



Culinary Imperialism and the Hierarchies of Food

By Joe Kobuthi



“Look at your plates when you eat. These imported grains of rice, corn, and millet - that is imperialism.” - Thomas Sankara

The violence that accompanied European colonisation of Africa people was a well-known fact. But while a lot of emphasis has leaned towards the political, military and economic changes forced upon the colonised people, the matter of food - the very source of survival - is seldom considered. Yet food has always been a fundamental tool in the process of colonisation. Through food, social and cultural norms are conveyed, and also violated. Indeed, one cannot properly understand colonisation without taking into account the issue of food and eating.

In 1895, Britain annexed the future Kenya as an East African protectorate. However, the expansion of the British Empire was met with resistance in some parts of the protectorate. The British suppressed the opposition by using different methods, from divide-and-rule tactics to military campaigns, signing treaties with local rulers, and controlling food to quell dissent.

The scorched-earth policy of burning crops and killing livestock proved to be a most effective method for suppressing rebellion and colonising the population. In his book, *Kenya Diary 1902-1906*, Colonel Richard Meinertzhagen describes official policy in matter of fact terms while reflecting on

how during his many expeditions the burning of huts, crops and livestock proved to be a very effective means of suppressing dissent and subduing the African native.

Feeding the monster

Once the British consolidated power in the colony, there was an influx of thousands of European settlers who were invited by the colonial government with offers of huge leases for the most fertile land in the country. The fertile expanses that later became the "White Highlands," were opened for settlement through the forceful displacement of the previous inhabitants, most of whom ended up in the drier margins of their former homelands. Africans who didn't find a place to settle became squatters on white farms or worked as labourers for Asian merchants.

The colonial state used white settlers to introduce commercial agricultural production as the mainstay of the colonial economy. The state forcibly seized land, livestock and other indigenous assets from certain communities and households on behalf of the settlers and the colonial administration, systematically marginalising and subordinating indigenous African agriculture.

Among the Kipsigis, [writes](#) Dr Samson Omoyo in a paper titled "*The agricultural changes in the Kipsigis: A historical analysis*", describes how colonial manoeuvres depleted the native stock critical for the Kipsigis' economic and social reproduction, clearing the way for the increasing numbers of European settlers. The capital-driven process eroded the Kipsigis' indigenous land tenure systems and gradually undermined and changed their previous way of life.

By the mid-1930s, about one-fifth of arable land in Kenya was under the exclusive control of the settlers. In addition, the state provided the settlers and corporate capital with the necessary infrastructural, agricultural, marketing, and credit facilities. Above all, the state sought to create, mobilise and control the supply of African labour for capital.

The forbidden fruits

Cash crop farming quickly became the choice source of income for the settlers, who benefited from the cheap land and the large African labour force that they conscripted. British colonialists forced Africans to work on their farms and this facilitated the introduction of European food crops. Often, African workers in settler farms were paid in sacks of maize due to its high nutritional value that created a strong and healthy labour force and its easy access and availability in the colony.

When the Africans returned to the so-called "reserves", they introduced maize into their subsistence farming systems, cementing its position as the colony's primary staple crop, and replacing crops like millet, tubers, legumes, and kale, which were commonly found in traditional farming systems.

In 1923, the government announced that it would promote commercial crop markets in the reserves. Little came of this because African farmers, who were more intent on providing for local food needs, showed little interest in producing for the export market.

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Strong opposition to the planned introduction of cash crops led the colonial government to instead subsidise European production in order to maintain the colony's food security. The indigenous smallholder farmers who attempted to make a living selling cash crops could not compete as a result. Eventually, in 1937, the colonial government reinstated cash crop growing in the reserves as

a mainstay economic activity.

As land became scarce, Kenyans increasingly began favouring cash crops in place of subsistence farming. This made peasant household food security a tenuous affair. Commercialisation resulted in the emergence of new types of households: commodity-producing households; labour-exporting households; squatter households; and working-class households. This massive displacement of people not only deprived Africans of food and ceremony, but also of [traditional knowledge](#) of food and its preparation as communities became reliant on the new economic system.

Everything from the loss of teachings about indigenous plants to cultural exchanges through regional indigenous markets were destroyed. As such, African farming systems were forever altered, traditional practices were lost, and cultural norms were destroyed.

But what the colonial economic system didn't obliterate, the church did.

Things go bananas

By the 1930s, the missionary schools and other church institutions had made concerted effort to rid local cultures of their traditions. Although earlier travellers and missionaries like David Livingstone [had reported](#) on Africans' healthy diets, many of his predecessors held the racist and eugenicist view that food shaped the colonial body. In other words, the European body differed from that of the African people because the British diet and culinary habits differed from culinary habits of the local Africans. Bodies could be altered by diets—thus the fear that by consuming “inferior” African foods, Brits would eventually become like the “natives”. Only proper European foods would maintain the superior nature of European bodies, and only these foods and British food sensibilities could also civilise the “African savages” to be more like their colonisers.

