

Research Article

Food and Nutrition Security: Lessons From ‘African Backwardness’

^aHildah Mutale, ^{*b}Malvern Kanyati and ^cAnnie Phiri

Rockview University, Zambia

*Corresponding Author Email: drkanyatimalvern@gmail.com

Received: May 29, 2025

Accepted: June 18, 2025

Published: June 25, 2025

Abstract

This research work explores food and nutrition security through the lens of Bemba indigenous knowledge and lived experiences in Northern Zambia. The research investigates how pre-colonial Bemba communities achieved nutrition security using local crops, traditional culinary practices, and food preservation methods. It emphasizes indigenous resilience and lessons for contemporary food systems, particularly in rural areas grappling with climate change, economic inequality, and declining nutritional health. Interviews and oral testimonies from elderly Bemba people provide valuable insight into sustainable and nutritious food systems that existed before modern interventions. The study argues for policy inclusion of indigenous knowledge to improve resilience and sustainability in African food and nutrition strategies.

Keywords: Indigenous Knowledge, Bemba Food Systems, Nutrition Security, Food Resilience, Traditional Practices, Northern Zambia.

Introduction

Food and nutrition security continues to be a critical development concern across sub-Saharan Africa. While global and national policies often focus on industrial agriculture and food aid, there exists a rich tapestry of indigenous knowledge that has sustained African societies for centuries. This study explores how the Bemba people in pre-colonial Northern Zambia ensured nutrition security through traditional food systems, culinary practices, and community-based resilience mechanisms. It draws on oral histories and testimonies from elderly Bemba individuals to uncover lost wisdom that could inform contemporary solutions.

Eighty (80) years ago, the United Nations (UN) Conference on Food and Agriculture that convened during the Second World War at Hot Springs in Virginia of the United States of America created the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the UN (Shaw, 2007). This founding conference of FAO construed, within its mandate, the then-in-vogue *freedom from want* as “a secure, an adequate, and a suitable supply of food for every man” (FAO, 1943 p.1). This construal heralded modern international undertakings on food and nutrition security (Phillips and Taylor, 1991; Weingärtner, 2004) and forms the background of this research.

The research problem is that 80 years on, and in spite of the vigorous and international interventions on food and nutrition security, the Global Food Security Index 2022 shows deterioration for the 113 nations that were sampled (The Economist Group, 2022). Additionally, a report by various UN agencies on the state of food security and nutrition in the world observes that “hunger is on the rise in almost all African subregions” (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, 2019, p.xiv). The 2021 UN report on food security, nutrition and sustainable development indicates that over 75% of Zambians cannot afford a healthy diet (The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2021). This is a red flag, indicative of persisting challenges to food and nutrition security.

Currently, the topic of food and nutrition security is predominantly studied at the global level (Shaw, 2007; Abdulkadyrova *et al.*, 2016; FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, 2019), regional level (Burchi *et al.*, 2018), and national level (Ojo and Adebayo, 2012; Government of Pakistan, 2019; Devereux, 2000; Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2021). Subsequently, lessons for averting food and nutrition insecurity are drawn from these levels of analysis. For marginal strata, like that of children, only a diagnostic approach is taken (Fram *et al.*, 2015). The purpose of this study is to use analytic evidence from the 1930s anthropological study of the diet of a cultural community in colonial Northern Rhodesia to draw lessons for

averting modern-day food and nutrition insecurity in Zambia. The rationale is that pre-colonial AbaBemba were faced with food and nutrition insecurity whenever they were faced with natural calamities (drought, crop-devouring locusts, or floods) and when they engaged in long journeys by foot (and could not carry sufficient food supplies). During those periods, they devised food and nutrition security strategies.

The term *African backwardness* is so important for this study that it ought to be defined right away. The key literature on the diet, food and nutrition (Gouldsbury and Sheane, 1911; Richards, 1995) sees the ideas and philosophy of pre-colonial Bemba people as characteristically 'African backwardness'. The authors of this literature directly refer to Bemba people as "savage" (Richards, 1995, p.1) and "primitive people" and frame their books as an endeavor to depict the conditions of a country, and the manners and customs of a people, while for the moment, they still remain primitive—before they fade and are forever obliterated by the corrosive contact of civilization (Gouldsbury and Sheane, 1911, p. x). This is the context in which the 'African backwardness' in the title of this research, as well as in the treatment of the topic, is used.

