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DISPLACED TASTES

'You Can Now Get Engaged'

Meanings of cassava among the Pojulu of South Sudan

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Luga Aquila planting groundnuts in Baggari Jidid, near Wau.

Displaced Tastes *is a research project run by the Rift Valley Institute in partnership with the Catholic University of South Sudan under the X-Border Local Research Network. The project examines the changing tastes for food in South Sudan in the context of the country's economic transition and place in the regional, cross-border economy of grain. In this piece, Luga Aquila explores the history of cassava among the Pojulu in Central Equatoria. He explains how one local cassava variety called yoyoji-yoyoja, which translates as 'you can now get engaged', became an important means of bridewealth in the Pojulu community. Later, yoyoji-yoyoja lost some of its social value when a new cassava variety called bokolisha was introduced, which has properties that are more suitable for market production. Luga draws upon his family's oral history to show how the movement of people and tubers is connected to changing marriage practices and the organization and redistribution of family wealth.*

Cassava was introduced to the Pojulu, who mainly live in the Central Equatoria region of South Sudan, by the Azande from Western Equatoria. Nineteenth-century observers found cassava growing everywhere in Pojulu land in the 1870s.[1] People in Equatoria adopted different varieties of cassava from neighbouring societies: Azande people acquired varieties of bitter cassava called *bazomangi* and *karangba* from French-ruled Central Africa during the early decades of the twentieth century.[2] My father learned from his father that the first cassava variety—*bwuti-Mengi*—was introduced to Pojulu-land in the 1940s. It was later followed by other varieties like *yoyoyi-yoyoja* in the 1960s and *bokolisha* in the 1970s.

Cassava was integrated into local agricultural practices and diets, which mainly consisted of crops such as millet, sorghum, *sim sim* (sesame), maize and groundnuts. In South Sudan today, there are many varieties of cassava that are given different names by diverse language groups. Local names reflect the geographical origin of the cassava variety; how these varieties were experienced locally; their germination time; and socio-economic significance.

This paper draws on oral history interviews with members of my paternal and maternal families—resident in Lainya and Juba—about the different types of cassava they grow and eat, and the significance of cassava in engagement procedures and marriage ceremonies.

The names and meanings of cassava varieties

Bwuti-Mengi was the first type of cassava introduced to the Pojulu community in the 1940s. In the Pojulu language, *bwuti-mengi* means 'someone like Mengi'. Mengi is a name usually received at birth that describes people who are stubborn. It is given to remind the child of a stubborn parent or grandparent. The physical appearance of *bwuti-mengi*, which is short and curved, is deceptive and tricks people into thinking that it is not high-yielding. But its roots, although small, are many—it is a stubborn crop that is hard to remove from the ground.
A newer variety of cassava in Pojululand, known as *Yoyoji-yoyoja*, literally means 'you can now get engaged'. The original name of this variety, when it was first introduced to the Pojulu, is not remembered, but it became popularly known as *yoyoji-yoyoja* because it grew into an important source of wealth that people accumulate in order to get married. These resources are known in the anthropological literature as bridewealth. Cassava is used for bridewealth because it can be converted into livestock, or more recently money, which is needed for marriage settlement. Because *yoyoji-yoyoja* is high-yielding it allows for the rapid accumulation of livestock like goats or money for bride wealth.

Because of its poisonous properties, the fresh roots of the *yoyoji-yoyoja* variety have little immediate exchange or monetary value. It is the raw cassava that is first converted into flour or alcohol through the collective efforts of the women of the family, involving the sisters, mother and paternal aunts of the bridegroom. After this, it is exchanged for livestock or money to fund the dowry needed to move ahead with the marriage process.

Yoyoji-yoyoja has other functions during marriage celebrations. For example, the alcohol that is often made from it is consumed plentifully during wedding celebrations. Processed cassava is also often exchanged for goats and other livestock, which are eaten by wedding guests. Cassava flour is also used to prepare the meal that is eaten by the parents of the bride—an act that signals the marriage is official. People generally prefer the *asida*—a thick porridge made from the *yoyoji-yoyoja* flour—since it is white and clean and the taste is preferred over other varieties of cassava.

