods and the national economy in Zambia* (Lusaka, 2007), 11.

[17] NAZ: KSE6/6/2, F.V. Bruce-Miller, Mwinilunga district tour report, September 1928.

[18] *Incha* comes from the *Parinari curatellifolia* tree – I am in the process of retrieving the scientific names for the other two fruits.

hardship. Some wild fruits are still regarded as true delicacies, especially *mabula* (of the *Uapaca kirkiana* tree) and *nfungu* (of the *Anisophyllea boehmii* tree) and are highly nutritious.[19]

Equally so, the range of available vegetables is copious. The leaves of cassava, sweet potato and pumpkin plants, for instance, are used as wholesome relish accompanying the main meal. Cassava leaves, for example, are rich in proteins, minerals, vitamin B1, B2 and C.[20] In addition, a wealth of local vegetables is cultivated, including *mulengu* (*Amaranthus hybridus*), *kateti* (*Solanaceae* spp.) and *wusi* (*Hibiscus sabdariffa*).[21] However, these cultivars are generally not recognised as being 'true vegetables', and have even derogatively been called 'weeds and grasses' by colonial administrators.[22] This open denunciation by the colonial administration resulted in negative buying policies by traders. In order to supply hospitals, schools or the town population, traders unanimously preferred vegetables such as cabbage over *wusi*, and this expressed itself in pricing policies as well. Such negative buying policies, however, were not necessarily in line with local preferences of consumption, nor were they always grounded on a sound nutritional base – as will become apparent.

Instead of locally available varieties government officials advocated fruits such as bananas, mangoes, pawpaws, pineapples and citrus fruits.[23] Furthermore, the growing of 'European-style vegetables', such as tomatoes, onions, cabbage, Irish potatoes and peas was promoted.[24] Although government officials initially introduced and propagated these varieties under the pretence of being 'superior' – in either a nutritional, agricultural or marketing sense – they tacitly admitted that local fruits and vegetables were probably no less nutritious than the varieties proposed by the government.[25] With regard to the cultivation of the proposed crops, attention was not always paid to whether they would grow well in the particular climate and soils of the area, nor if they would fit in with existing agricultural practices. The growing of the proposed vegetables often required the clearing of a separate garden and many of the crops were troubled by fungal diseases due to the high rainfall in the area.[26] In spite of possible drawbacks, fruits such as pineapples were promoted as 'luxury fruit' and fetched high prices from traders – far above those offered for *nfungu*, if this could be marketed at all.

The reason that these alternative fruits and vegetables were promoted, then, was that they were in high demand at urban centres, missions, schools and hospitals.[27] Because of marketability, the aforementioned pineapple became one of the major cash crops in the area. High prices, coupled with the erection of a pineapple canning factory – resulting in a virtually guaranteed market – greatly helped spur the cultivation of pineapples after Independence. It must be noted, however, that the pineapple was particularly suited to the specific soils and climate of Mwinilunga District, and this helps explain the spread and success of its cultivation to a large extent. Whereas in 1965 43 tons of pineapples had been marketed, by the 1969/70 agricultural season the figure had risen to 480 tons, sold at a price of 3 ngwee per pound of

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[19] Interview with Judy Mudimina, Ikelenge, 19 September 2008.
[20] A.O. Fasuyi, 'Nutrient composition and processing effects on cassava leaf (*Manihot esculenta*, Crantz) antinutrients', *Pakistan journal of nutrition*, 4:1 (2005), 37.
[21] I use the term 'local' fruits and vegetables here to distinguish these crops and plants from the vegetables and fruits proposed by government officials. This does not mean that all fruits and vegetables were necessarily of local origin, as some had originated in the Americas or Asia.
[22] NAZ: SEC2/955, C.M.N. White, Mwinilunga district tour report, February 1940.
[23] NAZ: HM8/FI/2/6/1/1, Walter and Anna Fisher correspondences; 19 March 1909 Eileen to Walter Fisher.
[24] NAZ: SEC2/133, N.S. Price, Annual report on native affairs, Mwinilunga district, 1935 – yet these vegetables are not of European, but of Asian and American origin.
[25] NAZ: SEC2/177, Recommendations of the standing committee on diet and nutrition, May 1938.
[26] Interview with Lawrence Floranga, Ntambu, 10 October 2008.
[27] NAZ: SEC2/955, C.M.N. White, Mwinilunga district tour report, February 1940.