Links to Literature

Before the 1943 formation of FAO and between the two world wars, the problems of nutrition got administrative and scholarly interest in British Colonial territories—Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) being a part of these British colonial territories. In 1935, a Diet Committee of anthropologists and experts in nutrition was constituted by the International African Institute. Two years later, the Colonial Economic Advisory Committee set up a Nutrition Committee for the British Colonial territories (Richards, 1995). By the time Dr. Audrey Richards was appointed to these committees, she had done two intensive anthropological fieldworks (1930-1931, 1933) among the Bemba people of Northern Rhodesia. In fact, her 1932 PhD thesis was on *Hunger and Work in a Savage Tribe*. The so-called 'savage tribe' was the Bemba ethnic group of Northern Rhodesia.

The early anthropological literature from Northern Rhodesia on, what is known in modern terminology as, food and nutrition security was greatly influenced by the 'practical anthropology' methodology of Bronislaw Malinowski of the London School of Economics. Within this functionalist intellectual perspective, food was not only a biological (nutritional) need but it was also imbued with pervasive political, social, and cultural values (Richards, 1995). This provides an intellectual, political, and cultural context to the anchoring of the founding principle of FAO on 'freedom from want' (FAO, 1943) and the reinforcing upshot of the United Nations' 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Both 'freedom from want' and 'universal human rights' are cultural values embedded in the preferred social and political organization of a society.

On the political front, the colonial diet and nutrition committees of the 1930s were coupled with the 1943 formation of FAO, the 1948 UN declaration of universal human rights, and the 1963 establishment of the World Food Programme. In 1964, Northern Rhodesia gained independence from Britain and became Zambia. In 1967, President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia formalized the political philosophy for the social and economic development of Zambia: Humanism. Integral to the philosophy of humanism was what was termed the "agrarian revolution" (Kaunda, 1967, p.40). Two of the four declarations for the achievement of the agrarian revolution were: 1) "No person should starve in Zambia because there is no real land hunger as it is the case in many other parts of the world" and 2) "No person should ever suffer from malnutrition in Zambia" (Kaunda, 1967, p.36). Subsequently, the government of Zambia embarked on an ambitious project dubbed Operation Food Production: 1980-1990 (Republic of Zambia, 1980). In 2015, the United Nations member states came up with 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs). SDG 2 sought to achieve zero hunger by the year 2030. 'Zero hunger' meant to end hunger on earth for all, to achieve food security and improved nutrition, and to promote sustainable agriculture. Table 1, below, summarises the chronology of food and nutrition security initiatives, the responsible political organ, and the political imperative addressed by the initiative.

On the cultural front, scholars have appreciated that the topic of food, diet and nutrition is not only about biological needs (nourishment of the human body) but also about cultural needs (Richards, 1995; Mukuka, 2013). For example, many cultural communities use their choice of food as an expression of social status. Those with a higher social status will have a preference for rare and difficulty to find foods—and by the economic force of supply and demand, the most expensive. Today, 'junk foods' (high in calories, sugar, fat and sodium but with little dietary fibre, protein, vitamins, minerals and nutritional value) are more affordable (easier to find) than organic foods and those devoid of genetically modified organisms. Consequently, the diet and nutrition of the high social class individuals are likely to consist of the pricey organic foods while low status individuals might be condemned to the easier to find junk foods.

Additionally, most traditional cultures not only specify the type of foods (i.e. the diet) suitable for respectable visitors and for particular cultural events but also impose ritual taboos against certain foods for certain individuals. For example, there are dietary precepts among Bemba people against the consumption of pork, fish that has no fins and scales on its body, and cassava leaves for those in the priesthood of nature spirits (Mukuka, 2020). There are also dietary guidelines for enthroned Bemba royalty and, sometimes, for men and women.

Table 1. Chronology of the most influential food and nutrition security political initiatives relevant to Zambia.

