

CUSTOM AND CHILD HEALTH IN BUGANDA

IV. FOOD AND NUTRITION

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This collection of ideas is the result of a combination of observations made in Kiganda homes, talks with many men and women of the tribe, and a study of the available literature.

WHAT IS FOOD?

In the language of the Baganda, the same word is used for "food" and for plantains (known as "*matoke*") (Figs. 4, 5.) "Foods" are the staples; everything else is in the nature of an accessory. The main classification of food known to the Baganda is that of "good" food and "not-good" food; "good" food is also "warm" food, and "not-good" food is referred to as "cold" food. The term "good" food is reserved for "*matoke*", and other staples, if classified at all, come under the alternative heading. There are no ideas on what makes food good; it is believed that there is no better food for the stomach than "*matoke*", and as one of the main reasons for eating is to fill the stomach, the large-scale consumption of "*matoke*" is logical.

It is recognised by the Baganda that food is necessary for the maintenance of life. One estimate given for the time that man could survive without food was nine days, whereas it was thought that without water, he could survive for twelve. The Baganda believe that food maintains life by keeping the blood circulating and by giving strength to the body, but they seem to be very vague about what happens to food in the body, although it is thought that urine and faeces are in some way the result of eating food and that their formation is necessary to life. The stomach is the only organ whose function is recognised, but it is believed to act merely as a container for the food eaten. The container should not, however, be over-filled; man always likes to eat more than he should, but too much food, even "*matoke*", can make him ill. There is no understanding of a connection between eating, growth and development. Eating "*matoke*" makes a man healthy, because it is good food, and because a man is healthy, he is big and strong.

HOW FOOD IS OBTAINED

The range of food crops that is cultivated for use is relatively small; it consists mainly of "*matoke*" and other types of banana, sweet potatoes, cassava, yams, maize, sesame, beans and groundnuts. Some sorghum and millet are grown for use in beer making, but are only regarded as food in time of famine.

Paw-paw (*Papaya spp.*), "*dodo*" (green leaves of many kinds, often called "spin-

ach", and including *Amaranthus spp.*), "*ntula*" (berries of *Solanum spp.*) are said to grow themselves, although some of the plants are cultivated for their leaves.

The Baganda know very little of the origin of most of the plants they eat, with the exception of "*matoke*", which according to legend was brought by the tribal ancestor,



Fig. 4. "*Matoke*". The peeled plantain is cut into pieces and wrapped up in plantain leaf packets "*ettu*". These are then put in a pot "*entamu*" covered with a layer of plantain leaves. The steamed plantain "*matoke*" is the cultural "superfood" of the Baganda. The raised fireplace is a recent alteration to Kiganda kitchens, introduced by the Community Development Department.

Kintu, who came from heaven, although in one variant he came from somewhere in the north, via the district now known as Lango. Sorghum, sesame, millet, and some varieties of beans, yams, tomatoes and maize are regarded as indigenous, and the rest are given Arab, Asian and European origins. For example, Indian corn is named after the Asians who first introduced it to the markets in Uganda. The cultivation and harvesting of food crops is traditionally work for the women, and the men are more

generally associated with the production of cash crops, though the harvesting of these crops also may be done by the women.

In the system of peasant agriculture practiced in Buganda, most attention is devoted to the cultivation of "*matoke*"; but everything about "*matoke*" is ritual of an intensity that is almost religious. The sweet potato is generally the first crop to be planted on newly-cleared land—an instance, incidentally, of sound agricultural practice—and is often interplanted, as are bananas, with maize, yams and beans. Most planting is done at the time of the rains. The ground is cleared, but very little