weight.[28] Traders promoted this 'yellow gold' mainly for the external market, but pineapples increasingly became a mainstay of local consumption as well. Individuals within the district could consume the excess pineapples which could not find an outlet in urban centres or at the canning factory.[29] In this case, changes in patterns of food consumption followed in the wake of the availability of marketing opportunities, as a consequence of the high prices offered by traders for a crop which was highly desired by the urban and even overseas population.

Whereas the local population initially seemed hesitant to adopt the fruits and vegetables proposed by government officials and traders, and predominantly grew them for sale at European-dominated urban centres only, a gradual trend could be observed towards the end of the colonial period and accelerating after Independence, by which the crops increasingly became incorporated as a normal article of the daily diet, in response to government propaganda coupled with traders' pricing policies.[30] Initially cabbage was frowned upon, however as patients in the hospital were fed on cabbage and labour migrants were served cabbage in urban areas, cultivation of the crop became more widespread and gained acceptance. As traders promoted the crop by offering high prices, cabbage has today become more commonplace – and in some circles more valued – than *kateti*, which is now denounced as a bitter alternative, both literally and figuratively. Nevertheless, local fruits and vegetables continue to exist and add diversity to the diet, even though reliance on them has possibly decreased as compared to the past.[31]

Beans, eggs and meat – Sources of protein

Next to complaints about the lack of fruits and vegetables in the local diet, government officials frequently expressed concern over a lack of protein.[32] During the pre-colonial period game meat and fish, obtained either by hunting and fishing nearby or by bartering various foodstuffs for dried fish and meat from further away (especially Angola), had provided sufficient supplies of protein to the local diet. However, as the colonial period progressed game populations gradually diminished and various restrictions were put in place to limit hunting.[33] Therefore, although the Lunda were said to be 'great meat eaters', their favoured source of meat was becoming increasingly scarce and difficult to obtain.[34] In addition fish, previously obtained in large quantities by barter trade with Angola, became difficult to access as international boundaries were monitored more effectively.[35] Small numbers of domestic animals (goats, sheep, chicken and cattle) were held in Mwinilunga, but these animals were not used for milking purposes, nor were they slaughtered for meat regularly – only on special occasions.[36] The difficulties of obtaining sufficient intake of protein are captured in the following excerpt:

> 'The keeping of cattle by natives had for many years been prohibited owing to the prevalence of pleuro-pneumonia in Angola (…) As a result of this embargo, combined with a growing scarcity of

[28] NAZ: LGH5/2/2 Loc. 3611, Marketing of produce North-Western Province 23 July 1970 and NAZ: MAG2/17/86 Loc. 199, Pineapples July 1970.
[29] Interview with Mr. Kamafumbu, Ikelenge, 6 March and 25 April 2010 and interview with Mr. Saipilinga, Ikelenge, 8 April 2010.
[30] NAZ: NWP1/2/83 Loc. 4914, Department of agriculture annual report for North-western Province, 1958.
[31] NAZ: MAG2/9/11 Loc. 171, Department of agriculture on nutrition trends, 1959.
[32] NAZ: NWP1/2/12 Loc. 4899, K.S. Kinross, Mwinilunga district tour report, No. 3/1944.
[33] NAZ: KSE6/1/5, F.V. Bruce-Miller, Annual report for Mwinilunga sub-district, 1926.
[34] NAZ: KSE4/1, Mwinilunga district notebook, 1913.
[35] NAZ: SEC2/958, R.C. Dening, Mwinilunga district tour report, May 1950.
[36] NAZ: SEC2/952, G.S. Jones, Mwinilunga district tour report, 1932.

