



A Malawian vendor's shop on Phokela Road in Masiphumelele

# TRADITIONAL CROPS AS COMPANIONS

## Tales of Malawi to Masiphumelele

Research  
Feedback

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## CONTEXT

In Africa, traditional crop systems are central to the environmental sustainability of farming lands and the social well-being of farmers. These systems act as platforms for farmers, allowing them to form profound relationships with their surrounding communities and ecologies. Traditional seeds, saved on-farm for generations, have been shown to provide individuals, whether they be small-scale farmers, their relatives, neighbours or other consumers of their produce, with social connection, resilience and food sovereignty.

Authors active in this context, such as Rachel Bezner-Kerr, Ronnie Vernooy, Jaci van Niekerk and Rachel Wynberg, highlight the profound relationships built between marginalised, rural communities in various African locations and the traditional crops they grow. They remind us how crucial these relationships are for seed and food sovereignty, social justice and ecological well-being, particularly salient in view of the pressure faced by traditional crop systems as the industrial agriculture model advances throughout Africa.

Researchers Lesley Green and Anna Tsing would suggest that we see such relationships as a wider reflection of how we relate to our ecologies as humans. That is, to see how inseparable nature is from society and how people have existed in symbiosis with ecologies in an array of localities and ways. Perhaps our ecologies are cultural and social as much as they are natural? They emphasise that our failure to recognise this

inseparability and reliance on nature serves to enable, perpetuate and enforce unsustainable, profit-driven approaches.

In 2019, University of Cape Town Honours student, Moira Shoobridge, set out to uncover the relationships between crops grown in traditional farming systems in Malawi and their vendors in a township south of Cape Town, Masiphumelele.

### *Setting the scene*

The research sought to unpack and expand knowledge on the extension of traditional crop systems outside of rural contexts. She chose to focus on an urban area where traditional seeds from a distant nation, Malawi, were offered for sale. She engaged with a number of vendors of these seeds, highlighting the social and cultural faces of traditional crop systems in a foreign land, dislocated from their rural place of origin.



Small businesses on Phokela Road

## Research sites and participants involved

The study was conducted between July and September 2019, employing open, semi-structured interviews and participant-observation as data collection methods. Four vendors (three women and one man) were involved, each participating in a number of interviews and meetings. All of them were both living and running their enterprises in Masiphumelele at the time. The duration of their trading history varied between one and six years, each vendor individually sourcing their produce in Malawi and transporting it back to Masiphumelele by bus on a regular basis.



Vendors selling their wares along Phokela Road

## FINDINGS

### What was being sold?

Vendors sold a wide range of traditional crops and produce which varied according to season and availability. While the study focused on traditional crops specifically, the trade itself was not limited to these. The vendors also offered for

sale dried fish from local fishers, Malawian soy mince in yellow packets, and specialised kitchen utensils for making Malawian dishes.



A variety of products sold by Malawian vendors, including traditional crops, vegetables and wooden kitchen utensils

A wide variety of legumes dominated the traditional crop trade. This included pigeon peas (*nsawawa*), cow peas (*nyemba*), peanuts or groundnuts (*nteza* or *nteza okazinga*), jugo beans (also known as bambara nuts, *Vigna subterranea*) and black beans. Beyond that, other crops included sugar cane (*nzimbe*), sweet potato (*mbatata*), cassava (*chinangwa*) and maize (*chimanga*) (see Table 1).

Although most of the produce was sold in raw form, many other forms of the traditional crops were processed by the vendors themselves while in Malawi.

### Examples of raw vs. processed crops sold

Some of the fish was boiled before being dried to remove the bitter taste, while others were sold as simply dried. Maize was sold dried on the cob, or processed into flours and porridges, sometimes combined with rice. Other maize products were separated into sweetcorn, maize meal and popcorn kernels, each with different names for their different uses.

**Table 1. A selection of traditional foods sold in Masiphumelele**

Grains	Legumes	Fish	Others
Maize for roasting or eating fresh <i>Chimanga</i> or Maize for cooking pap <i>(nsima)</i> /porridge <i>Ufa</i>	Beans <i>Nyemba</i>	Dried fish, no boiling (sour) <i>Nsomba</i>	Sweet potato <i>Mbatata</i>
	Cow peas <i>Nkhobwe</i>	Boiled, dried fish (not sour) <i>Usipa</i>	Taro <i>Amadumbe</i>
Rice <i>Mpunga</i>	Jugo bean <i>Mzama</i>	Larger fish than the previous two <i>Kapenta/Matembera</i>	Cassava <i>Chinangwa</i>
	Fresh peanuts <i>Nteza</i> or Roasted peanuts <i>Nteza okazinga</i>		Sugar cane <i>Nzimbe</i>
	Pigeon pea <i>Nsawawa</i>		Chili pepper

## REASONS FOR ESTABLISHING THEIR BUSINESSES

The trade appeared to rely deeply on social connections. The vast majority of the customers were African nationals such as Malawians, Zimbabweans, Congolese and others. One can thus safely conclude that the Malawian vendors came to Masiphumelele to serve the growing African diaspora, rather than sell wares, some of them unknown, to locals.

### *Access through social networks*

Only one of the vendors moved into Masiphumelele because of her business. Two

vendors had moved to Masiphumelele in order to support their spouses who were already living in the settlement. Once established, the trade became the primary source of income for all of the vendors.

A fourth vendor switched from a career that was no longer viable. He explained how he moved into the trade through his wife and stated that it was a far more secure and less anxiety-inducing venture than his previous one.

All of the Malawian vendors gained access into the business through their social connections. The first vendor came to find out about the desire for traditional crops through her daughter.

