

BETTERING AFRICAN FOODS: REINVENTING AGRICULTURAL TECHNOLOGIES AND PRACTICES IN MALAWI, 1859-2010

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the efforts the state and other European actors made to transform the manner in which Africans produced and consumed their foods in Malawi from 1859 to 2010. It draws from oral histories, classical writings, archival and other documentary evidence to demonstrate the extent to which African agricultural technologies, practices and uses have survived global forces to sustain food production and nutrition among the peasants of southern Malawi. It observes that, despite possessing political and economic power, the state, in its various forms, was not always all-powerful or monolithic in executing its food and nutrition interventions in the country. It faced challenges from the peasants who constantly resisted and negotiated the terms of their participation. Far from being passive victims of state machination; the peasants sought to not only claim but also cultivate their space within state hegemony. Furthermore, although the new agricultural science was pivotal in transforming Malawian dietary and culinary life, it needed to be adapted to local context to realise its full potential. For, while the local context might have its problems, the eating practices of Malawian peasants were functional, had enabled them to survive over the years and supported demographic growth. In fact, as the paper shows, it was beyond the comprehension of most officials that Africans might know better, from experience, what was good for the land, the crops and their diets. Consequently, the state found itself dealing with food production and malnutrition problems that, even according to their own data, did not exist. Rather than improving the welfare of the peasants, state nutritional interventions succeeded only in adding to their agricultural and financial burdens and widening the existing social disparities among them.