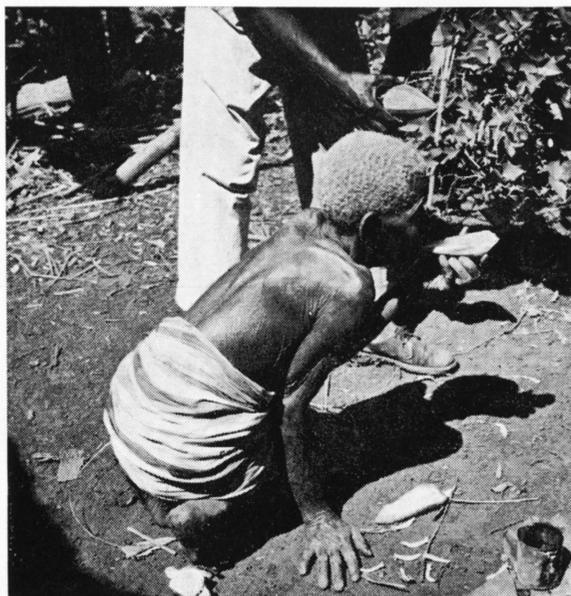


Fig. 5. "*Mpumumpu*". Old Muganda lady demonstrating the use of the outer petal of the plantain flower "*mpumumpu*" as a feeding vessel. It is traditionally employed in feeding motherless babies.

else is done for any crop except "*matoke*"; the banana patches are weeded regularly. Irrigation, and the watering of plants, is unknown in the indigenous system of agriculture.

The Baganda do not pay much attention to the prevention of damage to crops in the field by insects and other pests, but medicines may be used against damage by wild pigs and monkeys, and children are employed to scare away birds.

The Baganda are almost unique in their failure to store food. "*Matoke*" can be harvested all the year round, and cassava keeps for long periods underground. Beans and groundnuts may be stored, but more often than not most of the crop is sold and supplies are bought as required, inevitably at a higher price. Beans are sometimes preserved by adding ash to keep away insects, who are believed to dislike its smell, and groundnuts may be kept in the shell. Sesame, and small amounts of millet or sorghum for beer making, may also be stored. Insecticides have not been widely accepted by the Baganda for either the field or the store, mainly because of suspicions that they may poison the crops and the people who eat them and not because the killing of insects is thought to be wrong in any way.

Ownership of cattle in Buganda was formerly the prerogative of the wealthier classes, and if a poor man was found to have a cow, it would be taken away from him, as he would be suspected of having stolen it. Even today, cattle are kept for their prestige value rather than for their milk. Milk has never been a food of the Baganda and is still not regarded as such by the majority, perhaps because it is the traditional food of the cattle-herders, the Bahima, who are not held in high esteem. Goats and chickens have always been kept by most Baganda, but goats' milk is not drunk.

Gathered foods form quite an important part of the Kiganda diet. Some plants have already been mentioned, and there are a few contributions from the animal kingdom. Insects, chiefly white ants and green grasshoppers, are regarded as a delicacy and in season everyone turns out to catch them. Grasshoppers caught by a woman in the absence of a man cannot be taken into the house before his return, and then one has first to be released and re-caught by him. If this is not done death or illness, or some other trouble, will affect someone in the house. The insects, although a few may be eaten raw as they are caught, are usually fried and then preserved by drying. Birds may also be caught for food by using traps or bird lime, or by chasing them from tree to tree till they are exhausted.

Many kinds of fish are also caught, though in earlier days the Baganda fished only in the rivers and swamps, and the lake fishing was done by the Bassesse and the Bavuma. One informant said that the Baganda were not great fishermen because they did not live very close to the lake-shore for fear of damage to crops or houses by hippopotamus, that used to be very numerous. ROSCOE (1911), however, says that each chief had a piece of land adjoining the lake and was supplied with fish by his tenants in return for the use of the land¹. Hunting used to be the principal method by which ordinary people obtained meat, and animals of all kinds, from the mongoose to the buffalo, were taken with spears, nets and traps. Today, Buganda has very little game that is edible.

