

DISPLACED TASTES

# Conflict, Mobility and Markets

## *Changing food systems in South Sudan*

BY LOES LIJNDERS



View of the grain and milling section of KonyoKonyo Market, one of South Sudan's biggest urban markets in the capital Juba © Silvano Yokwe

*Displaced Tastes* is a collaborative research project run by the Rift Valley Institute (RVI) and the Catholic University of South Sudan (CUofSS) as part of the X-Border Local Research Network. The project examines how experiences of conflict, regional displacement and mobility, and the shift to an increasingly market-oriented and import-dependent economy have changed what people in South Sudan grow and eat. The research focuses on the country's borderland spaces, or locations where South Sudan's interaction with the regionalized market in grains and other foods is most evident, like food markets in Juba. Furthermore, the research looks at experiences with border-crossing and regional displacement and how these can be studied through changing food systems.

The move towards markets and imported foods is taking place through several, linked processes namely: the monetization of exchange; commodification of goods and labour; and new patterns of accumulation and consumption, which have led to the uprooting of people from their land and other resources needed to sustain their own production.<sup>1</sup>

These processes, explored in *Displaced Tastes*, have had a profound effect on what food is grown in, or imported into, the country. As a result, new foods are introduced into people's diets; innovations are made in preparation and cooking methods; perceptions of what tastes good and is satisfying are being rethought; and the socio-cultural meanings of foodways—the rich meanings that people communicate through their attitudes, practices and rituals established around food—are shifting.<sup>2</sup>

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The research studies presented in this collection focus on people's tastes for grains like sorghum, millet and maize and tubers like cassava—all of which form a major component of an everyday diet in South Sudan. The briefing draws on intimate conversations conducted in early 2019 by CUofSS researchers with Juba-based members of their wider family networks, and the female members of their families; grandmothers, mothers, aunts and sisters, in particular.

## Ancestral foods

Food is an intimate and tangible subject, which can, nevertheless, reflect much larger-scale socio-economic processes, and how they are experienced and even tasted, in peoples' everyday lives. Much of the growing body of historical and anthropological literature on South Sudan is focused on people's subjective and everyday experiences of violent conflict and displacement, including the lack of food. The focus here is on changing tastes of available food rather than its dearth, which brings new insights on the lived experiences of conflict driven displacement and mobility.

One of the most striking findings common to the collection is the strong social and moral attachments to indigenous grains and tubers, often described by the people interviewed for this study as ancestral foods. These visceral food attachments are most clearly articulated by people equating indigenous staple grains or tubers to life itself: they carry significance beyond consumption alone and not only provide people with the calories for daily survival, but their continued cultivation and consumption also connects people across generations, with both the living and the dead, and affirm and seal relationships between family members.

For many South Sudanese, these ancestral foods hold ritual value and help people hold on to social practices and beliefs, even in the most challenging and insecure of circumstances, including extended periods of individual displacement or mobility. Grains and tubers are a vital component to how societies organize everyday life, not only enabling people to produce what they need to survive, but also to bring new generations into existence, and ensure the survival of the non-productive family members, in particular children and the elderly.

## Marrying and making families

Staple foods constitute an important part of bridewealth, an exchange that is key to social reproduction. In many South Sudanese societies, accumulated wealth passes across generations through marriage via bridewealth rather than inheritance after death. Bridewealth often is a prerequisite for getting married and making the transition from childhood to adulthood. Historically, these processes took on particular forms according to dominant community livelihoods and are changing over time and place.

In agrarian societies, bridewealth was often paid in symbolic currencies. Luga Aquila's work with his home Pojulu community in Central Equatoria, shows how young men acquired such currency in iron jewellery, through the cultivation of grains or tubers, or by social connections built from donations of labour.<sup>3</sup> By recounting the marriage history of his maternal and paternal family, Luga shows how the local cassava variety *yoyoji-yoyoja*, which translates as 'you can now get married,' became a powerful symbol of marriageability and young men grew it to accumulate a dowry.

In today's South Sudan, many agrarian societies now use money for bridewealth and most young men acquire money by growing staple foods. Luga's work shows how following the introduction of the shorter-maturing *bokolisha* cassava variety by humanitarian organizations *yoyoji-yoyoja*'s social popularity is increasingly overwritten by *bokolisha*'s monetary value. *Bokolisha*'s properties make it a preferable commodity more suited for commercial cultivation—a telling symbol of South Sudan's move towards markets.

Grains and tubers as bridewealth, or the means to bridewealth, are common to societies despite their widespread (often external) description as agriculturalist (farmers) or pastoralist (herders). For example, young men from cattle-keeping groups like Dinka communities acquire cattle from their elders and give them to their in-laws as part of the marriage system. Deng Kuol's work with the Ngok Dinka from the Abyei region, on South Sudan's borderlands with Sudan,<sup>4</sup> reveals that young men contribute to this process by

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growing favoured indigenous grains for their elders.<sup>5</sup> The research makes an important contribution to countering singular identifications of South Sudanese communities.