> game, there was a definite deficiency in the diet of the natives, who could not afford to buy meat from the Europeans.'[37]

Rather than due to an absolute scarcity of meat, it was because of embargoes, game laws and high prices charged by European farmers and traders, that a protein deficiency in the local diet was caused. Access rather than availability seemed to be at the base of the problem.

As an ambiguous solution, alternative sources of protein were proposed by the government and propagated by trade policies. Initially recommendations were geared towards the cultivation of beans, cowpeas and groundnuts, but later on improved breeds of livestock and the digging of fishponds were also proposed. Even though several varieties of beans and groundnuts had been cultivated since long in Mwinilunga District, in the 1940s and 1950s special campaigns were set up by the colonial administration to promote the growing of pulses and nuts on a vastly expanded scale, in order to improve the local diet and add variety to it.[38] Planting material was distributed through Native Authorities, and agricultural demonstrators assisted people in cultivation, especially of groundnuts as they appeared to grow poorly – which was later discovered to be caused by ill-conceived cultivation techniques.[39] The promotion of these crops was, however, not only geared towards adding diversity to the local diet, but also served a different purpose, namely of providing the growing mining towns of the Copperbelt with much-needed foodstuffs and possibly even exporting groundnuts overseas: 'This crop [groundnuts] is not yet receiving the attention it should as there is a constant demand for this produce by the mines in the Territory and the Congo.'[40] The promotion of groundnuts and beans, only hesitantly received by the local population because of the required extra labour inputs, thus served a dual purpose. Whereas these crops could present a cheap source of protein for the local population, they could simultaneously provide a tradable surplus at mining centres.

An attempt to boost protein intake was also made by stimulating livestock ownership. For this purpose, improved breeds of sheep, goats and poultry were sold and distributed, and schemes were devised to promote cattle ownership, initially only among chiefs but later among all village members.[41] Such plans met with great success, and the improved breeds were in large demand. The local population, however, not only relied on livestock as a source of protein, but equally made use of the new commercial opportunities in the form of urban meat markets at the Zambian and Congolese mining centres.[42] In similar vein, milk was increasingly used to satisfy the demand at local missions and administrative centres, though the provision of milk on a large scale was difficult due to its perishable nature in combination with transport difficulties.[43] In addition, fish ponds were promoted and became highly popular throughout the district, both diversifying local diets and offering people an opportunity to sell the surplus dried fish at markets and urban centres.[44]

Access to sources of protein was ambiguous, being restricted by various laws and policies – game laws, embargoes and disease regulations – yet encouraged by others – promoting the cultivation of pulses, improved breeds of livestock and the stocking of fish ponds. The foregoing has made it apparent, then, that behind the seemingly benevolent aim of adding protein and nutritional diversity to the local diet, an attempt was hidden to induce the

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[37] NAZ: SEC3/320, Revised report of the land commission, May 1945.
[38] NAZ: NWP1/2/37 Loc. 4903, D. Clough, Annual report on African affairs Mwinilunga District, 1950.
[39] NAZ: SEC2/135, R.C. Dening, Annual report on African affairs Mwinilunga District, 1952.
[40] NAZ: MAG1/18/6, Ministry of agriculture tours and tour reports North-Western Province, 1963.
[41] NAZ: SEC2/177, District Commissioners conference Western Province, March 1937.
[42] NAZ: MAG1/10/1 Loc. 76, Agricultural development North-Western Province, April 1955.
[43] NAZ: SEC2/156, R.C. Dening, Annual report on African affairs Mwinilunga District, 1949.
[44] NAZ: NWP1/2/78 Loc. 4913, J. Lemon, Annual report on African affairs North-Western Province, 1958.

population to produce a marketable and exportable good, for the booming mining towns and the European population. The local population, however, was in no sense a passive actor in this process, but to the contrary, was quick to react to the new marketing and cash-earning possibilities which arose. In addition, individuals ingeniously continued to access both game meat and fish – either by illicit hunting or cross-border trade, and thereby maintained access to their preferred sources of protein. Even today, hunting still continues and a tacit triangle trade in meat is carried on, connecting Angola, Congo and the Zambian Copperbelt.