There are no objections to killing animals for food, only to killing for no reason. Dead animals may be eaten if they have been killed by another animal, but not if they have died from natural causes, or been poisoned. Snakes are not eaten by Baganda; neither are the hippopotamus, crocodile, lizard or elephant, although at one time elephant was often hunted and the meat disposed of to neighbouring tribes. Before the days when food could be purchased, it was customary to work for any food which was required, but that could not be grown in the garden. Barter of one food for another did not exist on a large scale in Buganda, though ROSCOE (1911) mentions the barter of dried plantain slices, or plantain flour, for fish¹. Nowadays almost every food can be bought, but, for a large number of rural Baganda, the purchases are still restricted to meat, fish, groundnuts, beans, salt, sugar, edible oil (usually called "*sim-sim*" or sesame, but actually cottonseed oil), tea, bread and milk. It seems likely that sums of up to 10 E.A. shillings (20 shillings = 1 English pound) or even more, are now spent weekly on food by many rural families. To a large extent, however, money is a seasonal possession, and buying must therefore also be seasonal.

Gifts of food are an integral part of traditional Baganda life. The Baganda had, and still have to some extent, a tremendous reputation for hospitality. SPEKE refers to the disadvantages of traditional hospitality, by which food had to be given to strangers, and ROSCOE¹ says that while the old customs were observed, everyone was

welcome to sit down and share a meal with his equals. The tradition is still kept up to some extent. Only a few years ago the Welfare Officer at the Namulonge Cotton Research Station, a Muganda, felt that it was his duty to provide a midday meal for all African staff of the Medical Research Council Unit on their regular visits to the Station, although he knew that they were being given money for their food. He unhesitatingly refused payment offered by the Unit.

Visitors are usually given food in a range from a few coffee beans, crushed sesame or mushrooms, to a chicken or even a goat, according to the wealth of the donor and the importance of the visitor. Gifts of food are also made at certain seasons to relatives and good friends. They are called "season foods" and consist mainly of "*matoke*", maize, beans and peas. Gifts also play an important part in various traditional celebrations and ceremonies of the Baganda, which are mentioned later on.

FOOD PREFERENCES AND TABOOS

Food preferences can be divided into those concerning the desirable qualities of particular foods, and preferences for different foods. Good plantains should be freshly cut and mature, though not yellow, and sweet potatoes should be heavy, fairly hard and exuding juice when cut. The strong preference for fresh "*matoke*" can be seen from the fact that a loaded stem, if it is in prime condition, may cost six shillings, but if it remains unsold for a day or two, will be sold for under two shillings. The difference is accounted for partly by the change in taste, and partly by the prestige value of the fresh "*matoke*". Meat and fish may be dried or smoked for preservation, but are generally preferred fresh. No Baganda will eat salted fish. An attempt to sell to Africans fish that had been kept in ice was made some years ago, but failed completely. There are no foods which are kept and eaten in partially decayed or gamey state.

Some foods are regarded as special to children or men. For women, there are no special foods, but there are taboos on foods regarded as special to men. Sweet foods—sweet bananas, "*matoke*" that has been allowed to ripen to a yellow colour, mangoes, pawpaw, sugar cane, and so on—are for children, and are often given as snacks between meals. If there is money available, sweets may be bought, preferably hard and brightly coloured ones, or small cakes and sweetmeats made from sesame and sugar, resembling the "*tahiniya*" of the Sudan.

Chicken, mutton, eggs, pork and several kinds of fish have always been regarded as food for men and forbidden to women though nowadays there is a growing tendency for them to be eaten by women. Taboos for women are not usually considered to affect young girls under the age of about four years; the age, according to one informant at which girls understand everything. It is, in fact, the time when girls start helping in the home and so begin to take on the duties of a woman.

In addition to the women's taboos, clan members may not eat the animal for which the clan is named—the cow clan solves its obvious difficulty by transferring the prohibition to the eating of frog—and there are various temporary taboos. During pregnancy, salt must not be eaten unless a certain protective medicine has first been taken, and there are other restrictions. Very hot food must be avoided because it might burn the child, and hard food because it might stick in the throat of the child and choke him, or lodge in his umbilical cord; and a yam, known as "*ndagu*" must

not be eaten because it would make the child stupid. Although the Baganda consider that large babies are desirable, they do not eat large amounts of food to increase the size; instead, they do a great deal of work. Difficult labour caused by disproportion is common, but mothers do not try to reduce the size of the baby by taking less food, as occurs in some cultures.

