

Selection of Principal Starchy Food in a Livelihood System Based on Bananas: The Formation of Food Culture in Buganda, Central Uganda

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In part of the Great Lakes Region of East Africa, people make their livelihoods by intensively using bananas as a principal starchy food (PSF) as well as a wide variety of other crops. This study examines the selection of the PSF in terms of the cropping patterns and the food-use system among the Ganda people of Central Uganda. Data on their crops suggest that combining production of bananas and other crops is essential for a stable food supply. The ecological characteristics of bananas and the decisions of each household have great influence on cropping patterns. Regarding food use, descriptions reveal that delicate techniques and sensibilities in preparing banana meals are remarkably developed and are also applied to other crops. In this way, an analysis of neither a framework of people's adaptations to external conditions nor one of food preferences is adequate to understand the complex people–nature relation in a study of food culture. Rather, it is crucial to use both frameworks in understanding the formation of food culture.

Key words: agriculture, banana, food culture, Ganda, principal starchy food (PSF), Uganda

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The Ganda People and Bananas

In part of the Great Lakes Region in East Africa, including Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, Rwanda, Burundi, and the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, banana is an indispensable staple food crop. People heavily depend on banana crops in terms of agricultural landscape, subsistence economy, and local customs (cf. Sato & Shigeta 2006; Shigeta & Sato 2006). The Ganda⁽¹⁾ people, who are called Baganda in Central Uganda, are especially known as people who maintain their identity as “banana eaters.” They have developed a unique livelihood based on banana cultivation for hundreds of years. A study of historical linguistics estimates that the intensive cultivation of bananas expanded along the northern and western shores of the Lake Victoria between the 12th and 15th centuries (Schoenbrun 1998).

In accounts of expeditions and ethnographies, we can find two different perspectives on their food culture. Reid (2002), who studied the context of subsistence and society in the Buganda Kingdom, refers to these points as follows.

For H. M. Stanley, who exaggerated but clearly understood its importance, the banana was ‘almost everything but meat and iron.’ For the Ganda, the plant was closely associated with the

foundation of their kingdom and was perhaps seen to possess viviparous qualities, which would not have been too far from the truth (p. 23).

Banana trees usually took pride of place in any homestead, but plantations were never devoted solely to this crop and indeed diversity was one of the great strengths of Buganda's agricultural economy in the nineteenth century (p. 26).

The main dish that is widely consumed and unseasoned is referred to as the "principal starchy food" (PSF) (Ankei 1990). Until now, the Baganda people have subsisted by intensively using bananas as their PSF, supplemented by a wide variety of PSFs in parallel. Such a system cannot be understood in conventional frameworks that focus either on the use of a specific crop or on the mixed use of various crops. However, we know little about the factors associated with the system. The agricultural system (Musitwa & Kamutunga 2001) and the food culture (Bennett et al. 1965) of the Ganda have not been thoroughly researched, and what research has been conducted has been carried out separately by various academic disciplines. By focusing on the livelihoods of the Ganda, we can discuss the formation of the system as a common issue of natural resource management.

The objective of this study⁽²⁾ is to examine the formation of Ganda food culture from the perspective of people's selections of PSF in terms of both agricultural and cooking practices. This enables a multi-sided approach to the production and use of crops, which can contribute new interpretations to farming cultures that harmonize concentration on a mono-crop with crop diversification.

This research is based on the assumption that people select varieties of PSF by processes of adaptation or preference. Adaptation is the response of agricultural or cooking activities to external conditions, e.g., the ecological characteristics of crops. Preference refers to people's tastes for food in their daily lives.

In Central Uganda, as seen at the two study villages, each house is located separately, with each surrounded by a home garden. Householders engage in subsistence agriculture of banana, sweet potato, cassava,⁽³⁾ maize, cocoyam, yam, and pumpkin. A few households keep goats or cows on a small scale. Coffee is the major cash crop, and some people also sell surplus bananas. There has been an increase in the crop production for sale at market, but this increase is slow due to lack of cultivation space for each household. People give priority to crop production for self-consumption.