Millet, cassava and maize – Staple crops

Changes in staple crops, the core of the daily diet, were complex, gradual and ambiguous. Cassava, though not indigenous to the area, had gradually been adopted as a widespread staple crop in the course of the 19th and 20th centuries.[45] Even though the practical uses of cassava were recognised by government officials – as it was easy to grow, it grew exceptionally well in the area and it was resistant to droughts and diseases – the nutritional deficiencies of the crop were nevertheless frequently underlined. Early colonial District Commissioners described the Lunda as a 'weakly tribe' and 'physically inferior' due to their cassava-based diet, and the growth of too much cassava was even actively discouraged.[46] The ambiguity towards cassava is reflected in the following excerpts:

> 'The cultivation of cassava is encouraged in the native areas throughout the Territory as a famine reserve crop (…) the crop came into its own during this difficult drought year and fully justified the persistence of the Provincial Administration and the Department in recommending its cultivation.'[47]

However, only two years later cassava cultivation was discouraged again: 'Methods of production of this crop are wasteful and it is preferable that it should be regarded as a subsistence rather than a cash crop.'[48] In spite of discouragement, the land acreage under cassava actually expanded during the colonial period, as the crop greatly enhanced general food security.[49] Cassava could offer food all year round, as it did not have to be harvested during specific short intervals, and thereby it prevented 'hungry periods' while awaiting the harvests.[50] Next to cassava, the older-established crops sorghum and millet (bulrush and finger millet) were grown as subsidiary grains and for beer-making purposes. Their cultivation was revived when urban markets arose and these crops could be exported to the beerhalls on the Copperbelt.[51] Overall, however, cassava firmly established itself as the favoured food of the area.

The government and traders, though acknowledging the use of cassava, sorghum and millet, promoted other staple crops, such as rice, maize and even wheat. Rice was promoted especially in the south and northwest of the district, where it could be grown in riverside gardens. Initially individuals were hesitant to adopt rice in their daily diet and predominantly considered it as a cash crop, to be sold to the European population in the district and on the Copperbelt markets. Its cultivation required the clearing and working of separate dambo fields, and could not easily be combined with the cultivation of other crops.[52] Therefore, rice

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[45] A. von Oppen, '"Endogene Agrarrevolution" im vorkolonialen Afrika? Eine fallstudie", *Paideuma* 38 (1992), 269-296 and J. Vansina, 'Histoire du manioc en Afrique centrale avant 1850', *Paideuma* 43 (1997), 255-79.
[46] NAZ: KSE 6/1/1, G.A. McGregor, Annual report for the Balunda District, 1909.
[47] NAZ: Department of agriculture annual report, 1951.
[48] NAZ: Department of agriculture annual report, 1953.
[49] NAZ: SEC 2/135, R.C. Dening, Annual report on African affairs for Mwinilunga District, 1952.
[50] A. von Oppen, '"Endogene Agrarrevolution"', 280-1.
[51] NAZ: Mutende No. 368, 30 January 1951.
[52] NAZ: NWP 1/2/33, D.G. Clough, Mwinilunga District tour report, No.6/1950.

cultivation and consumption was only hesitantly and gradually adopted – equally cultivation of the crop suffered from severe fluctuations, as price levels were highly volatile. When high prices were offered for rice, cultivation would expand rapidly, only to slump again suddenly if prices crashed once more. In 1959 it was remarked by the District Commissioner that: 'The main grievance at present is the lack of markets for rice', and because of low prices: 'many producers are threatening to stop producing.'[53] Comparable to rice, wheat was promoted as being a more nutritious alternative to sorghum and millet, but recommendations met with little success as the crop did not grow well in the soils and climate of Mwinilunga District.

