



# Food and Migration: A Culinary Journey Through East Africa

By Nduati Githae



East Africa has a colourful history, particularly along the sandy beaches of the Indian Ocean coast where Swahili was born. From as far back as 2,500 years ago and as far away as China, this coastal region has been peppered by influences from a whole lot of visitors.

Historically, flavour and ingredients have changed a great deal in Africa. Before intercontinental trade, the most important staples were sorghum, millet, fonio, barley, lentils and, to a lesser extent, rice. In East Africa, Arabs, Indians and Persians influenced the cosmopolitan trend in the local diet, importing dried fruits, rice, sugarcane and spices, thus expanding the region's palate. As centuries passed, they also added bananas, oranges, lemons and limes from China and India, and, in a weird twist of fate, domestic pigs because their old gods had no problem with the hygiene regimen of their food.

Around 600 CE, a Phoenician fleet sailed south along the African coast. It is believed to have circumnavigated the continent before returning to the Mediterranean three years later. The fleet's occupants found trees, a bunch of mangrove crabs having a party and the sound of crickets. They didn't linger. The Egyptians then sailed down the East African coast around 500 CE. They just smiled and waved, anchoring only to refill their water casks, pick out a few berries that appeared safe to eat and subsist their diet with a fat ruminant.

Sometime after 500 CE, a disheveled band of Bantus arrived on the East African coast, having covered roughly 3,500 kilometers for some ancestor-forsaken reason. This was the first wave of what was going to become a full-fledged sub-Saharan Bantu migration. (Bantu is a general label that currently covers more than 100 million people across sub-Saharan Africa who speak upwards of 700 discrete languages.)

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Of Kenya's three major migrant ethno-linguistic groups, however, the first to arrive were the Cushites, believed to have begun a migration southwards into north and northeastern Kenya from southern Ethiopia sometime between the second and first millennium BC.

Next came the Nilotes down from southern Sudan around 500 BC. However, large-scale Nilotic migrations began in earnest only about five hundred years ago with the arrival of the Luo and the Maasai. They continued south along the plains of the Rift Valley, finally reaching Tanzania in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, pushing the Cushites East.

Until the arrival of the Nilotes, the Cushites occupied a much larger part of East Africa than they do today, extending into the verdant Rift Valley lakes, as well as central and southern Kenya, and displacing or assimilating the hunter-gatherer communities they encountered.

Today, there are over forty different ethnic communities in Kenya, each with their own distinct traditions, cultures, languages and beliefs.

### **Dinner in Africa in 500 BC was a somewhat subdued affair**

For over seven millennia, since the grain was first domesticated from among the wild grasses of the savannah west of the Nile, sorghum has been the single most important food in Africa. Millet, another savannah grass indigenous to Africa, comes a close second in terms of overall importance. One variety, Pearl millet, originated in Western Sahel and slowly made its way to the rest of the continent while Finger millet, a native of Ethiopia and the East African highlands, tended to stay within the region.

Yam is likely the main food that made the early expansion of the Bantu-speaking people down to sub-Saharan Africa possible. It was a hardy plant that could feed a family for days. Later, during the transatlantic slave trade, it was exported from West Africa and became a staple in the Caribbean, Southeast Asia and Oceania.

Guinea rice, a hardy rice indigenous to Africa, originated in the hot, wet Guinea coast highlands and in the Delta Basin of the middle Niger River. The Asian variety that we all know and love originated in Southeast Asia and was brought to the East African coast by traders who came to these shores using trade winds more than a thousand years ago, after the Arabs had wrested control of the maritime trade routes from the Ethiopians and the Indians. It was regarded by the Swahili, who considered Finger millet *mjengo* (construction worker) food, as superior.

These cereals were supplemented by edible plants and leaves. However, the recommended vegetable intake was often not achieved. "Hidden hunger" - micro-nutrient deficiencies in vitamin A, iron, and iodine - resulted in an infant mortality rate estimated at over 30 percent. Until recently, the Maasai, for example, did not name their children until the age of three, when the family was

certain the child would survive infancy. This made polygynous marriage a practical solution for the preservation of the community.

The Bantu largely consumed bananas, plantains, sweet potatoes, millet, wild vegetables, wild berries, taro and meat. Preparation was not elaborate and satiation, rather than enjoyment, was the chief purpose of eating. Admixing with the Nilotes probably made the Bantu lactose-tolerant.

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The plains Nilotes subsisted on a diet that revolved around livestock – meat, milk and blood were standard fare. This was subsisted with fruits, roots and resin from several trees. Certain shrubs were eaten as snacks by women, boys and girls when they were in fields.

The Luo made do with sorghum, red millet, wild vegetables, fish and meat. Women avoided the meat of the elephant, rhinoceros and hippopotamus.

