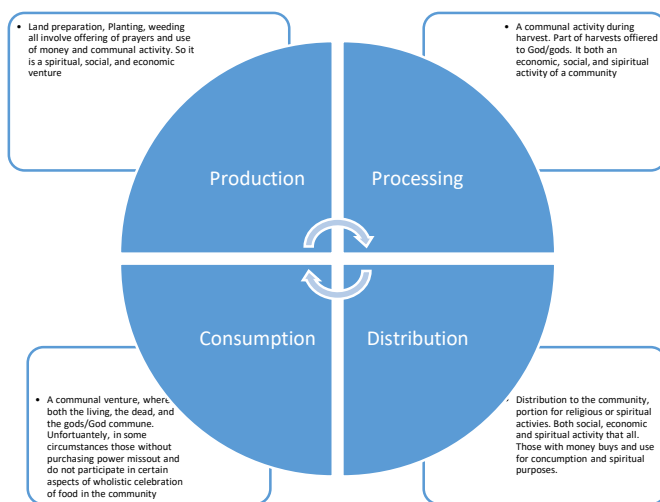


FOOD IN AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY PROJECT PROPOSAL

In November 2020 a group of three scholars, Dr. David Omona (Uganda), Dr. Loreen Maseno (Kenya) and Dr. Robert Kuloba (Uganda) set out to write a project proposal titled Food in African Spirituality. To write this proposal, we were privileged to have access to eHRAF World Cultures Resources accessible to Dr. Maseno who was selected for the 2021 HRAF Global Scholars program.

This project on food in African Spirituality was premised on the centrality of food in all aspects of life in African community. It is clear that social, economic, political and spiritual, life in community is not complete minus food. Looking at food from the vantage point of food systems, this project sought to tease out why people usually place premium on inclusion of spirituality in all aspects of food and how understanding such could help us tease out what the absence of food imply in African religio-cultural contexts. To this end, the project would further look at how the forces of urbanization, modernization, and globalization is changing people's definition of food and how such changes affect people's spirituality.

The issue that this research sought to address is the centrality of food in African spirituality. For, in both traditional African and African Christian communities, sharing in food is as a sign of fellowship. To the extent, food system in Africa is a complex web of activities that are all having spiritual elements. Right from food production, processing, distribution, and consumption, an African person puts a spiritual lens on food. Even modern issues in food system that include the governance and economics of food production, its sustainability, the degree to which we waste food, how food production affects the natural environment, and the impact of food on individual and population health all have spiritual connotation. The figure below summarizes how right from production to consumption, socio-economics and spirituality coalesced in African perception of food.



Source: designed by the researchers

Food beliefs are among the oldest and most entrenched aspects of many cultures that exert deep influence on the behavior of people. The cultural background determines what is eaten as well as when and how (Williams, 1985: 290, 567). A people's culture has a lot of influence on the kind of foods eaten in each community and the beliefs associated with them.

In different part of Africa, people have diverse feeding habits that have been passed over from generation to generation. Without discounting the biological and psychological functions, food in many African communities is used for performing various religious rituals and rites. Among the Luo of Kenya, the ritual specialist may add herbal medicines to food and conduct prayers. The blood of the sacrificed animal, the smoke of the fire, and the remnants of meat left around and outside the homestead are all thought to reach the ancestors; the blood and meat feed them. The flowing blood and the smoke are also thought to wash away evil (Shipton 1989:41).

Many African communities, in the past three or five generations, have experienced extensive changes in food supplies and in household diets. For example, traditionally the Gisu of Mt. Elgon region in Uganda appear to have cultivated only a limited range of food crops, such as plantains and millet. These crops can be grown in the different zones, however, the varieties differ. The plantain is normally steamed and served with a vegetable or meat sauce while (Heald 1989:83) most of the millet harvest is brewed into beer. Over the years there have been other introduced food crops which add variety to the diet, particularly sweet potatoes, groundnuts and pumpkins. Cassava is cultivated as an insurance against famine and beans are grown in preference to the indigenous cow peas. Yams are planted with plantains or coffee, as are 'exotic' European vegetables — potatoes, onions, cabbages, carrots and tomatoes (Heald 1989).