However, no other crop received so much active encouragement from both traders and government as maize. Even though the crop was not particularly suited to the soils of the area and was frequently affected by various diseases and weevils due to the high rainfall, its cultivation was nevertheless persistently propagated – especially after Independence through the policies of large-scale government controlled marketing boards such as ARMB and NAMBOARD.[54] These marketing boards did not include cassava in their buying repertoires, but contrastingly focused on maize – for which high prices were offered and various inputs (fertilisers, pesticides and improved seeds), transport subsidies and loans (for clearing fields, stumping and purchasing inputs or equipment) were provided.[55] The importance attached to maize is well reflected by the following statement:

> 'As the staple food of the people of Zambia, maize is central in the Zambian agricultural economy. Not only is the crop of importance as a human foodstuff but it is widely used for stock-feeding purposes. As a result of the position occupied by this commodity the price of maize has an important bearing on most other agricultural commodities.'[56]

Maize was consigned prime importance, and on top of this the pricing levels of other crops were made dependant on and adjusted to maize prices. Because of such policies, a development could be traced, as people initially grew maize intercropped with cassava or on small patches along the rivers and ate it in its 'green stage' off the cob, but later started adopting maize as a subsidiary staple crop and as part of the main meal in the form of *nshima*.[57] Maize developed from being used mainly as a vegetable crop, to increasingly becoming a staple grain crop. Cultivation of the crop expanded as it was adopted by schools, missions and hospitals, and subsequently spread to the workers at the Boma. Maize was the staple crop of the urban and mining population, and enquiries were made into the possibility of selling maize from Mwinilunga at the Copperbelt markets, though transport costs made this option uneconomic.[58]

In spite of encouragement, maize cultivation only spread relatively slowly and haphazardly throughout Mwinilunga, and in 1964 it was still remarked that: 'any [maize] surplus marketed was merely a fortuitous surplus from subsistence cultivators and did not constitute an appreciable amount.'[59] The promotion of rice and maize did not cause cassava production or consumption to diminish, even though cassava was degraded to the status of being a famine or security crop. The local population continued to grow and eat cassava, because their favoured

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[53] NAZ: SEC2/967, J.T. Michie, Mwinilunga District tour report, 1959.

[54] For comparative purposes see: J.C. McCann, *Maize and grace: Africa's encounter with a new world crop, 1500-2000* (Cambridge etc., 2005). The Agricultural Rural Marketing Board (ARMB) operated in Mwinilunga from 1965-69, whereas the National Agricultural Marketing Board (NAMBOARD) took over from 1969 onwards.

[55] See: A.P. Wood (ed.), *The dynamics of agricultural policy and reform in Zambia* (Ames, 1990).

[56] NAZ: Review of the operations of the agricultural marketing committee, 30 June 1965.

[57] NAZ: SEC2/962, P.L.N. Hannaford, Mwinilunga District tour report, June 1954

[58] NAZ: Northern Rhodesia Department of agriculture annual report, 1954, and interview with Paul Fisher, Hillwood farm Ikelenge, 27 September 2008.

[59] NAZ: Annual report ministry of agriculture, 1964.

food offered many advantages. Cassava, however, by and large lacked marketing and export possibilities, whereas maize and rice could be sold to the European population and at mining centres, and therefore these crops came to stand in higher regard than crops such as cassava, sorghum and millet – which nevertheless retained local preference and importance.

Dietary change and ideas about proper nutrition

Dietary change did not occur overnight, but took many years, or even decades, to materialise. Neither were dietary changes always completely voluntary:

> 'There is reluctance on the part of many natives to modify their present diet, and it will be necessary gradually to cultivate the taste for new forms of food and gradually to educate the people up to the stage of realising the benefits which would result from varied and improved diets (…) the question of bringing pressure to bear through suitable authorities might have to be considered and close and constant supervision would undoubtedly be necessary.'[60]