From the foods consumed by the Baganda, it seems reasonable to deduce a preference for soft foods rather than hard, and an example of the preference is the increasing popularity of bread dunked in tea—although the dunking is primarily to improve the flavour of the bread, eaten without butter or jam. Liquid foods such as soups are not often consumed, though sauces are always served with the staples to produce variety in taste. They are seasoned, usually with salt and sometimes also with curry powder. Staples, on the other hand, are not salted and are never seasoned in any way; they were said to have "no taste" by one elderly man. No other flavourings or spices are used to any extent by the Baganda.

Preference in texture varies considerably, but one preference is constant—meat should be tough. Women are not encouraged to express their preferences; wives are expected to learn to like the foods their husbands enjoy. Adults seem to have no objections to, or preference for, any colours in food. White bread and sugar are, however, preferred to brown, and the colour of some foods is very important as an indication of their proper preparation. For instance, plantains when well steamed should be deep golden yellow.

THE USE OF FOOD

The daily pattern consists of two main meals each day, one at about two in the afternoon and the other at about nine in the evening. Each consists of staple and one or more sauces. The food for the meals is collected, prepared, cooked and served by the women, and there are no restrictions or taboos relating to menstruation or pregnancy. In ordinary families, and on ordinary occasions, it used to be the custom for the whole family to eat together, but nowadays the father or head of the household may eat at a table and use a knife and fork, whilst the rest of the family sit on the floor and use their fingers. It is still customary, however, for the hands to be washed both before and after meals.

Nothing is drunk with meals—the chief staples, "*matoke*" and sweet potatoes, contain about 80 per cent water as they are eaten—but it is now quite usual to drink tea afterwards. Water is drunk only when thirst is extreme; it is not boiled, although it is kept in a special pot which is regularly dried out, and occasionally smoked.

Snacks between the two main meals are unusual except for children, but cold food left over the night before may be eaten in the morning before going to the "*shamba*" (garden), or may be given to school children as a midday meal. In a wealthy household food that remains uneaten after a meal is now usually given away, but used to be thrown away.

To eat alone is thought to be bad, and a member of the family usually serves and remains with someone who is forced to eat alone. Eating fills the stomach, but also has a social value. It is regarded as a method of keeping on good terms with people. The special foods for visitors have already been mentioned. A polite guest should accept all the food that is offered, and he should refuse only on very good grounds. To show a proper appreciation, he should take something from each dish.

Food plays a major part in most Kiganda celebrations. For example, the exchange of gifts of food at a traditional wedding is highly complicated. It starts some time before the wedding ceremony with gifts of food from the family of the groom to that of the bride, and does not finish till about a month after the ceremony, when a big feast is held, to mark officially the beginning of married life.

The naming ceremonies of children, and the birth of twins, are also occasions for feasts. After the birth of twins, the feasts are held first at the home of the father's parents, and then at the home of the mother's parents; at each place, food is exchanged by members of the families, all the members of the households eat together, and there is singing and dancing. These celebrations take place whether the children are alive or dead. The foods particularly associated with feasts and celebrations are "*matoke*", sesame, mushrooms, chicken and fish.

As already mentioned, it is held that too much food can cause illness. There are also various concepts of food being either good or bad for various illnesses. Meat is bad for measles and chicken pox, though fish is not. Eggs, on the contrary, are said to be good for swelling or coughing, and soup made from an animal's stomach is good for pneumonia. Beans, bean soup, chicken, meat soup and milk are all thought to be good for illness of any sort.

The acceptance of the value of milk may be of fairly recent origin. A few years ago at Mulago Hospital the mother of a child admitted for the treatment of kwashiorkor refused to allow her child to be given milk. The child developed severe skin lesions before finally she gave permission. He then made a good recovery, but it is unlikely that the milk was recognised as the agent responsible.