Exotic (untraditional) foods now dominate many urban areas in Africa. Even in the rural areas, the range of traditional domestic foodstuff have been considerably reduced partly due to globalization, urbanization, increased cost of production and processing, and long and laborious domestic preparation methods. Among the Baganda of Uganda, great care is taken in the preparation of food. All the cultivation, harvesting, preparation, and cooking of food is done by women and girls. From her earliest years the girl is taught the correct way to hoe, to prune, to weed, to rotate the crops, to peel, and to prepare the food. The chief food in the province of Bugunda is matoke, bananas picked green and cooked. This is supplemented by meat (chicken, goat, cow, lamb), fish of various kinds, binyewebwa (ground nuts), tomatoes, sem-sem seeds, lumonde (potatoes), cassava, and white ants. Oranges and papaws are the most common fruits (Anna 1940).

The domination of exotic foods, have therefore made it hard for performance of some African rituals, sharing food with others, and it has contributed negatively to the family diet and socialization. Most of the dietary energy comes from the staple cereals such as maize, sorghum, millet and rice. These contribute 40-60 percent of the total dietary energy supply (DES).

In relation to nutrition, the meal frequency pattern and the distribution of food within the family are important factors. The food habits and dietary patterns are often related to the ecological zone within which people live (Oniang'o, Mutuku, & Malaba, 2003). Some types of foodstuffs are considered deadly, while others are desired because they are

considered to be healthy and a solution to problems including old age, illness, and cosmetic aspects such as wrinkling of the skin and expanding girth (Lupton 1996:137). Noteworthy, human religious beliefs are influenced by the ecological zone, thus qualifying the saying that man made God in his own image (Berdie, & Nuernberger, 1974: 10-11).

Generally, food plays a pivotal role in African cosmology. In different African communities, various food taboos exist among men and women, or cultural groups. As a result, women avoid certain food items completely or during pregnancy (Kheiri, Kunna, Mustafa Shaaeldin, & Alsammani 2017). Among the Nguni of Southern Africa, for example, when a goat is slaughtered for ritualistic purposes at the birth of a baby, parts of the slain goat are divided and each portion distributed. This division of the meat serves two purposes: a part will be ritually sacrificed to appease the ancestral spirits who guard the destiny of the living, and another will be consumed at a feast to celebrate the arrival of the baby. The central issue here is a sense of fellowship between the living, the dead, and the spiritual world. Since among most African people there exist strong beliefs, fears and respect for the spirits of the ancestors, if the ritual goat sacrifice were omitted, it is imagined, the anger of the ancestors would become apparent and “burn” the child thus subsequently preventing it to grow and thrive (Galli, 1973).

While such communal aspect of food prevailed in African and helped those who became Christians to embrace the memorial celebration of the Eucharist, some Christian leaders using Euro-American lenses look at African practices with negativity, thus making the Africans themselves to question their own practices. To the extent, traditional dimensions of spirituality in the food system are looked with disdain by many who on the other hand have embraced Christian rituals festivals like Eucharist, Easter, Christmas and so forth. where food is central. It is worse in the wake of globalization and urbanization, which have detached people from cultural life and values, even among those who have travelled around the world and those who live in urban areas. The changing food beliefs among many communities in Kenyan and Ugandan societies have made it difficult for them to blend spirituality with their cultural practices.

This study proposal, therefore, seeks to answer the following questions:

- a. How does socio-cultural and religious life of people play in food processes in Africa in general, and in Kenya and Uganda in particular?
- b. How is the African spirituality in food processes preserved in modern African world Christianities?
- c. Since Africans have, from time immemorial used food as a sign of showing fellowship between the living, the dead, and the ancestral spirits, to what extent can food facilitate socio-spiritual cohesion in African Christianity at present (in Kenya and Uganda)?

More qualitatively, what will have changed for the better because of the project?

When this project is undertaken, it will definitely make people to have a fresh outlook on food in the context of African spirituality. Those who will have the privilege to reading it will get to know that the presence or absence of food will either enhance people’s

participation in a spiritual activity or limit it. Given that certain spiritual practices require certain kinds of food served and many traditional dishes are diminishing because of urbanization and globalization, reading the outcome of the research will make one ask, what next and how can such effect of urbanization and globalization, in terms of food practices be addressed,

The ideas and discoveries that this study will set in motion is bringing to the fore the importance of the wholistic African food practices on spirituality. For, as noted above, right from preparation to distribution level, food carries spiritual dimension. Further still, the study will help us to glean from the changing food beliefs among communities in Kenyan and Ugandan societies. These changes shall be examined and inferences made as to the ongoing developments.

What sorts of trends and longer-term results might happen?

This project—in placing spirituality as a subject will open fresh insights into other aspects of study like medicine and spirituality, environmental theology and other disciplines.

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