Another variety of cassava that is grown and eaten by the Pojulu is called *lenga-Lojuon*. This name narrates a personal history as it literally means 'Lojuon was killed'. Although the date that Lojuon died, or who he was, is unknown, the name is connected with a story about how the Pojulu first encountered this highly poisonous cassava variety: Lojuon died because he ate the fresh roots of the poisonous cassava. This name stands as a continuous warning to potential consumers, reminding them of the need to ferment it to remove its poisonous qualities before eating.

Marango-marango is a variety of cassava that was introduced around the same time as *yoyoji-yoyoja* and *lenga-Lojuon*. *Marango-marango* means 'doing something prematurely'. It is a drought-resistant crop and can be harvested and eaten before it has fully matured. People often turn to it in times of hunger.

The last type of cassava described here is named *bokolisha* or *agirikisha*. There are different accounts about the introduction of this cassava variety to South Sudan, but what people agree on is that it is a more recent arrival to the cassava landscape in Central Equatoria. Some people argue that *bokolisha* is a loan word from the Lingala language,[3] while others argue that it is a corruption of the name of the Ugandan Buliisa District from which the cassava variety is said to originate. The name *agirikisha*, which means 'cool', is used by the Mukaya clan of the Pojulu who live close to Yei (a city near South Sudan's border with the DRC) to describe this variety. This is the only cassava variety that is sweet and non-poisonous. It can be eaten raw.

Bokolisha or *agirikisha* was introduced in the early 1970s by the Project Development Unit (PDU), the humanitarian arm of the Southern Sudanese Regional Government of the time. However, it was only widely adopted more recently and has become an important cash-crop among the Pojulu because it does not need lengthy conversion or preparation processes and is more short-maturing than *yoyoji-yoyoja*. Many farmers are now adopting this variety because it is not harmful—particularly to children—if consumed fresh.

Despite its commercial value, initially *bokolisha* was a rare variety and was not shared readily. But, since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which saw the opening up of South Sudan to foreign trade and the intensification of humanitarian presence (including an increased focus on development over relief), humanitarian organizations, like ZOA (a Dutch faith-based humanitarian organization with a long history of operation in this region), have been distributing the stalk through cooperatives and it has been actively advertised as a cash-crop by humanitarian organizations.

Historically, there were two main methods of planting cassava. The first is by digging a small hole and putting two or three cassava stalks in it, after which it is covered with soil. The second method is by digging mounds of earth that look like small ant hills and then planting the cassava stalk on top of this by entering three cassava stalks on three sides. The second method is more labour intensive, but allows the roots more space to grow and generally yields a better harvest. There is a belief among the Pojulu that planting cannot be done by everyone. Some members of the family are believed to bring higher yields, especially *mojet*, or children born after a dead sibling. If one method does not bring a high yield, the next year the farmer will try the other method and people will say that '*nyanyar kene lolut*' (the crop does not like your hand).

The majority of cassava varieties grown and eaten by the Pojulu are poisonous and cannot be eaten raw. Fresh cassava is turned into edible flour by soaking the roots in water for a period of a few days to remove the poisonous prussic acid, after which it is sun-dried and pounded into flour. This method is still used up to the present, but other methods have been introduced as well. For example, people peel the cassava and leave it to dry in the sun for a minimum of three days to remove the poisonous elements.[4]

Cassava, money and bridewealth

Oral history gathered from my extended family reveals the historical role of cassava in bride wealth, and the different ways of acquiring the resources needed for it. Even within my family and in the space of a few generations there are differences. For example, neither my paternal grandfather, nor my father or I relied on cassava to marry. Yet, this was different on my mother's side of the family: her brothers relied on their cassava harvest to acquire the necessary bridewealth to marry. The differences reveal that marriage systems are in flux, and that strategies for accumulating bridewealth are shifting as people get access to salaried jobs. However, the changes that have happened within my family also show that people of my generation value agricultural labour differently from our parents and grandparents.