Around the first century, East Africa became a port-of-call along the Indian Ocean trade routes. For the next century or so, the simmering cauldron of heritage was seasoned with Arab and Persian influences as the Bantu population admixed with the traders. Slowly, a new culture emerged that was an unlikely melding of language, tradition and skin complexion. The Bantus traded ivory, ambergris, timber and slaves for spices and ceramics.

Here is where another crop that shaped Africa likely made landfall. Varieties of the plantain, which originated in Southeast Asia, quickly became a staple crop in the region and rapidly found its way west. Incidentally, Africa had an indigenous banana, labelled the false banana because even if it looks like the regular banana, it doesn't bear edible fruit. Its tubers, however were pounded and cooked as a dietary staple, its seeds used as ornaments and for medicine and its stems for ropes in Ethiopia.

Through the centuries, more foods were introduced to the East African coast by subsequent traders. Asian rice was quickly adopted by the Swahili, who preferred it to millet, which they viewed as "farmers' food". Pigs were introduced by the Arabs before they discovered their new God who doesn't take kindly to the close proximity of muck and animals. Sugarcane and peas also arrived with the trade winds.

Pilaf (or pilau, as it is locally known) is an ancient dish whose origins are probably lost in the sands of time. At its most rudimentary level, pilau is not really a dish, but a method of preparing rice, often in stock, combined with spices, meats and vegetables. It is more than likely a precursor to India's biryani.

While rice had been an Asian staple for millennia, the Persians only began its large-scale cultivation between 1000 BC and 500 BC. Shortly thereafter, some Persian with too much time on his hands – or an overactive imagination – invented the first pilaf. It may be that the technique is originally from India because they'd been eating rice for eons longer, but the name and the historical record that stuck, was Persian.

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Persian and Arab culture, likely had already come into contact with the flavourful dish.

Biryani, which is a version of pilau layered with meat, vegetables, dried fruits and nuts, became a popular variation in India and made its way here. Here, though, it is made a little differently. Rather than packing the ingredients on top of each other, the meat is prepared separately from the rice and the rice is brightened with appealing food colour. If there's no accompanying banana and if it's not washed down with tamarind juice, then it's just rice and spicy meat.

While on the surface it may seem that pilau was introduced by the Indian immigrants, it is more likely that it predates the Indian presence here. Swahili culture, fused with Persian and Arab culture, likely had already come into contact with the flavourful dish. To this day, it is still prepared like it was prepared a thousand years ago, especially at the coast, with very little variation. Further inland, its preparation is a little more flexible.

Chapati is another increasingly popular Kenyan staple that made landfall with the Indians. It's a little difficult to explain. It's kind of like unleavened bread, but isn't. It's also a bit like a wrap, but isn't. Originally, chapati in the region was made with Atta, a type of whole-wheat flour, but this was gradually dropped in favour of regular wheat flour. Chapati dough is usually made of flour, salt and water that is kneaded and left alone for the gluten to do its dough-strengthening thing. When the dough becomes softer and more pliable, balls are pinched and rolled out on a surface with the palms of the hands and kneaded into long thin ropes. These are then wound into themselves into some kind of tight Fibonacci sequence spiral. The spiral is then rolled out with a rolling pin then fried on a preheated flat cast iron pan. For the longest time in many households, chapati was eaten at home with a variety of stews and sauces, but only during religious holidays or special occasions.

From Sofala in present-day Mozambique to Freddy Mercury's birthplace of Zanzibar to Mogadishu in the at-present fractious Somalia, a raft of cities sprung up all along the coast. As the centuries flitted by, the cities prospered. Kilwa in Tanzania, Stone Town in Zanzibar and Mombasa and Malindi in Kenya emerged as the big, important trading ports. A strict class system was instituted and, as is wont to happen when that vilest of humans, the career politician, appears, the blissful joy with which slaves were traded and elephants butchered for their ivory dissolved effervescently like a vitamin C tablet in warm water. In no time, none of the big cities were on talking terms.

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to pass by the East African coast, ostensibly looking for a sea route to India. In 1499, Vasco Da Gama, with gold bars in his eyes, returned to Portugal with tales of booty that set the King's heart aflutter. He returned with 19 ships and walked all over the bickering East African cities. The Portuguese went on to take over the trade routes, building outposts from Mozambique to India.

### **Portugal seeks alternate trade routes (and discover new foods in the process)**

On 6th April, 1453, the 21-year-old Mehmed the Conqueror invaded the last remaining bastion of the Byzantine Empire, laying siege to Constantinople. On 23rd May 1453, Constantinople fell under a hail of really slow cannon fire, and was renamed Istanbul, becoming the new capital of the Ottoman Empire under "Ceaser" Mehmed II. This marked the end of the last remaining strand of the once great Roman Empire that had lasted for over a millennium and a half, and effectively destroyed Christendom's hegemony in the Balkans and the Aegean.