She found that these had become powerful reminders of home and community for many of those living far away from home. Two had learned about the trade of traditional crops through others and followed suit, hoping to set up successful businesses too. Lastly, as described, one vendor learnt about the business through his wife.

These connections indicate how the cultural value of these traditional crop systems, extends beyond geographical boundaries. Hence, living on in the social fabric of Malawians living in faraway Masiphumelele.

## RECONNECTION: PEOPLE AND TRADITIONAL CROPS MOVING TOGETHER

One of the participants spoke of how the business allowed him to regularly travel back and forth to Malawi. For him, the nature of the trade meant that he could travel back home to see his family once a month or so, and participate in family gatherings, such as weddings and other celebrations, sharing daily meals and events.

Two of the other respondents shared these feelings. This arrangement was important to them, because they missed home. On another level, one of the vendors stressed that the crops she brought to Masiphumelele came from farmers she had known her whole life. For instance, processing crops by hand was something they had known about and been doing since childhood. Some of the traditional

crops, such as sugar cane and cassava, are treats that hold many memories too. This holds true for other delicacies which cannot be found easily in Cape Town, such as dried crickets and dry mud which pregnant women are known to crave.

### *Financial security and autonomy*

Beyond the ability to reconnect, the trade of traditional crops allowed these Malawians to have greater freedom in what they wanted to do with their lives.

All of them expressed how they enjoyed the business they are in and saw its potential to expand and grow. In addition, all of the vendors wished to one day return home and branch out into business in other sectors. The trade, they all mentioned, allowed them a financial opportunity that didn't restrict them within South Africa. They explained how this gave them hope for eventual independence, once safely back home.

### *Gender empowerment*

Although this was not a main theme discussed in the thesis, it would be negligent to ignore the gendered aspect behind this trade. The business of selling Malawian traditional crops in Masiphumelele, appeared to be led by women. None of the female vendors relied on their partners for the running of their businesses.

Moreover, all of the Malawian vendors involved were the main breadwinners in their families, with the only male vendor running the business having partnered with his wife. One of the women mentioned how she wished to pass on

the legacy of her business to her daughter one day and the newest vendor expressed how she shared the business with her sister. Two of the vendors spoke about the potential they see for expanding their business, potentially trading other products in Masiphumelele and even other places.

Further, the women made it clear that this was not a trade that they were forced to be in. Rather, it was one they purposely found and chose.

### *Trade hardships*

Their choice to immerse themselves in their business certainly didn't come without its hardships. The respondents expressed how, despite the opportunity for growing business in Cape Town, there is the desire to one day return back home. Two of them, in particular, spoke about the xenophobic attitudes they had experienced since moving.



Fresh peanuts, beans and fish from Malawi

This, tied with the crime they witnessed and experienced on a daily basis, made it notable that these businesses did not entirely manage to mediate these anxieties or remove vendors from

potentially hostile situations.

### *Why are consumers so interested?*

From the conversations with all of the vendors, the movement and trade of traditional crops from Malawi into Masiphumelele appeared to be driven by a desire for these crops by African national inhabitants of Masiphumelele.



A Malawian vendor selling her goods to passing commuters near the taxi rank

It became more and more obvious that the traditional crops consumers were buying meant something to them, socially and culturally. This desire for traditional crops could be categorised as follows:

#### **1. Familiarity: crops as reminders of home**

All of the vendors described the feelings of dislocation African nationals experienced in Masiphumelele. They described how many people missed their countries of origin and felt disconnected from their homelands after relocating to Masiphumelele.

The traditional Malawian crops acted as reminders of home. It was notable how consumers and the vendors themselves were

able to connect with their homes and past lives, cooking food they had known during their childhood. Two of the most established vendors explained how these crops were used by consumers to cook foods for their children, just like the ones they themselves had grown up with. Some of these would not be easily available to Masiphumelele’s inhabitants, if at all, otherwise.

Here, it became convenient for them to quickly stop by on the way back home and buy traditional crops and other products. On the other hand, as the newest and least established respondent explained, vendors would accept payment from customers at different stages of the month, when the customers received their weekly or monthly pay. Moreover, it was observed on several occasions, that people worked on an informal credit system.

## 2. Perceived as being tastier and healthier than local produce

Many of the products sold were not otherwise easily available to inhabitants in Masiphumelele, making them a rarity. While others were common, available crops, such as maize. One of the vendors described how people chose to buy from them because their crops were seen as healthier, better priced and of higher quality than those accessible in Cape Town supermarkets. Although this study did not probe whether the vendors were aware that most of the maize in South Africa was genetically modified, their customers expressed that the maize from

Malawi was more tasty than local brands.

## CLOSING REMARKS

Through the stories and accounts of the Malawian vendors in Masiphumelele, we begin to see how the heart of the Malawian traditional crop trade in Masiphumelele was driven by human desire, need and connection. The study unveiled an array of social and cultural dimensions which acted as pillars of the traditional crop exchanges happening in this context.



Organically grown sweet potatoes and “Irish” potatoes from Malawi

These involved the social connections vendors made use of for their trade, their social and cultural reasons for immersing themselves in the trade, the various benefits the traditional crops brought them and the motivation for customers to buy their produce.

In the end, it was clear that the traditional crops at times proved to serve as companions to vendors and clientele. The trade’s ability to

empower, reconnect, create independence and autonomy, reflect many of the similar benefits to those experienced by rural communities from traditional crop systems.

### *Looking to the future*

Upon completion of this thesis, many avenues of future research and collaboration became apparent. These could involve expanding the social and cultural values of the traditional crop systems, exploring the gendered dimensions of the trade, or looking at the relation of companionship the vendors and customers formed with the traditional crops of their distant homelands.

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All photographs were taken by Moira Shoobridge.

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