Market woman measures a bucket of sorghum for sale in KonyoKonyo Market © Silvano Yokwe

## Migrating with seeds

Both Deng Kuol and Elizabeth Nyibol researched the social memory of ancestral varieties of sorghum passed down through generations, respectively called *ruath* and *kech*. *Ruath* is mainly grown in the Abyei region and *kech* is the favoured sorghum variety among Dinka Agar communities of Lakes States—illustrating the pronounced preferences and taste hierarchies among the indigenous grains.

Deng and Elizabeth’s work are an important corrective to external representations of Dinka as exclusively cattle-keepers and show the significance of ancient indigenous varieties of sorghum in people’s lives and the cattle economy. Their respective work also highlights the central role of mothers and daughters in transferring seed knowledge across generations. Elizabeth describes the gendered roles in the management of seed selection, cultivation and storage in her Dinka Agar community and how women (and grains) form an essential part in ensuring food security.<sup>6</sup>

Both researchers narrate the endeavours of female relatives—their mother and aunt, respectively—to hold on to their favourite indigenous grains after they were displaced from their homes during the 1983–2005 civil war in Southern Sudan. During the second civil war, people used long-existing methods to move with ancestral grains: women carried sorghum and millet grains in black-cloth drawstring bags and tied them into their *tobe* (a customary female dress adopted from Sudan).

Both Deng’s mother and Elizabeth’s aunt cultivated the seeds they carried in what they considered foreign soil, making it possible for their families and wider social networks to continue to use these grains for everyday consumption and during birth, marriage and death rituals. The research highlights how seeds accompanied people’s forced migration, and how this can be read as efforts by displaced South Sudanese to impose a sense of familiarity on situations of social fragmentation and uncertainty.

The familial stories also remember a time when South Sudan’s markets were not so heavily dominated by foreign, external East African imports and when the imported grains came predominantly from the more familiar northern Sudan, or were distributed as food aid by humanitarian organizations or the government.

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The memories of how these local seeds migrated are especially poignant to their narrators since they now mainly eat imported maize, sorghum and cassava, rather than the food that they, or their extended social networks, grow themselves.

## External interactions in foodways

The local varieties of sorghum in South Sudan (and Sudan) have been present for thousands of years. Deng remembers how the non-indigenous sorghum distributed by humanitarians as food aid during his youth in Abyei was received unfavourably and experienced as tasteless and indigestible, prompting people to risk return to conflict zones to recover their ancestral seeds and migrate with them.

In comparison, cassava is a very recent arrival. As Luga's work demonstrates, a cassava variety introduced into Central Equatoria as part of reconstruction efforts after the end of the first civil war (1955–1972) was received more favourably and is now an essential staple in domestic commercial cultivation. Changes to cassava cultivation practices often happen chaotically, however: with the outbreak of the post-independence civil war, cassava-growing areas experienced high levels of displacement and under duress many people abandoned their cassava fields.

Jovensia Uchalla's forthcoming research describes how humanitarian food (aid) often finds its way to urban markets, where it interacts with imported and domestically produced commercial grains and tubers. Jovensia's recording of the life histories of traders, transporters and millers of grain and tubers brings fresh insights into how individual South Sudanese have taken occupations in the marketing rather than the production of food.

The post-independence conflict has made South Sudan's markets volatile. This has increased risks and liabilities for bigger traders, but also offers opportunities for smaller ones. Many of the smaller traders moved into working in the grain trade after themselves experiencing insecurity and chaotic life events. The grains and tubers they import into Juba's markets from other parts of South Sudan and the region considerably shape people's foodways and tastes.



Millers at work in KonyoKonyo Market © Silvano Yokwe

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## Conclusion

Experiences of conflict, mobility and the shift to a market-oriented economy have changed what people in South Sudan eat. The intimate food memories shared in this series of articles illustrate how the investigation of everyday foodways bring a more complete understanding of social change in South Sudan. These underlying changes are often externally encountered as episodes of violent conflict and displacement, including the lack of food. This research by South Sudanese researchers into changing tastes of available food, and how grains have migrated across the region, and transferred between genders and generations, is vital reading for those interested to learn about what the everyday experiences of food can teach us about South Sudan's move towards markets.

## Notes

- 1 Edward Thomas, *Moving Towards Markets: cash, commodification and conflict in South Sudan*, London: Rift Valley Institute, 2019.
- 2 Patricia Harris, David Lyon and Sue McLaughlin, *The Meaning of Food*, Guilford CT: Globe Pequot Press, 2005, viii-ix.
- 3 Luga Aquila, "'You Can Now Get Engaged": Meanings of cassava among the Pojulu of South Sudan', London: Rift Valley Institute, 2020.
- 4 Abyei is a contested area on the South Sudan-Sudan border and currently holds the status of 'special administrative area' in South Sudan.
- 5 Deng Kuol, 'Grains As Life: The value of sorghum and millet amongst the Abyei Dinka', London: Rift Valley Institute, 2020.
- 6 Elizabeth Nyibol, 'Migrating with Seeds: Women, agricultural knowledge and displacement in South Sudan', London: Rift Valley Institute, 2020.



## Credits

This briefing was written by Loes Lijnders, Director of the Institute of Applied Research and Community Outreach, and part of the team of CUofSS researchers under the X-Border Local Research Network.

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