Nutritional recommendations were made in order to 'get people to wish what they need', but the inherently social aspect of food – the fact that food is fundamentally linked to identity, as 'any given human individual is constructed, biologically, psychologically and socially by the food he/she chooses to incorporate'[61] – was ignored in the process. The basic aim of government recommendations regarding food habits was for them to become thoroughly internalised by the local population – in order to alter patterns of agricultural production, food consumption and ideas about proper nutrition, as well as to cultivate a desire towards certain types of food and promote their perception as being 'good'. This, however, could clash with established agricultural practices, local perceptions and meanings attached to food (taboos, rituals and values connected to particular foodstuffs).[62]

Playing down local values and meanings of food, government officials claimed that: 'Many Africans do not know what are the right foods, they also do not know how to prepare food in the right way.' And therefore: 'Africans in the army are fed on maize, or mixed meal, rice, meat, a special kind of butter, fresh or dehydrated vegetables, potatoes, dried beans and peas, fresh fruit, sugar, salt and tea or coffee', which were presented as superior alternatives to 'the foods they consume in their village homes.'[63] Dietary change – following government recommendations on proper nutrition – was imagined in an idealised manner:

> 'Men travel a lot. Some go to industrial centres, while others go to schools. These men meet and make friends with people who live differently. From the friends they make they learn many things. They learn that the same food which they eat in their own homes can be cooked in more than one way. They taste and know that food is made more appetising by cooking it in different ways and they begin to develop a desire for these ways of preparing food.'[64]

The aims of agricultural policies were defined as follows: 'to raise productivity on as wide a front as is practical in order to improve the diet of the subsistence cultivator and, by improving his prospects, to make rural life more attractive and thus curb the current drift towards urban employment.'[65] Evidently, then, nutritional recommendations were far from neutral, but rather

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[60] NAZ: SEC2/177, Standing committee on nutrition, District Commissioners conference Western Province, 1937.
[61] C. Fischler, 'Food, self and identity', *Social science information: Anthropology of food*, 27:2 (1988), 275-6.
[62] See for an interesting comparison: F. de Boeck, ''When hunger goes around the land': Hunger and food among the Aluund of Zaire', *Man* 29:2 (1994), 257-82.
[63] NAZ: Mutende, No. 185, February 1945.
[64] NAZ: Mutende, No. 352, October 1950.
[65] NAZ: Annual report of the ministry of agriculture, 1965.

reflected socio-economic and political aims connected to market production, labour migration and what was perceived as ideal patterns of consumption.[66]

Some crops which were promoted by the administration or traders did not grow well in the particular environment of Mwinilunga District, nor did they always fit into existing agricultural practices. Nevertheless, these crops were promoted under the veneer of 'dietary improvement', but also with the dual purpose of being marketable and being desired by the European population. Even though officials sometimes forcibly propagated the growing of certain crops, the local population was not passive in this process. Various government proposals regarding the cultivation of crops were rejected – at times outright, at times deferred or indirectly – and the list of failed introductions is far longer than the list of successfully adopted crops. Wheat, mentioned before, is only one example of a failed introduction, but the list also includes such exotica as eucalyptus trees and cauliflower.[67] Contrastingly, if (newly arising) marketing possibilities seemed to be suitable or beneficial to the local population, positive and active responses to the proposed crop could follow. The striking case of the rapid spread of pineapple cultivation throughout the district is merely one example hereof. As a consequence, some of the crops promoted by government or traders were gradually, though at times only hesitantly, included in the daily diet to add variety to it.

Some deep-rooted local patterns of food consumption were adamantly adhered to, and therefore government policies or traders pricing mechanisms could never simply or completely change dietary preferences. Goody, in a Ghanaian context, argues that:

> 'One is tempted to express surprise at the lack of variety; a man can eat nothing but porridge (*saab*) every day if it can be arranged, and this is sometimes true even of those who have been resident in Europe for a long period and have been forced to use some local substitutes (…) cuisine and manners have remained substantially intact at the domestic level.'[68]

In Mwinilunga District a similar adhesion to established nutritional practices can be witnessed. Even whilst offered a varied menu in an urban restaurant, overwhelmingly individuals would order their familiar *nshima*, although a relish which deviates from the daily routine, such as T-bone steak, might be ordered on the side. Generally, if change in food consumption occurs, the periphery of the meal (the relish) is more likely to be affected than the core (*nshima* – in an urban context, however, maize might substitute the locally common cassava as flour for *nshima*). In the process of dietary change individuals sometimes internalised government recommendations and adopted new crops, but they by no means completely abandoned old crops, nor did they adopt crops which could not be incorporated into existing agricultural regimes, or which did not fit in with existing nutritional preferences. Change did occur – Goody mentions the influence of the particular colonial encounter, the world system and the nature of indigenous societies as factors influencing the course of change[69] – but was gradual and involved multiple factors and actors.

