

## INTRODUCTION TO THE SUPPLEMENTARY ISSUE “PROGRESS IN AFRICAN FOOD CULTURE RESEARCH”

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**ABSTRACT** Historically, food cultures in various parts of Africa have been nurtured through the interrelationships among people, crops and the natural environment. However, the study on food in sub-Saharan Africa so far has largely been confined to agriculture and food production; there has been little discussions on consumption patterns or eating cultures. Based on fieldwork in rural villages and literature studies, this supplementary issue focuses on the diverse food choices made by local farmers in sub-Saharan Africa in the context of crop selection and consumption and analyzes indigenous knowledge that informs farmers’ choices. Moreover, it considers the relationships among the natural environment, crops and food cultures, and should facilitate future study of food cultures in sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere.

**KEYWORDS:** Consumption patterns; Food cultures; Indigenous knowledge; Staple crops; Sub-Saharan Africa.

### AIMS OF THIS ISSUE

Since 2020, the global food system has been unable to function normally because the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic disrupted supply lines and logistics. Moreover, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has caused food prices to soar. Against this backdrop, Africa is expected to continue to experience high population growth despite extreme weather events such as drought, and food production and distribution will thus continue to be important issues.

In Africa, food crises and starvation have often occurred (e.g., Balineau *et al.* 2021). However, studies in Africa have mainly focused on food production and supply. Moreover, the influential Food and Agriculture Organization Corporate Statistical Database is heavily weighted toward the world’s major cereals, such as wheat, maize and rice, and does not adequately consider minor cereals and root crops, which are important in Africa. The same is true for the various vegetables, fruits and spices grown in Africa, such that Africa’s diverse food

cultures remain largely unrecognized. Furthermore, domestic consumption is not considered because African food data are based on supply-side data rather than household surveys (Hirano 2022). In reality, food distribution and consumption have sociocultural dimensions involving local wisdom, experience, and networks that have hitherto been overlooked.

Historically, food cultures across Africa have been nurtured through the interrelationships among people, crops and the natural environment. There is a persistent view that the natural environment is a limiting factor in terms of crop types and consumption patterns. To date, agriculture has mainly been studied in terms of the natural environment and agricultural technologies. In reality, however, people do not always grow major crops with high yields and market values; they often choose minor crops related to local food cultures and the natural environmental conditions in their region. This issue re-examines the relationships among the natural environment, crops, and food cultures.

Food culture encompasses technical elements (such as the preparation of ingredients) and social elements (such as taboos and rituals). The African diet normally consists of staple foods and side dishes; this issue focuses on staple foods because they are the most frequently consumed in people's daily lives. Staple foods in Africa are diverse and have changed over time. In summary, this issue aims to provide a detailed picture of staple foods and cooking methods in several African countries and societies. To overcome the limitations of conventional research, which regards the system as static, we also aim to understand dynamic changes through interviews and literature studies.

## BACKGROUND OF THIS ISSUE

Research on African food cultures by Japanese scientists has its roots in ecological anthropology studies conducted since the 1950s on the subsistence systems of hunter-gatherers, farmers, and pastoralists. This research has shed light on nutritional intake and the social settings of food consumption from the perspectives of human evolution and environmental adaptation (e.g., Tanaka 1980). Since the 1960s, research on crops and agriculture in Africa has focused on Africa's unique "agro-cultural complex" to clarify aspects of its food culture (e.g., Nakao 1966, 1969, 1972). Research has also examined the mechanisms through which indigenous knowledge and techniques are transmitted in rural societies (e.g., Fukui 1991; Shigeta 1996).

Against this background, several studies have used an integrated approach to identify a development path unique to Africa based on a deep understanding of local farming since the 1990s (e.g., Kakeya & Itani 2011). The focus has been on African farmers who, rather than simply replacing indigenous crops with exotic ones, incorporate them within existing systems. This fieldwork on indigenous practices has led to a reappraisal of history.

Many of the authors of this issue participated in a joint research project entitled "Study on the Relationship between Agriculture and Culture in Sub-Saharan Africa from a Historical Perspective" conducted by the Research Institute for Languages

and Cultures of Asia and Africa (ILCAA), Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, which began in 2010 and ran for 6 years. This led to the publication of *A History of Food and Agriculture in Africa* (Ishikawa *et al.* 2016). Researchers from fields including cultural and ecological anthropology, history, and human geography contributed articles to this book. Traditionally, agriculture and food culture have been considered different disciplines and studied separately. Ishikawa *et al.* (2016) attempted to synthesize these disciplines, emphasizing that research on food culture needs to be enriched to explore the relationship between agriculture and food culture fully.

