

Fanchester Un(lim)ited

Castle's Kenya Collection (5) – Ugandan Edition

Farming and food star again in this bulletin. But the focus is on a crop I haven't mentioned yet, and a country I've now visited for the first time. I look forward to returning!

Cassava was definitely my thing this week. Boiled at dinner, roast in the car, on sale everywhere along the road. The long road from Kampala to northern Uganda.

Our partners at [NaCCRI](#), the Ugandan cassava (plus many other plants) research institute, are doing some fascinating work on this crop. With support from a very big foundation and us, they're working closely with colleagues at EMBRAPA. That's the giant national research organization in Brazil, one of the world's other great cassava nations.



Well-established cassava plants look like the picture on page 2. The crop is known in some places as manioc, mandioca or yuca (not to be confused with yucca!), as well as by lots of other names. In the UK, it's also sweetly familiar to school lunch veterans – as tapioca. Far more importantly, cassava is a staple food for millions of Africans from west to east. It's also a key source of industrial starch. The market is booming.

So far, so yummy.

Unfortunately, cassava has some serious disadvantages in the field. The planting material – chunky lengths of stem – is bulky, inefficient to multiply, and vulnerable to pests and diseases. (Here's what termites left of a stem 24 cm long and as thick as those above). Those weaknesses are bad news for farmers. East African smallholders can't grow enough of it to meet demand. Forex-sapping imports fill the gap.



So NaCCRI, EMBRAPA and we foundations are trying to change the equation. The Ugandans are now testing shorter pieces of planting material, pre-treated to stay healthy. (That's an approach adapted from sugarcane, which has some agronomic similarities). Most of the studies are at NaCCRI HQ outside the capital, Kampala. Further sites are up that long road north.

Most of the road is dead straight, unkenyanly pothole-free, and light on traffic. (South Sudan and the D.R. Congo aren't really truckers' favorites right now). However, we got stopped by a very loud soldier for taking photos of a waterfall. This is illegal, apparently, although there's no sign to tell you. But Sergeant Yellatcha softened during debate and let us continue (free of charge) with a "May God forgive you". Perhaps our blue government number-plates helped. Or the wise words of the only lady on board.

Overall, and despite a very loud policeman as well, the road remained easy, including a friendly stop for Coke and – we're crop-loyal! – fried cassava. The Coke (or here unkenyanly often Pepsi) is important, by the way: Fried cassava is chewy, dull and dry.

Leave this great tarmac connection with the capital, however, and Uganda's rural arteries quickly turn red and bumpy. Despite 40 million inhabitants, the country tracks also pass surprisingly few villages. When they do, and if there's a TV, it always seems to be showing the same as in Kenya: soccer. Not Vipers vs. Entebbe Express, mind you, but (at least until these mercifully stop) European leagues. And now endless appetizers for the World Cup – even though Uganda and Kenya are like Italy (and the vast majority of the UN), and won't actually be participating.

With football on the flickering screen comes the merchandise, original or fake. Tons and tons of football shirts on road-side coathangers, and on people (mainly male) of all shapes and sizes. And yes: In one of the remotest villages along a bumpy red track miles from the road to South Sudan, a little boy waves to our car in a Manchester United shirt.

More pervasive even than Coke, the likes of Man U, Barça and Bayern are on the chests of millions. They also grimace from idiosyncratic portraits on Kenyan matatus. (Most Ugandan buses are too smartly painted for Ronaldo & Co.). And while Switzerland is currently belly-aching about online gambling – to the point of a referendum (a.k.a. The National Hobby) – football indirectly pays for Kenyas rich media landscape through betting ads, and for Uganda's through breweries' games of chance. Brazil would be proud of them!



So perhaps it's a common love of football, as well as of science and cassava, that makes NaCCRI and EMBRAPA such excellent partners? (That's not First-Time Visitor Me calling them that, it's the highly-experienced Ugandan Director). But whatever the motivators, I wish them the very best – including, vitally, the people working on the completely new business case. Because, just like footy shirts, innovative farming developments have to sell. It's no good your new Man-ioc beating Man-chester on paper, if nobody wants it on the farm. Re-thought crops must appeal not just to scientists, but also to young men along bumpy red tracks near the DRC.

And to their mothers, wives and sisters, who do all the real work.