My mother's father worked as a businessman who travelled to Uganda to purchase salt which he resold in Limbe, Central Equatoria, where they used to live. His business enabled him to marry three wives of which my maternal grandmother, whom he married in the late 1930s, was the last. My maternal grandfather obtained the necessary livestock and money he used to marry my grandmother through his business.

My paternal grandfather, Lazarus Ladwa Elia, worked with the Italian Comboni Mission in Juba as a head of cooks and received a salary paid to him in piasters, the colonial currency of that time. When he returned to the village the people sang a song for him describing his uniqueness and the attitudes he acquired from the white men. He saved money from his salary, which he used to buy livestock before returning from Juba and with which he started a goat farm. He later used his livestock to pay dowry and topped it up with money. He married my paternal grandmother in 1936. At that time, people mostly used livestock to marry and both my grandfathers were an exception. They were amongst the first in their generation to marry with money.

Before the introduction of money, people used to marry using *riyet*—rings made by specialized blacksmiths from iron black stones for hands, ears, nose, neck and legs. Before the 1940s, future spouses were largely introduced to each other through their parents. The father of the bridegroom would identify a hardworking and well-behaved girl and develop a relationship with her father and finalize the marriage without involving or telling his son. After that, the father would surprise the son, saying that I have a wife for you who is the daughter of my dear friend. In the mid-1940s, people began to introduce money and livestock as a source of bride wealth and the rings slowly began to disappear. Around the same time as the decline in *riyet*, British agricultural officials began to note sales of cassava, along with millet, sorghum and sesame, in Yei district.[5]

For much of the twentieth century, after an official engagement, new brides together with their sisters and other young unmarried girls would spend a period of time working on the farms of their family in-laws to test their work ethic and personalities. During cultivation time, they would be involved in the growing and harvesting of crops and during summer they would be asked to cut grass for making houses. Only if the husband and his extended family were satisfied with the work that the new bride performed, the marriage would be concluded. The sister of my paternal grandmother married in the area of Morosak, in the present-day Yei River State, where my grandfather also lived. She came to help her sister and when my grandfather observed how hard she worked, he immediately initiated the steps of marriage.

This labour contribution of bride and female companions to the groom's family continued up to the 1990s, but after the CPA it came to an end because, during peacetime, people began to access and move to towns and the role of women began to change and the practice was abandoned. It is no longer a useful practice because people who moved to urban areas cannot engage young women in agricultural work because they are no longer farming themselves. The value of a bride is still measured through her labour contributions to her new family, but this is now situated more within the domestic sphere and involves the cleaning of the compound and the home, as well as washing and cooking.

However, the traditional practice shows that marriage has long been linked to agricultural labour. During my grandparents' time, the durability of marriage was linked to the labour contributions of the bride and her female companions. In the next generation (of my parents), a man and his family's ability to grow surplus *yoyoji-yoyoja* became an important marker for marriageability. During this period, more markets came into existence in South Sudan and cassava became a more popular commodity with increasing monetary value attached to it. Marriageability has always been measured on the basis of people's labour ethics and agricultural productivity. A maturing field of cassava would serve as a convincing answer to the question, '*Dalaga kata?*' (What do you have?), which would inevitably be asked of a young bachelor announcing his interest to marry.

My maternal uncles married through the selling of cassava. One of my mother's brothers was a farmer and dedicated all of his life to farming. Her younger brother was a soldier and used to cultivate during his holidays to supplement his army salary with the money that he earned from his cassava, *sim sim* and groundnut harvests to complete his dowry payment in 2007. My paternal uncles were all able to get married due to the money that they earned through salaries. The elder brother of my father used to work in Uganda during the regime of the Idi Amin Dada in the 1970s as a senior officer, which enabled him to marry a Kakwa woman from Congo. My father is a teacher and he acquired his money for bride wealth through his monthly salary. The male members of my paternal family gained access to higher levels of education and therefore better paying jobs.