THE FEEDING OF CHILDREN

Although there are certain foods such as sweet bananas and ripe "*matoke*" that are given mainly to children, it is because children like them and not because they are thought in any way to do the children good.

The unsophisticated village mother takes her ability to lactate for granted, and during the first year of the child's life, providing the mother does not fall ill or become separated from the child, all is well from a nutritional point of view. Amongst urbanized Baganda, however, lactation is gradually becoming less perfect, and there is an increasing tendency to resort to artificial feeding after a few months².

Normally, under village conditions, a child is completely breast fed for at least four months; some children have no other food for the first eight months. Supplemented breast feeding continues until the child is a year old, and sometimes longer. Breast feeding is completely stopped before the end of the first year only because the mother is pregnant, or ill, or runs away.

The child's first foods, other than the breast milk, are tea with or without milk or sugar, maize porridge and "*matoke*". Various fruits, such as paw-paw or sweet bananas, may be added next. The protein foods—beans, groundnuts, meat, fish and eggs—are not usually given until the child is at least eight or nine months old, and then only in soups of little nutritional value.

Baganda children are taught to feed themselves from an early age. Initially the mother takes a small amount of food on her fingers, softens it well, and presses it against the child's mouth. Soon, however, small amounts of food are placed in the

child's hands and he feeds himself. Finally, he picks up the food for himself. The food is never pre-masticated by the mother.

It is the custom for young children after weaning to have the same foods as the adults of the family, the idea of preparing food specially for the children being completely alien to the Baganda. Quite often, the manual difficulties of feeding are too great for the child, particularly where the high protein foods are concerned. In any case, most of the occasional eggs, meat and fish go to the father, there being no idea that such foods are either necessary or good for the children. Some of the Baganda do now give their children fresh milk, or dried skimmed milk, but the wider use of milk is still fraught with problems of cost, distribution and hygiene.

ATTITUDES TO "NEW" FOODS

Like insecticides and fertilizers, new foods are suspect, and their introduction is resisted. The insecticides were at first given away, which increased the conviction that they were poisonous. Similarly, when free issues of dried skimmed milk were made, it was decided that an attempt was being made to poison the children. It was argued that no food would be given away if it was really valuable.

The suspicions about the dried milk have now been overcome, to a large extent, but may be important in relation to the introduction of other foods. Would the milk have aroused less suspicion if some payment had been required, even of only a nominal sum?

White bread is extremely popular, perhaps because it is not shrouded in the mysteries of a tin or package, the ingredients are not too unfamiliar, it needs no preparation, and the price of the common unit, the one pound loaf, is within easy reach of most people. Tinned foods tend still to be referred to as "not good", many people being still very suspicious of the contents of a tin. Tinned meat, particularly, is regarded with suspicion and is thought by some to be meat from a sick animal, or perhaps even from a human body. Labels are regarded as a means of deception, rather than a source of information. Fairly recently, a large consignment of excellent beef was produced in East Africa for a well known British firm and labelled "Made for... (the name of the firm)". For some reason, part of the production was not used by the firm and the tins were offered for sale on the local market. The name of the firm was removed, leaving the words "made for... (blank)". These tins were unsaleable to Africans, who were convinced that the obliterated word was "dogs". Tinned fruit is generally more acceptable than tinned meat, but only comes within the economic scope of a very small section of the population. Tinned milk and dried milk are both now used fairly widely, although the idea that they may have come from diseased animals persists. At present, ice-cream is regarded as for towns-people only, but it does not seem to have aroused any objections. Soft drinks and bottled beers have without a doubt had the most enthusiastic reception and come under the least suspicion.