They usually have meals three times a day: *ekyenkyā* (breakfast) in the morning, *ekyemisana* (lunch) in the afternoon, and *ekyegulo* (supper) at night. Meals for cultivators in Africa generally consist of a dish containing an unseasoned starchy ingredient suited for mass consumption (the PSF) and a side dish of seasoned thick sauce for dipping the PSF in (Ankei 1990; Komatsu 1998). In Buganda as well, meals are essentially composed of a PSF and a side dish.

1.2. Research Sites and Methods

The gray zone of the map in Fig. 1 is the territory of the Buganda Kingdom, which lasted until 1966. Field research was conducted at two villages in Buganda. Most of the data were collected at Ntebe village in Luweero district, Uganda, situated at 00°47' N latitude and 032°34' E longitude, and its elevation is about 1,100 m. It is 10 km from Wobulenzi, the nearest town, and about 100 km north of Kampala, the capital city. In 2002–3, the population was 230, with 48 households. Annual precipitation at 30 km southeast from the village was 1297.4 mm (data from 1991 to 2002 by the Department of Meteorology in Uganda Government). Each year is divided into two rainy seasons and two dry seasons. The companion study was conducted at Kampungu village in Rakai district, situated at 00°30' S latitude and 031°34' E longitude. It is about 150 km southwest of Kampala. The climate is similar to that of Ntebe village. Regarding agriculture and dietary habits, the two sites share a common sociocultural background.

The research period at Ntebe village was from December 2002 to June 2003. Participant observation and semi-structured interviews were conducted. I also asked eight households, who have relatively large banana gardens in the area, to make daily records of crop harvests and to measure the



Fig. 1. Map of Uganda and Research Site

harvested bananas. The research period at Kampungu village was from January to October 2005. Data on their menus were recorded, and information about their food preferences was collected through interviews.

2. CROPPING PATTERNS

2.1. Agricultural Practices

Banana cultivation in Buganda is broadly classified into the “banana–coffee system” (Karamura et al. 1998). Each home garden is planted with cooking bananas as the primary crop for family consumption, and trees of robusta coffee (*Coffea canephora*) are added as a component of mixed cropping. At the research sites, bananas were planted in combination with coffee and various other crops including

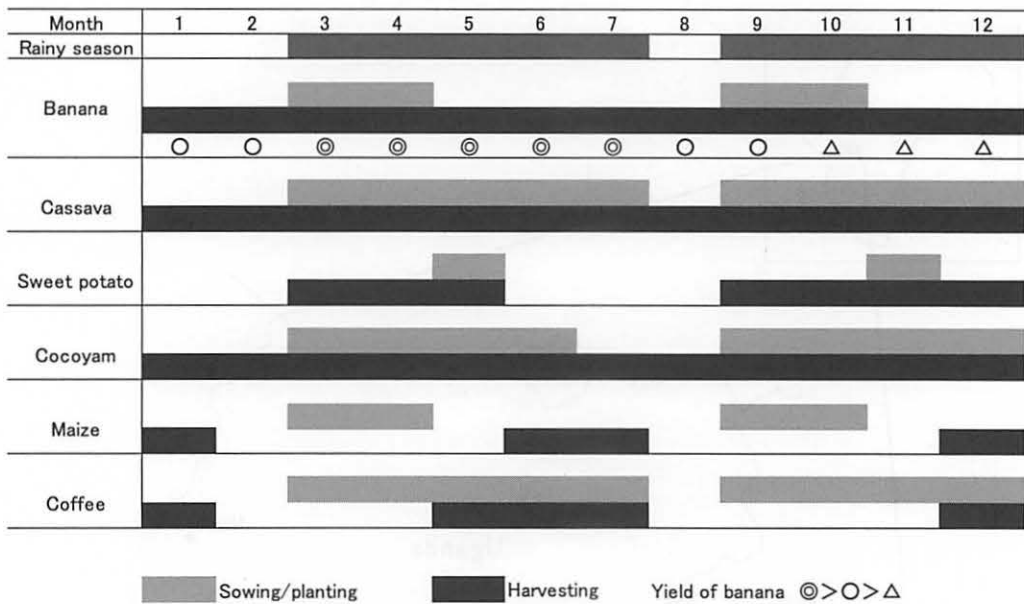


Fig. 2. Farming Calendar

other types of PSF and trees in the field around each house. Only a few households grew bananas as a single crop.