Among my brothers, I am the only one who is married and, like my father, I was able to acquire money for bridewealth through the salary I earned teaching at a secondary school. However, I also cultivated 1.5 feddans of cassava in 2013 and 2014 with the intention being that my mother would eat from it.[6] There was nobody staying with her apart from my father, who is a teacher and does not have the time to cultivate. The war broke out and did not allow me to replant my cassava field or tend to it. My uneducated mother has always supported our family through her home garden, and she intended to use the cassava for my bridewealth as part of her contribution to my marriage and the building of my own family. Despite these plans, because of the conflict she was unable to return and harvest the cassava. Her experiences with violent conflict, the displacement from her home and farm and her inability to contribute to my bridewealth have caused trauma in her.

My mother was not the only one who was displaced from her farm in the area. Many people in refugee camps in the neighbouring countries (particularly Uganda), and also those who moved to urban areas inside South Sudan, no longer have access to farmland. More research needs to be done to understand how mobility (both in the form of forced displacement and urbanization) is changing marriage systems. In Juba today, Pojulu marriages are subject to dowry inflation and the requirements for marriage are changing. The amount of money needed for bride wealth has become very high and engagement contracts have emerged, which are

described using the Arabic word *khutuba*. Today, aspiring bridegrooms are expected to bring together not only money for dowry, which can get as high as 500,000 South Sudanese pounds (SSP), but also for the delivery of an initial introduction letter, which is accompanied by an amount of around 100,000 SSP. It is becoming increasingly difficult for families to raise the money for introduction and engagement by growing cassava.

Cassava farmed near Luri, Central Equatoria.

From marker of marriageability to market commodity

Previously, cassava was converted to money or livestock and it was used for bridewealth payments and was an important marker of marriageability—a full field of cassava would constitute the bridewealth necessary to begin engagement and marriage processes. Due to the growing importance of and dependence on money, high-yielding crops such as cassava are turned into commodities. From 2005 onwards, many farmers began to cultivate cassava in large quantities to bring to the market and earn money and this has significantly changed how people live, work, farm and feed themselves. There was a growing demand for cassava in expanding urban markets. Cassava was diverted away from family granaries (locally named *gugu*) to markets, but the money earned from trade is still used to contribute to dowry. The recently-introduced *bokolisha* variety of cassava has begun to compete with *yoyoji-yoyoja* as it shares the same properties with this older variety, but has the added benefit of not being poisonous and not needing long preparation processes. This makes *bokolisha* into a more popular food commodity and, at present, it is more dominant in the markets in Juba, Yei and Lainya.

This process of commodification is not a straightforward one, and since 2016, when the civil war spread into the Equatorias, cassava farmers in the southern parts of Central Equatoria have been cut off from other urban markets and have often been displaced from their farms. Before the outbreak of the conflict, a lot of the cassava sold in Juba was coming from Lainya, Yei and Morobo as well as Eastern Equatoria, but because of road insecurity and the displacement of people, cassava remained in the farms and became an important

marker of time. As we have seen in the case of my mother, cassava may be seen as a time bomb: if they are not harvested on time they rot and the energy, time and resources invested into planting can be wasted. At the same time, people become dependent on food aid, whereas they know there is food in the farms they can no longer access.

One of the other consequences of this is that, at present, in Juba people do not have easy access to dried cassava and cassava flour because it no longer reaches the market from the areas affected by civil war. Cassava has become expensive and is not sold in large quantities. Women have been innovating in food preparation methods and mix maize and sorghum flour with cassava to improve the taste of *asida* and *kisra* (flat pancakes). However, there is also anecdotal evidence showing that people in Juba are using their family networks to get cassava flour from rural areas inside South Sudan. A middle-aged Bari woman who was interviewed for our tastes and imports study spoke about the importance of family residents in Koboko, Uganda, who sent cassava flour to her in Juba.