Year	Political organ/instrument	Political imperative
1932	London School of Economics. Dr. Audrey Richards' PhD research on <i>Hunger and work in a savage society</i>	Functionalist anthropology (need to study the connection between the biological, the social, and the symbolic): Food and nutrition are not only about biological needs but also about social organization and cultural values (Richards, 1995, p.x)
1935	<i>Diet Committee</i> of the International African Institute (British Colonial Territories)	The social and economic factors determining African diets
1937	<i>Nutrition Committee</i> of the Colonial Economic Advisory Committee (British Colonial Territories)	The socio-cultural factors influencing African food production and use
1943	United Nation (UN)'s Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO)	<i>Freedom from want</i> translated as "a secure, an adequate, and a suitable supply of food for every man [sic]" (FAO, 1943 p.1).
1948	United Nations (UN)	Universal declaration of human rights
1961	Government of Northern Rhodesia. Report on Intensive rural development in the Northern and Luapula Provinces of Northern Rhodesia, 1957-1961	1957 colonial budget: Strengthen the economy of the province with the object of making rural life as attractive as that of urban areas. Target: Crop farming, livestock farming, fisheries (Northern Rhodesia, 1961)
1963	United Nation establishes the World Food Programme	Combating hunger through emergence aid to conflict-affected countries by 1) delivering food and 2) working with communities to improve nutrition and build resilience (World Food Programme, n.d.)
1967	Zambian government formalizes <i>Humanism</i> as its political philosophy	The agrarian revolution: 1) "No person should starve in Zambia because there is no real land hunger as it is the case in many other parts of the world" and 2) "No person should ever suffer from malnutrition in Zambia" (Kaunda, 1967, p.36).
1980	Zambian government's <i>Operation Food Production: 1980-1990</i> (Republic of Zambia, 1980).	Actualising the agrarian revolution, as above.
2015	United Nations (UN) member states. 17 Sustainable Development Goals, targeting the year 2030	Goal 2: Zero hunger. End hunger on earth for all, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture

Research Methodology

Two factors influence the research methodology of this study. Research design is influenced by the purpose of this study. This study seeks to use analytic evidence from the 1930s anthropological study of the diet of a cultural community in colonial Northern Rhodesia to draw lessons for averting modern-day food and nutrition insecurity in Zambia. Therefore, the research is designed as qualitative and descriptive, and deductively uses established facts to prove something new. Consequently, this research offers a new account of the food and nutrition security lessons that can be drawn from the established facts about the traditional (pre-colonial) methods of managing food and nutrition security of the Bemba people of Zambia.

Data collection is influenced by the level of analysis. This study's level of analysis is built on a variable combination of four analytic terms: 1) food and nutrition security, 2) systems of managing food and nutrition security, 3) Bemba people, and 4) the traditional or pre-colonial period of Bemba people. The conceptual ambiguity introduced by the many topics under 'food and nutrition security' is clarified by a focus on the

'systems of managing food and nutrition security'; the temporal ambiguity inherent in the culturally fluid term 'Bemba people' is clarified by a focus on their 'pre-colonial' period. These conceptual parameters will guide data collection methods.

The primary source of the information on the traditional methods of food and nutrition security of the Bemba people is the 1995 edition of the 1939 book *Land, labour and diet in Northern Rhodesia: An economic study of the Bemba tribe* by anthropologist Dr. Audrey I. Richards (Richards, 1995). This book is the earliest academic record of the Bemba traditional ideas on diet—save for the less scholarly 1911 book (by servants of the British South African Company) that dealt with the broader Tanganyika Plateau, yet focusing on the Bemba people (Gouldsbury and Sheane, 1911); and, will be used as one of the secondary sources. Therefore, this is a historical research which utilizes historical sources to study ideas of the past and the philosophy of a group of people at a remote point of time. Aptly, the data collection methods involve a library research that purposefully samples documents and historical records, and then makes a content analysis of these (Kothari, 2004).

Content analysis focuses on how the concepts (or the conceptual equivalents) of food security and nutrition security were handled and mitigated in the pre-colonial Bemba society. Recorded practices, and their attendant philosophies, will be used as the analytical evidence for building up knowledge-claims about how Bemba people used to deal with food and nutrition security. Since the study uses archival data (contents of earlier written books), it poses no ethical challenges.

Findings

Analytic evidence from Richards (1995) shows that, among pre-colonial Bemba people, food and nutrition insecurity was highest when 1) people were on long journeys on foot; they could not bear the weight of the food they would need for the entire journey; and 2) during famine due to locusts, droughts, or wars. The choices of emergency foods and the social strategies for mitigating food and nutrition insecurity constitute the two key lessons deducible from African backwardness. On one hand, pre-colonial Bemba people used social insurance to foster food and nutrition security during dire times. On the other hand, pre-colonial Bemba people deliberately made portable foods with the highest achievable nutritional content. These two strategies are henceforth described and discussed.

Social Insurance Through Cultural Imperatives

While discussing the traditional philosophy of the human person among Bemba people, Mukuka (2013, p.146) identifies three values that sought to enshrine food generosity and the cultural imperative to share food with anyone without any excuse:

- 1) *Tekweshu ukutana umunobe icakulya, nangu engaba wamu musolo nangu fye uo mwaba nankwe mu mushi* (never refuse to share food with both people you know and strangers).
- 2) *Tekweshu ukutana umulendo icakulya nga afika pa nsaka yenu. Icilyotacicepa, icicepa cakufwala* (never refuse to share food with a traveller who comes to your door; a piece of clothing can be small but food is never too small to share).
- 3) *Tekweshu ukufunda umwanakashi ubulya-fibi; pa kunaya afwile ukulakusha no ushiliko aisa kwata apakusuna* (never teach a woman stinginess vis-à-vis food; when she is preparing food, she should prepare more than needed so that an unexpected arrival can have a decent share of your food).