Bananas are treated as a perennial crop. The stocks are renewed *in situ*, and continuous cropping over a long duration is practiced. I identified 11 farming operations involved in banana cultivation: (1) reclaiming land, preparing the plot, and digging holes for planting; (2) transplanting; (3) pruning leaves and leaf sheaths; (4) removing the male inflorescence; (5) thinning suckers; (6) propping; (7) mulching; (8) weeding; (9) fertilizing; (10) harvesting; and (11) treating plant bodies after harvesting. Fig. 2 presents a cropping calendar for major crops, which shows seasons of sowing/planting and harvesting the crops. Work is concentrated in the beginning of the rainy seasons, especially from March to April and during September. Compared with the operations involved in cereal cultivation, those for bananas are more flexible in terms of seasonal labor allocation. Farmers can take advantage of this flexibility to cultivate a number of crops in parallel. For instance, the sowing maize at the beginning of the rainy seasons is prioritized in comparison with the work associated with bananas, with the latter often carried out after the former has been finished.

In each household, agricultural work is divided between husband and wife. The wife is responsible for food production for self-consumption. The husband does not tend to intervene in the wife's work, but rather grows cash crops. This means that the selection of the PSF is in the wife's domain.

2.2. Harvesting Patterns

Table 1 presents the time framework for crop preservation. This information is based on interviews with householders. Banana and root crops cannot be kept for a long time after harvesting. This means that farmers need to harvest a small amount at one time and cook it right away. In Ntebe village, records of harvesting crops were kept for eight households for 150 days from January 3 to May 31 2003. Table 2 shows the number of harvest days for banana, sweet potato, and cassava crops for self-consumption by these households. The data indicate great variation in harvest frequency among households. However, every household cultivated all three crops. Households B, E, F, and H allocated harvest days for each crop almost evenly. Although households A and D designated fewer harvest days for sweet potatoes, they did not abandon this work. In terms of working hours, even if the harvest days of several crops overlapped, crop cultivation was not necessarily difficult.

Table 1. Maximum Storage Life of Principal Starchy Food after Harvesting

Crop	State	Maximum storage period
Banana	raw	about 7 days
Sweet potato	raw	more than 1 week
Cassava	raw	1 day–1 week
	dried	3 months
Cocoyam	raw	1 month
Maize	flour (threshed)	4 months
	flour (no threshed)	1–2 years

Table 2. Number of Days on which Each Harvested Crop Serves as Principal Starchy Food for Self-consumption in Households (days)

Household	Banana	Sweet potato	Cassava
A	93	8	128
B	75	64	103
C	89	27	63
D	120	13	95
E	73	60	105
F	53	41	41
G	51	96	38
H	136	133	143

Fig. 3 presents seasonal changes in banana production. There are no remarkable general tendencies. Households A, C, and G had peaks of production in January, households D and H had peaks in February, and household B had a peak in April. Households F had two peaks in January and March, and E also had two peaks in February and May. They explained that the yield drops in the beginning and middle of the rainy seasons. However, actually, the situation largely depends on each household. Bananas can be harvested all year round, but because of the ecological attributes of bananas, it is difficult to predict the yield. Furthermore, it is hard to control the size of the fruits or the harvest days. Such flexibility in the harvest pattern is quite characteristic of banana cultivation.

Based on data from each household, the consumption ratio of bananas for each household was calculated. This is the estimated number of times that bananas appeared in one of the three meals per day. The calculation was based on the assumptions that a) the edible part is 50% of the harvested amount, b) a male adult eats 1.1 kg⁽⁴⁾ of bananas in a meal, and c) the conversion rates according to sex and ages of household members are 0 for a person of 0–1 years old, 0.4 for a 2–5-year-old, 0.7 for a 6–13-year-old, and 0.8 for a woman 14 or more years old. The ratio is defined as follows.

$$\text{Consumption ratio} = \frac{\text{edible part of the yield in 150 days}}{(\text{consumption per time per meal} \times \text{size of household} \times 150 \text{ days})}$$

Results showed that the ratio was in the range of 0.24 to 1.92 (Table 3). In other words, households vary widely from a household serving banana once in 4 days to one serving bananas twice in 1 day. In fact, such selections of PSF crops for cultivation reflect the strategies and preferences of