Cassava and marketization in South Sudan

While cassava is a relatively recent introduction into the agricultural landscape of the Pojulu, it has become an important symbol for marriageability. Young men use their planted cassava fields— especially those planted with *yoyoji-yoyoja*—to claim readiness for marriage. In the 1960s, this cassava variety gained in popularity because it was short-maturing and high-yielding. People preferred its flour because it looked clean and white and its taste was well-liked. Cassava, through the effort of the family, would be converted into cassava flour and exchanged for the livestock and money demanded for bride wealth.

At present, *yoyoji-yoyoja* is losing its social value as a more recently introduced cassava variety called *bokolisha* is proving to be more relevant to an increasingly marketized society and because money has become more important in marriage procedures. *Bokolisha* not only matures faster than *yoyoji-yoyoja*, but also distinguishes itself from the other cassava varieties grown and eaten by the Pojulu because it is non-poisonous. These changes in bride wealth happened at the same time that farming became less important to the more educated, and salaried members of the Pojulu society. This process of monetization and marketization has a clear, but not straightforward relation to the wider social and economic impact of war and peace in South Sudan. *Bokolisha* stands as a fitting symbol for the changes in South Sudan's economic system. Its growing popularity not only tells us something about the complications which have arisen in the process of conversion from raw cassava to bridewealth and in the marriage system, but also how farmers and consumers alike identify and position themselves in relation to the growing influence of unstable markets and money.

Notes

1 G. Schweinfurth, F Ratzel, R.W. Felkin and G. Hartlaub (eds), *Emin Pasha in Central Africa, being a collection of his letters and journals*, tr. Mrs R. W. Felkin, London: George Philip and Son, 1888, 370-371.

2 H. Ferguson, 'Equatoria Province' in J.D. Tothill (ed) *Agriculture in the Sudan, Being a Handbook of Agriculture as practiced in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan*, London: Oxford University Press, 1948, 895.

3 Lingala is the *lingua franca* of the present-day Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and is also spoken in the Uganda-Congo borderlands.

4 A. E. Lorenzen, 'A Note on Nutrition in Equatoria Province,' in J.D. Tothill (ed) *Agriculture in the Sudan, Being a Handbook of Agriculture as practiced in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan*, London: Oxford University Press, 1948, 269.

5 Frank Crowther, 'A Review of Experimental Work,' in J.D. Tothill (ed) *Agriculture in the Sudan, Being a Handbook of Agriculture as practiced in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan*, London: Oxford University Press, 1948, 592.

6 One *feddan* equals 60 by 70 metres and is a measurement which was commonly used by small-scale farmers to describe their household gardens. This measurement is also used in commercial farms, but here the land under cultivation is generally subdivided into smaller 10 by 10 plots (*katala*) which are cleared, planted, weeded or harvested by wage labourers for money or in-kind.

Figure 1: Cassava varieties and their properties

Cassava variety	Description	Taste	Maturity	Yield	Consumption
Bwuti-Mengi	White, short stalk	Bitter, poisonous	Long-maturing (24–36 months)	Moderately-yielding	Made into flour, leaves are eaten and used for making alcohol
Yoyoji-yoyoja	Red-brown, long stalk	Bitter, poisonous	Short-maturing (8–12 months)	High-yielding and big roots	Made into flour, leaves are eaten and used for making alcohol
Lenga-Lojuon	Red, tall stalk	Bitter, poisonous	Long-maturing (24–36 months)	High-yielding and big roots	Made into flour, leaves are eaten but with special cooking procedures, alcohol made from this variety is very concentrated
Marango-marango	Red, long stalk	Bitter	Long-maturing (24–36 months)	High-yielding and small roots	Made into flour, leaves are eaten, used for making alcohol
Bokolisha/ Agirikisha	Grey-blue, long stalk	Sweet, non-poisonous	Short-maturing (6–12 months)	High-yielding and medium-sized roots	Made into flour, leaves are eaten, roots are boiled or fried and sold as snack

Credits

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