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The fall also gradually eroded the Silk Road. Old Mongol treaties that had ensured safe passage of goods and traders along the road were now useless, making travel and trade fraught with peril.

European kingdoms (on the back of a number of very bad years that included a couple of black plague outbreaks, the Crusades and the sustained advance of Islam) were essentially broke, tired and depleted. Driven by a need to entrench their respective imperialisms and economic competition among themselves, and unable to get their favourite perfumes via the Silk Road, they began to look outwards for solutions

Portugal's John II jump-started the country's somnolent imperialising, and got Bartolomeu Dias to sail around South Africa to look for a route to India. Portugal and Spain, the two biggest European superpowers at the time, both figured that whoever controlled the maritime trade routes would be king of the hill.

In 1488, Columbus had this idea that he could sail west around the world and appear in the East Indies. He approached John II to fund the voyage but as Dias had just returned from a trip around the southern tip of Africa, John II figured he'd much rather work with the tried and true over the speculative and refused to fund the expedition. A tad miffed, but otherwise undeterred, Columbus approached the Spanish Crown a couple of times and finally convinced Queen Isabella I and her political advisors that it was a viable plan. He set sail in 1492 but didn't quite get to Japan because there was an entire continent in the way. He claimed these territories for the crown of Castille.

When he returned in 1493, he made a point of dropping by John II to royally rub it in. John dusted off the Treaty of Alcacovas previously signed with Spain and off-handedly pointed out the clause that said that basically everything Columbus discovered belonged to Portugal. Before Columbus had even arrived at Isabella I of Castille's palace, John II had already sent a letter to her threatening to send a fleet over and claim whatever it is that Columbus had found across the sea for Portugal. Spain thought it prudent to negotiate and met with Portugal. They worked out a new treaty, the Treaty of Tordesillas, that more or less split things evenly between the two.

In 1497, Vasco Da Gama set out from Lisbon around the southern tip of Africa to the East African Coast where, in Malindi, he picked up a navigator to guide him to India. And in 1500, Pedro Alvares Cabral set off and landed in Brazil. By 1503, a colony had been set up. This same fleet went on to explore the East African coast and head onwards to India. In 1549, with permanent settlement in Brazil, Portugal put the industrial machine into gear and began large-scale sugarcane production powered by native, and in short order, African slaves.

Although they didn't discover the vast caverns full of gold that they were hoping for, the Portuguese discovered a treasure trove of pau-brazil, Brazilwood, from where Brazil gets its name, and a cache of New World crops that would become inexorably linked to Africa, forever redefining its future. Maize, cassava, beans, peanuts, potatoes, tomatoes, peas, sesame and bell peppers all originated from the Americas but have become so entrenched and ingrained in the African palate that one would be forgiven for thinking that they originally came from Africa. These crops mitigated the infant mortality rate among African peoples and triggered a population increase that likely led to the various migrations that began spontaneously.

In the 16th century, the Portuguese brought maize (called *milho* in Portuguese and *maíz* in Spanish) to Mozambique. High yields and a neutral, borderline sweet taste quickly made it a staple, preferred grain. Unlike sorghum, its sheathed compact cob protected it from birds and made it easy to store in large granaries. In comparison, sorghum seeds had to be kept in fragile baskets. By the 19th century its slow, inexorable and erratic spread had reached the shores of East Africa.

Ancient Peruvian pottery inscriptions show Native Americans holding beans in one hand and maize in the other, proving that *githeri*, or *nyoyo*, is really an ancient Americas recipe. Potatoes, carrots, cabbages and Royco Mchuzi Mix are recent ingredients incorporated by a certain ethnic community in Kenya that has a tendency to ..uh.. drill down food preparation to its most basic form.

Today, maize has all but replaced sorghum as the preferred grain in Africa, and in some parts of Africa, cassava has overtaken the yam.

Cassava quickly gained a foothold in the Equatorial rainforest and the poor soils in West Africa, fast becoming a staple throughout most of sub-Saharan Africa by the 19th century. Like the banana, and unlike sorghum and maize, cassava requires little land and labour which, coupled with its drought tolerance, make it an ideal food crop.

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It is more than a little ironic that it was the push for expansionism by the Portuguese, and the subsequent economic competition, that necessitated transporting millions out of Africa to the New World as slaves. Crops brought in from the New World injected the nutritional deficit that had plagued the African diet. Had this not happened, Africa would probably have become another United States of people-from-everywhere-else and I'd have spent my life compulsively gambling at a reservation in the middle of some infertile land far away from the nearest city.

In 1729, the Portuguese were finally evicted from East Africa's expansive coast by the Arabs but no sooner were they gone than a new threat emerged.