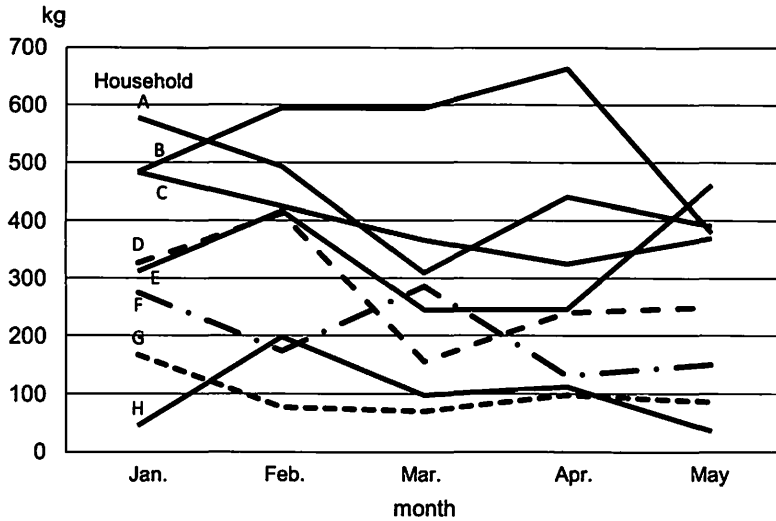


Fig. 3. Monthly Changes in Yield of Bananas as Principal Starchy Food for Self-consumption (from January 3 to May 31 2003)

Table 3. Consumption Ratio of Bananas as the Principal Starchy Food in Households

Household	Consumption Ratio
A	0.90
B	0.53
C	0.78
D	0.86
E	0.36
F	0.40
G	0.24
H	1.92

Consumption ratio = edible part of the yield in 150 days / (consumption per time per meal × size of household × 150 days).

the wives, who are responsible for cooking in each household. Their decisions with respect to menu directly connect to the daily harvest patterns.

3. FOOD USE SYSTEM

3.1. Cooking Methods of PSF

One of the pronounced findings from observing Ganda cooking was the multiple purposes of bananas. Table 4 compares kinds of recipes for about six crops. All share common features in processing food by “steaming” and “boiling.” However, bananas have more options in terms of cooking methods, for example, roasting, extracting juice, brewing and distilling, frying, and eating raw. Such a variety of cooking methods is an advantage of bananas.

In the gastronomic culture of the Ganda people, steaming is often used in daily life and has a high

Table 4. Cooking Methods of Principal Starchy Foods

	Boiling/ steaming	Roasting	Extracting juice	Brewing, distilling	Frying (snack)	Eating in raw
Banana	○	○	○	○	○	○
Sweet potato	○	△	×	×	×	×
Cassava	○	△	×	△	○	△
Cocoyam	○	×	×	×	×	×
Maize	○	○	×	×	×	×
Rice	○	×	×	×	×	×

○ often △ rarely × none

cultural value. Because there are no other areas in East Africa where the technology for this method has been developed, this cooking process may have been refined in Buganda after spreading to the area from other parts of the central region of Africa.

In the language of the Ganda people, the word “*matooke*” refers to both a banana dish served as a staple food and the banana itself that is used as the ingredient for preparing the staple food. The word is the same for the singular and the plural. *Matooke* as a prepared dish is made by cooking peeled unripe banana flesh with water. Cooked bananas are either mashed to transform the texture or left in their original form. The boiling method is used in many areas including Ankole⁽⁵⁾ in the southwestern part of Uganda and Haya⁽⁶⁾ in the northwestern part of Tanzania. However, the Ganda people also regularly employ other refined methods such as steaming.

They classify *matooke* dishes into three categories (3.1.1–3) according to differences in the cooking procedures. They also cook a dish called *katogo*, which is a boiled mixture of bananas, kidney beans, and organ meat. Cassava can be cooked in this dish instead of bananas.

3.1.1. *Matooke amanyige*

This is a mashed banana dish made by wrapping bananas with a banana leaf and steaming them in a bag. *Amanyige* is derived from the verb meaning “to mash” (*oku-nyiga*). Among the three categories, this method is the most complex one, and the dish is considered to be the most authentic *matooke*. It is prepared not only for special occasions, such as receiving visitors and conducting ceremonies, but also for meals on ordinary days. Methods of steaming and mashing bananas have much in common with cooking methods used for root crops. Banana leaves are also used when cooking other crops.

