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Faith, food and the future

**Indigenous crops –
production, use and benefits**



Examples of Indigenous Foods

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About this paper

This paper draws on the Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute's (SAFCEI's) 2025 *Faith, food and the future: Indigenous food systems for climate and community resilience* publication to describe the benefits of indigenous and traditional foods, as well as the systems in which they are produced and consumed. It gives an overview of common indigenous and traditional foods in Malawi, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe, including notes on production, preparation and benefits. It aims to inspire policymakers, faith communities, farmers and regional actors to protect and revitalise indigenous food systems through agroecological practices, legal reforms, investment in local markets and knowledge transmission, and the recognition of women's leadership in food and seed systems. This is the third document in a series of three reports on *Food, Faith and the Future*, namely: Research report, Policy recommendations and Examples of indigenous foods.

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Introduction

Southern Africa faces intertwined crises of climate change, hunger and the erosion of traditional farming knowledge, driven by industrial agriculture and extractive economies rooted in narrow notions of 'modernisation'. These forces have deepened hunger, displaced smallholder farmers, degraded ecosystems and weakened spiritual and cultural ties between people, land, seed and community. Indigenous food systems offer a pathway to resilience, blending ancestral knowledge, agroecology, diverse local crops and spiritual traditions that connect food production with ecological care (van Zonneveld et al. 2023).

They embody ecological wisdom, justice, culture and spirituality. They are sources of nutrition, medicine and livelihoods but also embody sacred relationships between people, land, water and seed. Faith leaders affirm that protecting these systems honours the Creator, the ancestors and the seasons of life, making their revival a matter of ecological justice and spiritual duty.



What are traditional and indigenous foods?

Indigenous foods originate from specific regions and include wild or semi-wild species foraged or lightly managed for centuries (e.g. baobab, marula) as well as domesticated crops cultivated by African communities over centuries (e.g. sorghum, finger millet) (Akinola et al. 2021). Defined by their African origin, pre-colonial use and cultural significance, they can be classified as conventional indigenous crops when cultivated (e.g. sorghum, cowpeas) and less conventional when left to grow naturally (e.g. calabash) (Akinola et al. 2021).

Traditional foods include both indigenous species and crops introduced through trade, migration or colonisation—such as maize, cassava and sweet potato—that have become naturalised over time, adapting to local ecosystems and woven into traditional seed saving, plant breeding and food customs. Their deep cultural integration over generations means many are now referred to as indigenous foods (Akinola et al. 2021). SAFCEI's faith leaders describe these foods as "seeds of continuity passed through generations" and "foods rooted in the wisdom of elders who understand soils, water and ecological health."

This paper includes indigenous and traditional foods because together they sustain ecosystems, farming practices, cultural identity and spiritual traditions (van Zonneveld et al. 2023). The term indigenous foods is used in the paper to refer broadly to both indigenous and traditional foods produced within indigenous food systems for nutrition, medicine, cultural and spiritual use.

Why indigenous food systems matter

Grown in traditional agroecological systems rooted in diversity, soil health, recycling, local economies and social values, indigenous food systems align ecological farming with cultural identity and support climate adaptation, food and nutrition security and biodiversity goals.

Biodiversity, agroecology and climate resilience

Indigenous crops such as sorghum, millet, cowpea, amaranth, marula, moringa and Bambara groundnut are drought-resilient, low-input and biodiversity-enhancing (Food and Agriculture Organization et al. 2023).

Harvested from the wild or grown using agroecological practices like intercropping, seed saving, organic fertilisation, crop rotation and water harvesting, they improve soil fertility, reduce pests and support ecosystem services such as pollination and water retention, strengthening food system resilience against pests, diseases and climate shocks (Mgwenya et al. 2025; van Zonneveld et al. 2023).

Nutrition and health benefits

More than 7 000 indigenous and traditional food species have historically been used, many richer in protein, vitamins (A, C), minerals (iron, calcium, zinc) and dietary fibre than global staples like wheat, rice and maize (Akinola et al. 2021). Crops such as Bambara groundnut, cowpea, amaranth, morogo (collective term for wild vegetables) and wild fruits provide essential amino acids absent in industrial staples, lowering risks of anaemia, childhood blindness and diet-related diseases (Mgwenya et al. 2025) while supplying antioxidants and bioactive compounds with medicinal value (rooibos, moringa) (Akinola et al. 2020).