In their minds, as one Chloe Campbell suggests in her book *Race and Empire: Eugenics in Colonial Kenya*, food not only functioned to maintain the European body's superiority, it also played a role in the formation of social identity and Britain's “civilising mission” across its empire.

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The campaign to “civilise” the African was more successful than the missionaries could have ever hoped for. The primary vectors for the cultural indoctrination were the mission schools, churches, boarding schools and public health programmes responsible for educating African youth. These methods of “education” uniformly reduced knowledge related to the cultivation and preparation of traditional and indigenous foods.

[Traditional knowledge](#) was devalued as the education of children was shifted from tribal elders to the imperial powers via the church and school. British education encouraged “sophistication”, which included the rejection of traditional foods and ancient methods of food preparation, and an emphasis on British culinary sensibilities and food practices. Traditional cereals, herbs and vegetables were promptly dropped for those with high market value and perceived desirability. Thereafter, traditional foods would only be consumed in secret and infrequently mainly in the African reserves.

The pie in the sky

The symbolic nature of food was also seen in the imposition of religion, another destructive aspect of

the British conquest. The Bishop of the Church Mission Society (CMS) Robert Merttins *Bird*, in a [letter](#) to the Christians and elders of the pastorate in Kikuyuland, forbade the consumption of local manufactured alcohol on 1st January 1930, deeming it evil and devilish, hence the need for it to be abandoned by all members of the church.

This policy, however, didn't take into account that many cultures in Kenya had a long tradition of beer-making, the consumption of which was reserved for ceremonies and cultural events. Just as the church demonised the consumption of local alcohol, there was also a concerted effort by the colonial government to control native alcohol consumption to keep the African labour productive. Both of these policies reinforced the [racist perception](#) that Africans could not hold their liquor and disrupted production in native cereal grains used in the brews.

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In 1963, when Kenya gained its independence, a new class of African elites took power. But as Franz Fanon writes in his seminal text *The Wretched of the Earth*, this class of (mostly) men and women did not reform the colonial state but, in fact, perfected it and exacerbated its venality towards its people. Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya, in cahoots with his cronies and senior government officials, acquired huge tracts of land and resources as they pleased. While indigenous communities suffered poverty, the confiscated resources became a source of wealth and prosperity for the political and business elite.

The effect of this massive land grab by the elite would consolidate the neocolonial system by replacing "peasant" modes of production with capitalist modes, and the establishment of a new African petit-bourgeois strata within sectors of the economy. Their primary occupation would be in activities of the intermediary type, scheming and hustling, and firmly entrenching their role as mediators for former colonial powers.

These elites, in cahoots with their Western allies, [have passed](#) draconian laws, illegally grabbed land, manipulated food and agricultural policies, and engaged in rampant corruption to control the food Kenyans consume. Of these, weaponising corruption has proved to be most effective means. In the maize sector, for instance, since 1965 - when the [first maize scandal](#) was reported - the politics of maize (Kenya's staple) has been used by the political class as a system of reward and a means to pacify or punish communities for political expediency - the same tactics used by the white colonialists to suppress resistance.

A hard nut to crack

Today, there has been growing interest in the battle for control over land, food and even seeds in Kenya. Under the guise of improving food security in Kenya, a new wave of [food imperialism](#) is taking shape. A series of public-private partnerships are aggressively shaping a food policy geared towards helping corporations access prime resources and markets within Kenya's food systems. Farmers are being forced to change from low-cost sustainable traditional agriculture to intensive, industrial farming with intensive application of chemical fertilisers, pesticides and corporate-owned seeds. This domineering framework to control what food people grow, how they grow and consume it, is in contrast to what many are calling food sovereignty.

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Food sovereignty is about the right of a people to determine their own choices with regard to food and agriculture as opposed to having their food supply subjected to external forces, such as imperialism or the global economic market. Food sovereignty, therefore, according to the [U.S Food Sovereignty Alliance](#), states that people must reclaim their power in the food system by rebuilding the relationships between people and land, and between food providers and those who eat it. It must go well beyond ensuring that people have enough food to meet their physical needs.

Food has never merely been about the simple act of eating; food is history, and identity. Hence, colonialism, as a violent process, fundamentally altered the way of life of a people, including their culinary habits. Since European occupation of Africa, its people have encountered a radically altered food system. Therefore, because food choices are [influenced](#) and constrained by cultural, political and economic values, they are an important part of the deconstruction and decolonisation of our social identity.

Indeed, for Africa in particular, food and food production has to go beyond just being about health, well-being, economic resilience and cultural heritage; food must be used to restore a balance of power, restore dignity and re-imagine a better future for its people. Food is power.

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