In a research project entitled “New Development of African Food Culture Research: For Food Sovereignty Studies” launched in 2018, we studied food cultures in Africa, focusing on people’s daily food choices and indigenous knowledge of culinary practices in rural communities. A dozen articles were published in Japanese in the special issue “New Developments in the Study of Food Culture in Africa” in the Japanese journal *Agricultural Techniques and Cultures* in 2021–2022. The current issue is the second product of that project. Cultural and ecological anthropologists, human geographers, and a historian with years of field and historical research experience in sub-Saharan Africa have contributed to this issue. A new ILCAA research project entitled “Research on African Food Cultures: Approaching their Changing Realities” will begin soon.

## SUMMARY OF THE ARTICLES IN THIS ISSUE

Through an analysis of historical records, in the second article of this issue, Ishikawa found that although teff was not a major staple in the Kingdom of Ethiopia until the early 16th century, its consumption had become widespread by the beginning of the 17th century. Although it is commonly believed that injera, which is a round spongy pancake-like flatbread that is among the most representative foods of Ethiopia, has been eaten since ancient times, he proposes a new theory about when the prototype of current injera was established, and suggests that it emerged relatively recently.

In the third article, based on anthropological fieldwork of the Malo in southwestern Ethiopia, Fujimoto discusses how injera has gained popularity, and how the cultivation of its main ingredient, teff, has expanded. Local techniques used for cultivating teff suggest that it has long been cultivated. However, extensive teff cultivation only began in this area half a century ago, mainly because of the adoption of injera in the mid-1970s. Moreover, the taste and cultural significance of injera for the people of Ethiopia seem to play a role in its popularity.

Rice cultivation and consumption are widespread in East Africa. Agricultural and processing techniques originating in Asia are applied, along with unique methods created in Africa. In the fourth article, Harako describes the cultivation and cooking of rice in a remote village in southwestern Tanzania in detail. At the study site, both upland and paddy cultivation were observed. The rice-eating culture in this region is based on millet-based flour and grain food cultures. He explains how those cultures developed, noting when they were introduced and

how they coexist.

In Africa, cassava is detoxified using a variety of methods. In the fifth article, Ankei discusses the complexity of the methods, which combine artificial and natural processing techniques. Eight methods are distinguished in terms of varieties, decomposition, autolysis, and fermentation; this classification is then applied to understand the processes reported in different parts of Africa. Through this approach, the origins and transmission pathways of the detoxification methods used in Africa are reconsidered.

Staple crops have both nutritional and economic significance, and the relationship between them within households is an important issue for the future of food in rural Africa. In the sixth article of this issue, Shioya examines the choices and reactions of people to the production, processing and marketing of cassava in rural eastern Cameroon, and their thoughts and backgrounds regarding its commercialization and subsistence crop production. The results reveal that they don't simply shift from subsistence crop production to commodity crop production,



**Figure 1** The research sites of the articles in this issue. The number in the figure indicates the chapter and approximate location of the articles.

but continue to maintain the dual character of subsistence and commodity crops.

Urbanization and environmental problems in Africa have a major impact on various aspects of the food culture. Fuel issues may influence how people cook, although the preferences that people currently have will not be changed easily. In the seventh article, Asada investigates the use of carbonized briquettes, which are produced from banana and root crop peels in Kampala, the capital of Uganda, and used as a fuel source. Residents of Kampala tend to use charcoal or woodfuel instead of gas because their cooking culture is tailored to cooking bananas. She interviews the producers of carbonized briquettes and discusses the advantages of the fuel. She expects briquettes to emerge as a new cooking fuel option.

Dietary survey data in research sites are often used in studies of food culture. However, the analysis has so far been limited to simple comparisons of frequency and quantity, so the overall description was largely subjective to the researcher. In the eighth and last article of this issue, Fujioka attempts to use multivariate analysis methods to analyze the survey data from a village in northern Namibia as a set of meals. Cluster analysis and two-way indicator species analysis (TWINSPAN) are conducted, and similar patterns of food combinations are found in both methods, although there are minor differences.

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