They are generally healthier than industrially produced and processed foods linked to rising obesity and other non-communicable diseases.

“ These foods are born from the covenant between the Creator, the land and the people. It is not only what we eat but how we honour the Earth that feeds us. Grown in ways that protect soil, heal water and mark the seasons, it keeps alive the ceremonies, prayers and sacred bonds connecting our communities to God, the ancestors and the living Earth. ”

– Matilda Fakazi, African Spirituality Faith Leader, Zimbabwe



Rape Vegetable.

“ Indigenous foods have more resilience to climate change; a shift towards indigenous food and systems means sustainable and resilient ways of solving the food crisis. ”

– Mu-Aalima Amyna, Muslim Faith Leader, South Africa

Livelihoods, local economies and markets

Indigenous food systems—from seed production and farming to processing and local markets—generate rural employment and income, especially for women farmers and informal traders (United Nations Environment Programme, 2017). Crops such as rooibos tea, marula oil and moringa powder already supply niche global markets, illustrating

the commercial and livelihood potential of indigenous foods when linked to local value addition (Akinola et al. 2020).

Cultural and spiritual significance

Indigenous foods sustain rituals, ceremonies, seed festivals and communal food practices that affirm our place in the community of life (SAFCEI, 2022).

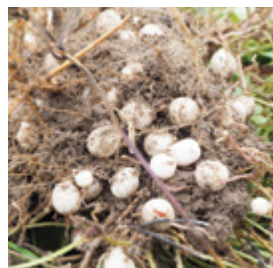
“ Indigenous food and seeds are deeply intertwined with spiritual practices, representing connection, reciprocity, nourishment, ceremony, creation, prayer and gratitude. ”

– Dipuo Jose, Christian Faith Leader, South Africa

Overview of common indigenous foods

Indigenous foods in Malawi

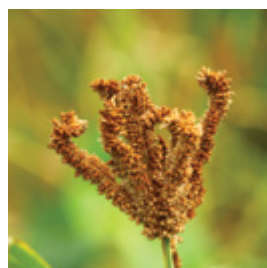
Bambara Nut (*Arachis hypogaea* L.),



or nzama, is mainly grown by women on small, rain-fed plots, thriving in low-fertility soils with minimal rainfall thanks to its drought tolerance and pest resilience (Ngwira

et al. 2019). As a nitrogen-fixing legume, it improves soil fertility, is intercropped with cereals like maize and millet, and yields 600–1 000 kilogram/hectare under optimal conditions. It is eaten boiled, roasted, salted or processed into milk, yoghurt, butter, cheese and flour for breads and cakes, while stalks and byproducts provide livestock feed, biofuel and fishmeal potential (Ngwira et al. 2019). It is rich in protein, amino acids, iron, calcium and fibre, boosting food security, women's incomes and carrying cultural value through fertility rituals and use in traditional medicine for ear infections, lung conditions, nausea and infertility (Maphosa & Jideani, 2024).

Finger Millet (*Eleusine coracana* L. Gaertn),



or mchewere, thrives in sandy loam soils with moderate fertility and ~1 000-millimetre rainfall (Ngira et al. 2019). Drought- and salinity-tolerant, it matures in 4–5 months, suits marginal

lands and is typically grown in intercropping systems resistant to pests and diseases. Harvested by cutting, sun-drying and threshing, it is gluten-free and rich in calcium, iron, protein, fibre and antioxidants, lowering risks of diabetes, hypertension and heart disease (Ngira et al. 2019). Milled into porridges, pancakes, breads and traditional beverages, it supports household food security and livelihoods, especially in drought-prone areas (Ngira et al. 2019).

Pigeon Pea (*Cajanus cajan*), or nandola,



is grown by smallholder farmers for food, cash income and export, contributing about 53% of Malawi's pulse production (Ngira et al. 2019). It thrives in low-input

systems, is deep-rooted, drought-tolerant and nitrogen-fixing, improving soil fertility, preventing erosion and breaking hardpan. Often intercropped with maize, groundnuts and soybeans, it ensures a continuous food supply, while stems and leaves serve as livestock fodder. Its protein-rich grains are eaten as split peas, whole grains in stews or flour for porridge and baked goods. With multiple harvests per season, pigeon pea strengthens drought resilience, boosts soil fertility and supports year-round household nutrition and income (Ngira et al. 2019).