3.1.2. *Matooke amasuulemu*

This is a boiled banana dish that is not mashed. Tomatoes, onions, etc., are stir-fried together, and then the bananas are added. This is considered to be a simple cooking method when there is little time to cook.

3.1.3. *Matooke amanyigiremu*

This is a boiled banana dish in which the banana is mashed after boiling. The participants reported that it is not made very often, and I did not observe it during my research period.

3.2. *Process for Cooking Matooke*

Making *matooke* (*amanigye*, and so forth) takes much time and labor. It takes about three hours from peeling bananas to completion, and the fire must be carefully watched during the cooking process. This method is specific to Central Uganda and deeply linked to cultural values. It is one of the cooking methods that women are supposed to master before getting married. The utensils, materials for

preparation, and the preparation procedure are as follows (Sato 2010).

Utensils and materials for preparation are a pot, a knife, plenty of banana leaves, and the following: a) fingers of green unripe bananas; b) fresh banana leaves from which the main nervures have been chipped off and bands have been made by splitting the dead leaf sheaths; c) banana leaf and fruit axes cut and bent to fit to the pot bottom; and d) previously used banana leaves to cover the food during steaming.

3.2.1. Peeling bananas and making a bag

First, the interior of the basket is covered by leaves. A hand of bananas is picked from the bunch, and the bananas are separated, peeled, and placed on top of the leaves in the pot (Fig. 4). When the pile is completed, the bag of leaves is closed and bound with the bands. By this process the bag containing the banana flesh is completed.

3.2.2. Steaming

Banana leaves are placed on the pot bottom so as to make a shelf above it. Water is poured up to the upper level of the leaf axis and fruit axis. The bag prepared in 3.2.1 is placed on the axes to keep it above the water on the bottom so that the bag does not get immersed, and then several fresh leaves and pieces of used leaves are placed on top of and around the bag to enclose it. Sometimes, to improve the airtightness, the entire setup is covered with another pot turned upside down. Then, the pot is heated with a strong fire for more than an hour while the quantity of water at the bottom is carefully monitored.

3.2.3. Mashing and serving

The pot is removed from the fire. The bag is pressed hard from the outside with both hands to crush the bananas until the mass turns into paste (Fig. 5). One leaf that has been used in cooking is placed on the floor and the prepared food is placed on it. People surround the food thus served. People make spatulas from banana leaves, use them for taking portions, and eat with their fingers.