DISCUSSION

The food ideology of the Baganda is based on a limited range of food crops which has not increased to any extent despite the introduction into the country of a large number of other foods. The cultivation and preparation of the traditional foods, and

many of the customs associated with them have not changed much either. It is precisely this conservatism which makes the "ettu" method of cooking, as a basis for the preparation of special food for children, so valuable. The method, which is widely used by the Baganda, consists in cooking food in small packets made from plantain leaves. It can be applied to everything, from groundnuts, matoke, and ants to meat. Special packets for children, containing "matoke" or sweet potatoes together with appropriate amounts of beans or groundnuts, would not only conform with the accepted methods of preparation and cooking, and make good use of foods from the limited range, but would also ensure that the children obtained valuable amounts of protein³.

The Baganda do not yet realise that children have particular nutritional needs. How can they, when they have no concept of food composition or of what happens to food in the body? Without such concepts, how is it possible to understand that food is responsible for growth, and conversely that the lack of food can be responsible for a failure of growth and for certain kinds of illness? Illness is something that is cured on the spot by injections or incantations, and not by food, given over a long period. A large number of mothers whose children have been treated for malnutrition at the Medical Research Council Unit, are still under the impression that the children were cured by the injections (mostly of antibiotics) that were given, incidental to the dietary treatment, despite the talks, demonstrations and detailed attention paid to the diet during the stay in hospital, and repeated when the child was taken home.

Traditional methods of infant feeding and weaning involve the Baganda in no cost, time or thought. What compelling reasons can be give for spending time and money on the feeding of children? Is the lack of special attention perhaps the result of a hand-to-mouth existence which is adequate for the adult but not for the child? Is it partly a general absence of thought for the future? As ROSCOE¹ says: when food is plentiful the Baganda eat three meals a day, and when it is not they eat two meals and hope for rain!

"Matoke" is in some ways an excellent food, but is its prestige (as much as its lack of protein) a danger to the young child? Do the traditional claims of the fathers on the meat, fish and eggs affect the availability of these foods for the children to any significant extent?

Snob values must not be forgotten. They may be advantageous. For example, meat and milk, which are now generally available, are undoubtedly popular because they are the foods of the wealthier classes. It is quite obvious from many of our interviews, and our knowledge of family circumstances, that exaggerated amounts are often quoted for the money spent on such foods as meat, milk and fish; the exaggeration is a formal necessity of social ambition.

Effective modification of food habits and ideas will be a matter of time and the right sort of education. While grandparents adhere to traditional customs, parents will remain rather sceptical of the younger generation's "educated" ideas.

The way is long. Invisible differences in foods, that we would say determined their nutritional value, must be recognised, and some basic physiology must be learnt. Chiefs and elders need to be convinced. The young may be more malleable, but the old can point to themselves as the living testimony to a practicable and agreeable system. Besides, they have the money.

SUMMARY

Some ideas on food and nutrition held by the Baganda are presented.

The dominant place of the cooking banana ("matoke") in the diet of the tribe is described and the general lack of knowledge about the functions of food. Details are given of how food is obtained and prepared. Foods have great social significance: they are the basis of traditional hospitality and play a large part in ceremonial observances. No special attention is paid to infant feeding and weaning. The attitude to "new" foods is based on their prestige and not on their nutritional value.

The modification of food habits will depend on education, but it will be necessary for the educators to appreciate fully the significance of the preferences and customs of the people.

RESUMEN

Nociones de los kigandas sobre alimentos y nutrición en Uganda. Se revelan algunas nociones sobre alimentos y nutrición de la tribu de los gandas.

Se destaca el papel dominante de bananas sancochadas ("matoke") en la dieta y la falta general de conocimientos acerca de la composición adecuada de la alimentación.

Se ofrece pormenores de la obtención y preparación de los alimentos.

Los alimentos tienen un significado social importante; forman la base de la hospitalidad tradicional y representan un papel notable en las ceremonias.

No se da atención especial a la nutrición de los infantes y al destete.

La actitud del pueblo en lo que respecta a los alimentos "nuevos" depende del prestigio que tienen y no de su valor nutritivo.

Para mejorar las costumbres de la alimentación será necesario una educación que tenga en cuenta el significado de las preferencias y las costumbres del pueblo.

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