Pumpkin (*Cucurbita maxima*), or



chibwabwa, is widely grown by smallholder farmers for household consumption, with its leaves, fruits and seeds providing year-round nutrition (Jere et al. 2020). Easy to grow,

low-cost and preferred over exotic vegetables for flavour, availability and health benefits, it features in *nkhwani otendera*—a traditional dish with peanut flour and maize porridge

(*nsima*)—while fruits are eaten as vegetables or stews and seeds are roasted or snacked on. Nutritionally, pumpkin is rich in vitamins (A, B-6, C), calcium, iron, zinc, magnesium and dietary fibre, supporting immunity, eyesight and overall health (Jere et al. 2020). As a low-input, fast-growing crop suited to smallholder systems, it is central to food sovereignty and traditional cuisine.

Cultural and ceremonial significance of Bambara nut

In Malawi, Bambara nut is entwined with deeply symbolic beliefs. Amongst other things, it is thought to invite death to a household—yet, paradoxically, women who have already lost a child are believed to be spared further tragedy if they grow the crop, speaking to its layered spiritual significance. It is closely associated with women and carries taboos that influences who cultivates and consumes it. Bambara nut is closely linked to fertility, death, protection, love and traditional medicine (Maphosa & Jideani, 2024).

Indigenous foods in South Africa

Sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor* (L.) Moench),

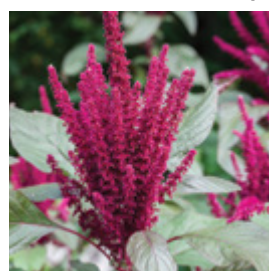


or *amazimba*, *amabele* or *mabele*, is grown by smallholder farmers under rain-fed conditions (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, 1996). It thrives in marginal

soils with deep roots, leaf-rolling and drought dormancy for resilience to heat and erratic rainfall (Namatsheve et al. 2020). Maturing in as little as 75 days with up to three harvests per year, it is intercropped with legumes like cowpea to improve soil fertility, ground cover and system diversity (Namatsheve et al. 2020). The grain is used for porridges, flatbreads, pancakes, rice-like dishes, traditional beers (*umqombothi*) and non-alcoholic drinks (*mahewu*), while stalks and leaves provide fodder, fuel and building materials. It provides more food energy per

labour unit than most grains, has higher protein than maize and offers antioxidant and anti-inflammatory benefits (Pereira & Hawkes, 2024).

Amaranthus (*A. deflexus*, *A. thunbergia*),



known as *morogo*, *imifino*, *morotho*, *lerotho* or *murudi*, is an indigenous leafy vegetable (Mashamaite et al. 2022). Thriving in backyards, fields and marginal lands, it tolerates drought, heat

and poor soils, making it a 'climate-smart' crop for low-input systems. Harvested 4–6 weeks after planting, its young leaves and shoots are eaten boiled or stewed with tomato, onion or groundnut, served with maize or sorghum porridge, or sun-dried, fermented or pickled for off-season use. Rich in vitamins (A, C), protein, fibre, calcium, iron and antioxidants, amaranthus supports nutrition and biodiversity (Mashamaite et al. 2022). Traditionally used to treat fever,

The cultural connection with Sorghum

Sorghum, cultivated in Africa for more than 8 000 years (Pereira & Hawkes, 2024), holds deep cultural and spiritual significance. Among Nguni communities, the *amadlozi* (ancestral spirits) are honoured as mediators between people and God (*uNkulunkulu*), with sorghum beer (*umqombothi*) offered at initiations, weddings, funerals, family gatherings and shrines. Preparing and sharing these foods affirms the sacred bond between people, land, seed and water, linking ancestral respect with care for creation. Brewing *umqombothi* is traditionally done by women, though taboos restrict them during menstruation or pregnancy when their increased 'heat' is believed to disturb fermentation.

anaemia, diabetes and infections, its anti-inflammatory and antimicrobial properties are now confirmed by research. Pest-repelling traits and low-input growth make it vital for affordable, nutritious diets and resilient food systems.