At the time these values were popularized, AbaBemba were a mobile, crop-growing, and food-gathering people. Thus, their key dietary vulnerability was associated with natural disasters and famine. From this vulnerability, Bemba people learnt that they could survive without clothes and shelter, but not without food. Mukuka (2013) observes that, out of this situation of dietary vulnerability, Bemba people came to appreciate food as a fundamental need that needed to be guaranteed. Therefore, traditional Bemba society practiced social insurance to ensure universal access to food. Social values reinforced this form of insurance. A traveler, being dietary insecure because of the inability to carry sufficient supplies on long journeys, was one of the most protected. Not only was a traveler socially entitled to a share of the food of the host village, such a person was also entitled to an additional parcel of food for the road.

Concentrated Essential Nutrients

Literature on essential human nutrition (Mann and Truswell, 2002) identifies six essential nutrients (proteins, carbohydrates, fat, vitamins, minerals, and water) and identifies carbohydrates (water soluble combinations of carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen), lipids (water insoluble combinations of carbon, hydrogen,

and oxygen), and proteins (amino acids; and combinations of carbon, oxygen, hydrogen, and nitrogen) as macronutrients that are required in large quantities by the body for it to perform its basic functions. Food and nutrition security entails access to foods that have essentials of human nutrition.

Analytic evidence from Richards (1995) shows that in times of food and nutrition insecurity (travelling, famine due to locusts, droughts, or war), pre-colonial Bemba people used to resort to high-nutrition foods:

- 1) *Icikonko* (groundnuts roasted, pounded into a cake, infused with salt) (Richards, 1995, p.406).
- 2) *Icitata* (peas, *intongwe*, pounded into a cake, cooked when required –with very little salt and water) (Richards, 1995, p.407).
- 3) *Icifuba* (finger millet, *amale*, flour made into a scone for journeys only) (Richards, 1995, p.406).
- 4) The three high-nutrition foods are primarily based on cereal grains (finger millet), legumes (peas), and nuts (groundnuts)–foods that provide high amounts of energy and are rich in what is today known as essential nutrients: protein (peas, groundnuts, finger millet), carbohydrates (finger millet, peas, groundnuts), fat (peas, groundnuts), minerals (finger millet, peas), and water (peas, groundnuts, finger millet) (Allman-Frinelli *et al.*, 2002). Only vitamins are in low supply in these three foods.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, food and nutrition security in pre-colonial Bemba society had two fronts. The first strategy was the preparation of for-the-road high-nutrition food. Such food was either fully processed and ready for use or semi-processed and in need of minor preparation before use. Additionally, such food was compact and easy to carry for long distances. The second strategy recruited the whole society into a form of social security that operated through societal values to guarantee food access for all, with a particular focus on travelers who were the most vulnerable. Sharing of food was a moral imperative. How can the modern-day society, particularly the Zambian society, draw lessons from these strategies?

Firstly, and with the improved crop production capacity and research on nutrition, food and nutrition security can be attained through the production of a deliberate combination of foods that will constitute high energy and protein supplements. These supplements should be tailored to availability (through cost effectiveness and accessible retail stocks), not to light weight and ability to be carried-as was the focus pre-colonial Bemba people. Secondly, food and nutrition capacity can be attained through the establishment of a form of social insurance to ensure universal access to food. Since the urbanized Zambia can no longer adequately support the clan-based social insurance, this responsibility of social insurance must be shifted to government: nationwide food reserves, cash transfer, food packs, farmer support, and government subsidies on staple foods.

By way of recommendation, further research should explore two lines. Firstly, and because of the changing seed varieties and soil improvement additives, more and continuous research needs to be conducted on the nutritional values of the foods that are locally available, or becomes locally available, in Zambia. The results of such research will inform the best food combinations for human nutritional ‘stress packs’. Secondly, longitudinal research needs to be conducted on the changing family and societal values. Results from such research can inform ‘access points’ for dietary social insurance.

Declarations

Acknowledgments: We would like to acknowledge the entire Rockview University for extending their help during this work.