Fig. 4. A Woman Peeling Bananas and a Bag for Steaming



Fig. 5. A Woman Mashing *Matooke*

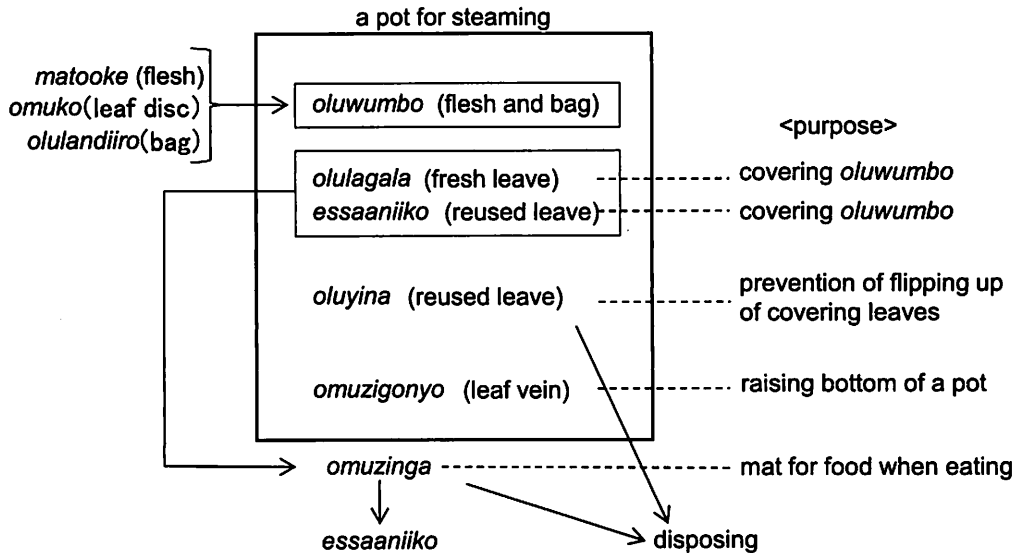


Fig. 6. Banana Leaves Used for Cooking *Matooke* and the Vernacular Names

In this way, people have a tradition of sophisticated use of banana leaves for cooking *matooke*. There is a rich vocabulary to describe this cooking. Vernacular words about leaves are connected with the complicated cooking practices. Fig. 6 shows how the names given to banana leaves vary throughout the cooking procedure. For example, the bag into which bananas are put is made of a banana leaf, and it is called *oluwumbo*. When it is steamed, it is covered with both fresh leaves and reused leaves. Each leaf is called *olulagala* (same name as a leaf of a banana plant) and *essaaniiko*.

3.3. Peoples' Preferences

From the perspective of people's PSF preferences, distinctive practices are observed in their cooking and diet as follows.

3.3.1. Wrapping food with banana leaves to steam

Wrapping the flesh of bananas with banana leaves to steam it is described above. Apart from this, a completed dish of the staple food may be wrapped in a banana leaf and steamed. This dish is called *emmere nagizizaako* [pl. *emmere ezizeeko*] ("staple food cooked again"). For instance, ugali of maize is cooked by this process. After heating maize flour with water, they remove it from the fire, put it into a bag made of banana leaves, and steam it. The aim is to enhance the flavor of the dish.

Banana leaves are also used in preparing a side dish, *lwombo* [pl. *empombo*]. To make it, water and ingredients such as meat, fish, and groundnuts are put in a bag made of a banana leaf and steamed. It is made around Christmas and Easter, and also served at other celebrations.

3.3.2. Use of a variety of PSF

PSF for the Ganda people were basically banana and root crops in the past, and more recently included maize. An old man in Kampungu village recalled his diet as follows.

When I was a child, I did not eat ugali of maize. The Ankole people ate it. In that period, *matooke* and cassava were served for lunch at the primary school. Once ugali and porridge (of maize) started to be served there, villagers began to eat it.

Matooke has a high social value and is consumed daily. However, households that serve it at every meal are quite rare. Crop production is insufficient for it to be eaten three times in a day. Additionally,

people approve of the diversity of PSF.

Table 5 presents a record of meals eaten by a woman at Kampungu village for two weeks. In this period, she cooked all the meals herself and ate them with her husband and children. It was the beginning of the rainy season, when the yield of bananas was decreasing. Banana, sweet potato, cassava, cocoyam, and maize were offered as PSF on her menu. The appearance ratio of banana in a meal is about 31% (2/7 times for breakfast, 3/14 for lunch, and 6/14 for supper). In terms of cooking methods, steaming, boiling, and cooking *katogo* are used in turn at every meal. In this way, the Ganda tend to change the items or recipes of the staple food for lunch and supper on the same day. Although the side dish is also changed at every meal, variation in the staple food is more remarkable. On September 4 and 11, bananas were steamed for lunch and supper. The woman I was observing explained that this was because she could take more time to cook on Sunday, and she liked *matooke*. We find therefore that the selection of the staple food is influenced not only by seasonality but also by people's strategies or preferences.

3.3.3. Combination of PSF with side dishes

From Table 5, we can see the pattern of combinations of PSF and side dishes. For instance, *matooke* is certainly served with a side dish, but cassava is served as *katogo* or a sole food. People recognize the compatibility of PSF and side dishes. The findings from an interview at one household are as follows.

a) All of the family members were convinced that *matooke* went well with any kind of side dishes. b) People were sharply divided on whether sweet potato goes with soup of kidney beans. c) For some people, *ugali* of maize does not go with sauce of *entula nyanya* (a kind of eggplant) and *mukene* (a kind of anchovy). d) For some people, pumpkin does not go with *engege embisi* (a kind of fish). These differences in opinion indicate that although the decision depends partially on personal tastes, banana goes with more kinds of side dishes than do the other types of PSF.