### **The British are coming (and going)**

When Europe began its process of "informal imperialism", traditional societies and cultures across the world suffered violent and catastrophic change. Far from being the "civilising" influence apologists extol it to be, this was likely the most destructive socio-economic event ever to have occurred among the hapless communities it steamrolled over, often obliterating vast indigenous communities. Cultures that survived the shock of the upheaval lost much of their traditions and identity, which were violently uprooted and destroyed forever. These changes cannot be unmade.

In 1884, during the Berlin Conference that set the stage for the "Scramble for Africa", Kenya was named a British protectorate, opening the proverbial floodgates as thousands of British settlers descended on the country to improve their lot by relocating the Africans settled on prime land to dry, barren reservations.

Cash crop farming quickly became the choice source of income for the settlers, especially with the large nearly-free labour force that they conscripted and the dirt cheap land. British colonialists forced Kenyans to work on their farms in virtual slavery and made it illegal for them to grow their own food. The colonial government also subsidised settler produce to drive out indigenous smallholder farmers who attempted to make a living selling cash crops. These farmers were only allowed to grow certain crops for sale at the local markets so that they could be taxed. This was the beginning of cash crop agriculture in Kenya. Some of these cash crops, such as tea, coffee and pyrethrum, remain Kenya's leading exports today.

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With the British came Christianity to save us all from our collective impending doom. A concerted effort was made to rid local cultures of their traditions because one true God and his bearded, robe-wearing, miracle-performing son demanded it. The concerted campaign was more successful than the missionaries could have ever hoped for. It has taken less than a century and a half for a near-total abandonment of the old ways across the country, save for pockets of resistance that are slowly but surely succumbing to the unstoppable juggernaut of Jesus-ism. Traditional cereals, herbs and vegetables were promptly dropped for those with high market value and perceived desirability; if they were consumed, they were eaten in secret and infrequently, mainly in the reservations.

Often, Kenyan workers in settler farms were paid in sacks of maize. When they returned to their newly allocated reservations, they took some of this maize with them. At some point in the late 1800s, a mysterious disease decimated millet and sorghum and drastically reduced yield. This was the foothold that maize needed. Until well within the 20th century, maize wasn't the mainstay of the diet in most of Eastern and Central Africa; in fact, it seems to have been unknown in Uganda even as late as 1861. Today, it is probably the single most important food and cash crop across Africa. Although one would be forgiven for assuming it has been here since God created the heavens and the earth because of how deep its tentacles have rooted themselves in Kenyan tradition.

Ugali, or sima, has been eaten with reckless abandon by just about everyone in Kenya for the last half century. It is also a little difficult to explain. It's a mix of finely ground maize flour and water cooked to a semi-solid consistency and eaten with an accompanying vegetable or meat dish. Some savages blaspheme by adding butter or margarine in the maize flour/water meal while cooking or, even more scandalously, milk, but thankfully, cases of this are few and far between. People have divorced their significant other and more than one fight has erupted because of the incorrect preparation of this seemingly simple meal.

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With land now a scarcity, and at a premium, Kenyans increasingly began favouring cash crops as opposed to subsistence farming. This erosion of the peasant household made food security a tenuous affair, especially because resistance against colonial rule was taking place at that time. The capitalist labour needs resulted in the emergence of new types of households: commodity-producing households, labour-exporting households, squatter households and working-class households that wholly relied on this new economic system.

In January 1960, the British suddenly decided to up and leave Kenya to its own devices, confounding everyone, not least the resistance. This came with some perks. The new, indigenous government could now resettle the landless and large-scale commercial farming could continue on select plantations. Food production improved as more land was opened up for cultivation. The government was able to improve roads in the schemes to help farmers transport their goods. People from different parts of the country and from different communities were able to live together in joy and harmony, thereby creating national unity.

Today, there has been a resurgence of traditional vegetables - at my local supermarket, there's an aisle full of plants and herbs that I'm unfamiliar with, some pungent, some broad-leafed, some that make me sneeze, and all labelled with the wholly useless tag of "assorted vegetables". Rows of

arrow roots, yams and cassava sit right next to artichokes, celery and button mushrooms. This was not the case a mere 20 years ago.

Increasingly, foods that were considered “high-brow” have become more readily available. Chapati no longer holds its hallowed position as the go-to celebrity meal, the prices of meat and chicken are (more or less) affordable for many and an influx of fast-food chains (a direct marker of a middle income market that can sustain these franchises) have introduced Kenyans to the pizzas and the burgers and the foot-longs of the First World. Even the beers on the shelves have increased to the point where we have local artisanal beers.

All we need now is for sorghum, millet, teff, barley and African rice to make a resurgence. Then we’ll have come full circle.

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