While studying dietary change in Tanganyika, Little concluded that colonial recommendation with regard to food habits and the promotion of export crops led to the crumbling down of 'the once-diversified indigenous food systems of Africa.'[70] However, in Mwinilunga the process was not this simple. Local foods continued to exist, and some even

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[66] See also: H.L. Moore and M. Vaughan, *Cutting down trees: Gender, nutrition and agricultural change in the Northern Province of Zambia* (Portsmouth etc., 1994).
[67] Interview with Mr. Paul Chitadi, September 9th 2008, Kampemba.
[68] J. Goody, *Cooking, cuisine and class: A study in comparative sociology* (Cambridge etc., 1982),177-8.
[69] Goody, *Cooking, cuisine and class*, 183.
[70] Marilyn Little, 'Imperialism, colonialism and the new science of nutrition: The Tanganyika experience 1925-1945', *Social science and medicine*, 32:1 (1991), 12.

thrived next to the crops promoted by the administration and traders. Even though the reliance on certain local fruits and vegetables diminished due to the promotion of alternatives such as pineapples and cabbage, local options did not fall into (complete) disuse. Cassava provides a striking example, as in spite of being discouraged, cultivation of the crop even increased.

Conclusion

The ideas and recommendations of government and traders concerning 'improved nutrition', though sometimes merely stemming from a misapprehension of the local diet, were not always benevolent and neutral. They often hid socio-economic and political paradigms which promoted the production of marketable crops, without regarding what was optimal with regard to local dietary requirements or what fitted into existing agricultural systems. An attempt was made to influence and even dominate the content of the cooking pot, but this attempt was not received by the population in an unanimous way. Whereas certain new crops and goods were readily accepted and people made active use of the ensuing marketing possibilities, other crops were but hesitantly adopted, or rejected altogether.

Factors influencing dietary change included government policies, trade advertisements, pricing mechanisms, marketability, agricultural practices, but also ideas about proper nutrition, food preferences and local values. Government propaganda and high prices offered for maize could not curb the cultivation of cassava – a locally favoured crop enjoying distinct agricultural benefits. The outcome of the process of dietary change was influenced by the balance of these disparate factors, and proved difficult to predict or determine.

Government and commercial policies or recommendations regarding improved nutrition and desirable patterns of food consumption – presented as models for a better future – were actively moulded, challenged and sometimes altered, rather than being simply imposed in a hegemonic manner. The local population questioned the various suggestions and adapted these in such a way as to suit the prevailing circumstances and opportunities within Mwinilunga District. Rather than being a one-way external imposition, power was negotiated between various actors, none of which predominated completely. The result has been a gradual process of dietary change in which new crops have been added to, but have not replaced, the existing repertoire of cultivated crops and favourite foods.

Further inspired by:

R. Devisch, F. de Boeck and D. Jonckers, *Alimentations, traditions et développements en Afrique intertropicale* (Paris, 1995).

M. Douglas (ed.), *Food in the social order: Studies of food and festivities in three American communities* (New York, 1984).

C. Fischler, 'Food habits, social change and the nature/culture dilemma', *Social science information* 19:6 (1980), 937-53.

J.D. Holtzman, 'In a cup of tea: Commodities and history among Samburu pastoralists in northern Kenya', *American ethnologist* 30:1 (2003), 136-55.

D.R.F. Taylor, 'Changing food habits in Kikuyuland', *Canadian journal of African studies* 4:3 (1970), 333-49.