Table 5. Principal Starchy Foods and Side Dishes in a Household (September 2005)

Date	Breakfast		Lunch		Supper	
	PSF	side	PSF	side	PSF	side
4 Sun.			ba■	a, o, t	sw■	a, o, t
5 Mon.			ma○	-	ma▲	b, o, t
6 Tue.			ma▲	b, o, t	(ba▲)	(k, o, t)
7 Wed.	ba▲	-	(ca▲)	(k, o, t)	ma▲	ca○
8 Thu.	ma○	-	ma○	ca■	-	ba■
9 Fri.			ma○	ca■	-	ma▲
10 Sat.	ma※	-	ba▲	c, o, t	co■	o, t
11 Sun.	co※	-	ma▲	c, o, t	ba■	l, o, t
12 Mon.			ba■	ca■	-	(ba▲)
13 Tue.				(ca▲)	(k, o, t)	sw■
14 Wed.			ma○	ca■	-	sw■
15 Thu.	sw■	-	ma○	ca■	-	ba■
16 Fri.	ba※	-	ma▲	a, o, t	ca■	c, o, t
17 Sat.	ca※	-	ma○	ca■	-	(ba▲)

PSF ba: banana, sw: sweet potato, ca: cassava, co: cocoyam, ma: maize

■ steamed, ▲ boiled (*ugali*, *katogo*), ○ boiled (porridge), ※ leftover food

side dish a: *engege* (fish), b: *mukene* (fish), c: *enkeje* (fish), k: kidney beans, l: locust, o: onion, t: tomato
(): *katogo*, which is a mixture of PSF and side dishes.

3.3.4. Ekitoobero⁽⁷⁾

This is a special dish served as a mixture of staple food and side dishes made of a variety of sauces, meats, etc. According to folklore, this type of dish was introduced from the Soga⁽⁸⁾ people, whose main living area is to the east of Buganda. The dish is also called *emmere engattike*, which means “added food.” Banana, cassava, sweet potato, and pumpkin are placed on one plate, and groundnut sauce, kidney bean soup, meat, and fish are added. It is preferred at parties such as wedding and graduation ceremonies. From this menu, we can understand their positive assessments of a wide variety of food.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined the selection of PSF among the Ganda people by describing the cropping patterns and the food-use system. Bananas have high sociocultural value, although harvest patterns reveal that combining bananas with other crops is necessary for subsistence. The ecological characteristics of crops and decisions by the wives in households have a great influence on the cropping patterns. From the viewpoint of food use, analysis finds the delicate techniques and sensibilities in preparing banana meals are remarkably developed and are also applied to other crops. In other words, their knowledge of cooking bananas enables them to utilize a variety of foods. The variation in food and people’s preferences are also important factors in deciding their daily menus.

In this way, an analysis restricted to a framework focusing either on people’s adaptations to external conditions or on food preferences is not adequate for understanding the complex people–nature relations inhabiting food culture. It is crucial to describe its formation from a viewpoint including both of these frameworks.

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NOTES

- (1) “-ganda” is a stem of the word, usually used with a prefix. For example, a man is *muganda* [pl. *baganda*], the language is *luganda*, the land is *buganda*, and a tradition or custom is *kiganda*.
- (2) This paper is based on the second chapter “Formation of Staple Food Culture: Crops, Cultivation and Use” in Sato (2011). The contents are revised in order to focus on the interpretation of food culture.
- (3) Most types of cassava in Buganda do not need soaking in water to remove the hydrocyanic acid.
- (4) The weight of *matooke* at a meal in a household was measured using a scale. A total of 8.1 kg were consumed by nine members (7.1 after conversion). The count of 1.1 kg/man was calculated based on these data.
- (5) Ankole is an ethnic group in southwestern Uganda. Their language is classified into the Bantu group. In their history, they have been both pastoralists and cultivators. Their main crop is finger millet, and banana production has rapidly increased since the 1970s.
- (6) Haya is an ethnic group of northwestern Tanzania. They are a Bantu-speaking people. Their farming is characterized by intensive land use and management of banana-based home gardens (Maruo 2002).

- (7) “*Ekitoobero*” is also the name of a pop music concert that is held every year at Kampala. Many musicians assemble together for this event. This word is used to express “many types of things or people coming together.”
- (8) Soga is an ethnic group in the central and eastern parts of Uganda. Their language is classified into the Bantu group. It has a high rate of concordance with the Ganda language.

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