

2022

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Recommended Citation

Williams, F. Edward (2022) "Fresh Maize," *LC Journal of Special Education*: Vol. 3, Article 13.

Available at: <https://digitalshowcase.lynchburg.edu/lc-journal-of-special-education/vol3/iss1/13>

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Fresh Maize!

F. Edward Williams

"Want a maize?"

"Get one maize. It's only 500 *kwacha* (10 cents USD)"

"Get two, one for you and one for me."

All this said by the woman at the stall in the market, as I walk by.

It happens that I know the woman and stop to greet her, "*Mwapoleni Mukwai*." (Hello) "*Muli shani mukwai?*" ("How are you?").

"OK, I'll have one." I take the offered cob of maize and laughingly turn down her repeated request to buy two, "one for me", reminding her that she and her husband own the farm where the maize is grown.

During the dry season, maize is irrigated in order to grow. There is no rain at all for eight months, from May to November. So maize and other crops are planted near a river or other stream of water. Water diverted then gives a soaking. Other places women and children carry water in pails and pour it over the vegetation to provide life-sustaining moisture. Beginning in December, it rains a bit nearly every day and all things, maize included, can grow profusely. Men, women, and children plant wherever there is a tract or bit of land. On land that is ceaselessly cultivated, fertilizer contributes suitable results.

"I saw MR Siwakwi, Saturday on the road to Chipundo. He said he was going to the farm. I was going to a friend's farm, myself." "They just planted maize two weeks ago and with the rain good now, it is growing very nicely."

"Yes, he was here then." "We have to take you to our farm sometime."

"Good, because I would like to see your farm."

Ground maize, roller meal, is used to make *nshima*, a boiled doughy concoction of ground maize deemed necessary for every complete meal. Hand molded small portions are put to use as a consumable-eating utensil. Bread, pastries, and breakfast meal, all also use ground maize as a base.

Umunkoyo, a viscous local beverage, uses maize as a base and combines with pounded "*umunkoya* roots", all boiled in water, and then cooled. At the market people, served from a common gourd, with a shared cup, pay 200 *kwacha* (4 cents USD) to drink. Local beers, as well as national brand beers, use maize as a base when combined with hops.

Naturally, maize as a major crop is planted wherever space allows, and nearly every woman, man, and child "knows how to grow maize." Sometimes this, "I know how to grow maize," attitude obstructs people from learning improved methods with greater yields. The price of maize affects the basis and growth of the local economy.

A typical daily walk through the market, with dialogue and interchange between colleagues and fellow community members including neighbors, illustrates much of the attraction to the market. Not many people have electricity, or televisions and radios for easy access to news, local information, or entertainment. They get the low-down through conversations and from notices posted at the market and on trees in town.

When someone has crops, not immediately needed, a trip into the town market and selling brings always-welcome money to the family. Of course, some people sell at the market every day; it is their livelihood. There are shops at the market, as well.

Bartering for a satisfactory price is a fundamental element of favorable browsing local markets. There perhaps is no "correct" price. The seller and buyer mutually agree on an exchange of *ndalama* (money) and goods. The buyer and other vendors may disapprove or recognize an easy mark if one makes no attempt of negotiating the first demanded price. This seems so indispensable that often vendors suggest a lower price even as they state the initial demanded price.

"Do you have beans?"

"They are 1,500 kwacha (25 cents USD)." "I can give them to you for 1,200 kwacha."

"That is a high price, can you please lower the price?"

"How much do you have?"

"I can pay 1,000 kwacha (20 cents USD)."

"*Ciisuma*, Thank you, that is a good price."

"*Mbasela*, Something for free?"

"OK, here is a small tomato."

"Thank you."

At the open market sellers almost always give a 'bonus' or something for free after buying is finished and asking for it is OK.

Open stalls at the market crudely constructed of simple local materials, reeds and slabs, endure for about one year. At times rough tables are sufficient and umbrellas give shade and protection

to sellers from the sun. Many temporary, one day, sellers use the open ground or reed mats to display their wares.

There is no refrigeration at the open market and little refrigeration in the shops. Some homes have refrigeration and freezers. People with freezers make 'ice blocks', frozen kool-aide, to sell for 100 kwacha (2 cents USD). Kept in a plastic pail the ice-blocks melt after 3 hours, some people will buy for the cool sweet drink remaining.

Displayed on open tabletops, reed mats on the ground, or in baskets, dry fish is a big seller at the market. Flies, thick as dust, swarm around the fish. On occasion there is dried wild game, or bush meat. Most of this is sold privately, because it may be poached from game management areas.

Dirt, dust, and flies are abundant. Many sellers flutter hands or leaves to disturb the flies. Items dropped to the ground are dusted off and returned for sale. Maize husks and other are dropped in the paths. When rain comes, there is a mad dash for shelter and to protect and secure items from water and mud. Rain, muck, and spoiled food on the ground create a strong unpleasant odor of decay.

Barefoot children meander around the market through dust, mud, and trash and even an occasional adult is without shoes. During each day the ground is raked and swept, dust tolerated, and then husks together with trash immediately begin to return.

Food must be carefully washed at home when prepared for eating. Boiling and 'overcooking' food at home offers sanitation not available at the market. Restaurants typically serve food cooked 'well done'.

"What is this? It looks like small little bees."

"This is *icibengele*, ('flying white ants')." "The wings are gone and they are roasted in a frying pan." "These *icibengele* are good." "They are crunchy."

"*Ni shinga?* (How much?)"

"1,500 kwacha."

"I don't have 1,500 kwacha. I can give you 1,000 kwacha."

"OK, that is good."

"*Natotela sana* (Thank you very much)."

Mushroom, *icibengele*, caterpillars, oranges, and other local native food heaps at the market, when they are in season. Occasionally people dry the local food and store it for selling out of season at a higher price.

Some vendors occupy strongly constructed permanent structures of brick and concrete. Displaying manufactured goods and food produced in factories for sale, these shops operate with dependable schedules of open and closed hours. A person asks for and how many of each item exhibited at the front and behind the counter as desired. A helper procures one's request from the store room area in back of the counter. The "principal cashier" remains 'on watch' behind the counter at all times.

Basic consistent pricing from day to day and from shop to shop is welcome, but stocking of these shops tends to be irregular. A few shops offer "discount' pricing and/or RRP, the "Right Retail Price". One factor for pricing is the cost to transport the consumer goods to the shops. Merchandise comes from major cities that are seven or more hours motor vehicle travel away, 700 or more kilometers, over a good asphalt highway. Fluctuating prices of fuel directly affect the price of goods in the shops. Some items of course, even come from a neighboring country.