Author Contributions: HM: Definition of intellectual content, implementation of study protocol, review manuscript; MK: Design of study, statistical analysis and interpretation, literature survey, data collection, data analysis, manuscript preparation, editing, and manuscript revision; AP: Concept, design, literature survey, prepared first draft of manuscript, data collection, data analysis, manuscript preparation and submission of article.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Consent to Publish: The authors agree to publish the paper in International Journal of Recent Innovations in Academic Research.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in this study.

Research Content: The research content of manuscript is original and has not been published elsewhere.

References

1. Abdulkadyrova, M.A., Dikinov, A.H., Tajmashanov, H.È., Shidaev, L.A. and Shidaeva, E.A. 2016. Global food security problems in the modern world economy. *International Journal of Environmental and Science Education*, 11(12): 5320-5330.
2. Allman-Ferinelli, M., Griffiths, T. and Munro, S. 2002. Food groups: Breads and cereals, legumes, nuts and seeds. In: Mann, J. and Truswell, A.S., (Eds.), *Essentials of human nutrition*. 2nd Edition (pp. 382-390). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
3. Burchi, F., Scarlato, M. and d'Agostino, G. 2018. Addressing food insecurity in sub-Saharan Africa: The role of cash transfers. *Poverty and Public Policy*, 10(4): 564-589.
4. Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. 2021. UK food security report 2021. UK: Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office.
5. Devereux, S. 2000. Food Insecurity in Ethiopia: A discussion paper for DFID. Government Printer.
6. FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2019. The state of food security and nutrition in the world 2019: Safeguarding against economic slowdowns and downturns. Rome: FAO.
7. FAO. 1943. United Nations Conference on Food and Agriculture, Hot Springs, Virginia, May 18-June 3, Final Act and Section Reports. Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office.
8. Fram, M.S., Bernal, J. and Frongillo, E.A. 2015. The measurement of food insecurity among children: Review of literature and concept note. Innocenti Working Paper No.2015-08, UNICEF Office of Research, Florence.
9. Gouldsbury, C. and Sheane, H. 1911. The great plateau of Northern Rhodesia: Being some impressions of the Tanganyika Plateau. London: Edward Arnold.
10. Government of Pakistan. 2019. The state of food security in Pakistan. Third quarterly report for FY19: The state of Pakistan's economy. Government of Pakistan.
11. Kaunda, K.D. 1967. Humanism in Zambia and a guide to its implementation. Lusaka: Zambia Information Services.
12. Kothari, C.R. 2004. Research methodology: Methods and techniques. 2nd Edition. New Delhi: New Age International Publishers.
13. Mann, J. and Truswell, A.S., (Eds.). 2002. *Essentials of human nutrition*. 2nd Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
14. Mukuka, R. 2013. Ubuntu in S.M. Kapwepwe's *Shalapo Canicandala*: Insights for Afrocentric psychology. *Journal of Black Studies*, 44(2): 137-157.
15. Mukuka, R. 2020. AbaBemba no BuBemba: Understanding the Bemba cultural world. Kasama, Zambia: Kalebalika.
16. Northern Rhodesia. 1961. Report on intensive rural development in the northern and Luapula provinces of Northern Rhodesia, 1957-1961. Lusaka: The Government Printer.
17. Ojo, E.O. and Adebayo, P.F. 2012. Food security in Nigeria: An overview. *European Journal of Sustainable Development*, 1(2): 199-222.
18. Phillips, T.P. and Taylor, D.S. 1991. Background paper on food security. Centre for Food Security, University of Guelph.
19. Republic of Zambia. 1980. Project: Operation food production 1980-1990. Lusaka: State House.
20. Richards, A.I. 1995. Land, labour and diet in Northern Rhodesia: An economic study of the Bemba tribe. Münster-Hamburg: LIT Verlag/International African Institute.
21. Shaw, J. 2007. *World food security: A history since 1945*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
22. The Economist Group. 2022. Global food security index 2022. London: Economist Impact.

23. The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs. 2021. Population, food security, nutrition and sustainable development. Policy Brief No.102, April.
24. Weingärtner, L. 2004. The concept of food and nutrition security. International training course: Food and nutrition security assessment instruments and intervention strategies. Background Paper No. 1, Welt Hunger Hilfe.
25. World Food Programme (n.d.). Mission: World Food Programme. Accessed 30 October 2023, from <https://www.wfp.org/overview/>

Citation: Hildah Mutale, Malvern Kanyati and Annie Phiri. 2025. Food and Nutrition Security: Lessons From 'African Backwardness'. *International Journal of Recent Innovations in Academic Research*, 9(2): 464-470.

Copyright: ©2025 Hildah Mutale et al. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.