Marula (*Sclerocarya birrea*), known as *morula*,

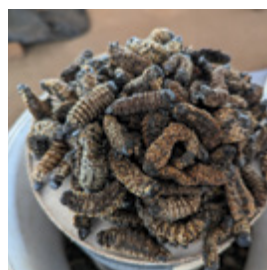


mufula or *ukanyi*, grows in savannas, bushveld and sandy loam soils, often with baobabs and acacias. Harvested mainly from wild or semi-wild trees, it blooms September–November and ripens

December–June, with mature trees yielding up to 500 kilograms a year. Fruits feed wildlife and are eaten fresh or made into juices, jams, syrups, chutneys, beers, wines and liqueur. Nuts are consumed directly or cold-pressed for oil used in cooking, cosmetics and global trade. Marula fruit has six times more vitamin C than oranges, plus fibre, minerals and amino acids, while nuts are protein- and oil-rich (Hlangwani et al. 2023). Bark, leaves and fruit treat malaria, dysentery, diarrhoea, infections and heartburn, while wood and fibres provide utensils, ropes and

dyes. Economically, marula underpins women-led enterprises in cosmetics, handicrafts and food processing, while culturally it features in fertility rituals, gender ceremonies and communal identity.

Mopane Worm (*Gonimbrasia belina*), or



masonje, is harvested twice yearly from mopane woodlands—with late-stage larvae collected by hand (Nemadodzi et al. 2023). After degutting, boiling and sun-drying, they store for months and enter both

local markets and supermarkets as demand grows. Cooked into stews, relishes or ground into flour for protein-rich foods, they are a long-standing part of Southern African cuisines. Rich in protein, fat, B vitamins and polyunsaturated fatty acids, mopane worms offer a good potassium-to-sodium ratio for heart health (Nemadodzi et al. 2023). They provide low-cost, long-lasting nutrition and are a key income source for rural women while linking livelihoods to woodland conservation. Rising demand and cross-border trade, however, highlight the need for sustainable harvesting practices.

Indigenous foods in Zambia

Cowpea (*Vigna unguiculata* (L.) Walp),



known as *likhobi*, *nkhaka* and *khobwe*, is grown mainly by smallholder farmers in low-input, drought-prone systems, thriving in poor soils while improving fertility through nitrogen fixation

(Muchemwa et al. 2022). Often intercropped with maize, sorghum, groundnuts and other staples, it provides multiple harvests, contributing to farm diversification and climate resilience. Dual-purpose varieties supply both food and fodder, supporting dairy and cattle systems through residue use. Leaves are eaten as relish with groundnut paste, while grains are boiled, ground into flour or consumed as fresh pods. High in protein, iron, vitamins and micronutrients, cowpea strengthens household

diets, reduces maize dependency and supports soil health, crop rotation and dryland food security (Muchemwa et al. 2022).

Okra (*Abelmoschus esculentus*), or *delele*, grows in warm, lowland areas under drought- and heat-prone conditions with minimal inputs (Elkhalifa et al. 2021). Farmers often intercrop it with maize, sorghum or groundnuts, promoting land efficiency and climate-resilient production. Eaten fresh during the rainy season, pods are also dried and powdered for off-season use, extending availability and income opportunities through fresh and dried produce markets. Rich in vitamins (A, C), folate, calcium and dietary fibre, okra supports nutrition, food security and gut health. Its drought tolerance and low-input needs make it a key crop for smallholders facing climate stress (Elkhalifa et al. 2021).



Spider Plant (*Cleome gynandra*), or *Lulamba*, grows widely in backyard gardens and intercropped plots, regenerating easily after harvest and requiring minimal inputs (Chatara et al. 2023). Seeds saved



by women farmers maintain local diversity and ensure availability in low-rainfall seasons. Eaten fresh or dried with groundnut paste or tomato sauces, spider plant accompanies maize porridge (*nshima*); it provides vitamin A, calcium, iron and antioxidants essential for nutrition and immune health (Chatara et al. 2023). It sustains dry-season diets when other vegetables are scarce, offers local income for women farmers and supports traditional medicinal uses for fatigue and immunity.

Chikanda (*Disa*, *Habenaria*, *Satyrrium* spp.), or African polony, is made from wild orchid tubers harvested in Miombo woodlands (Gattuso, 2019). Tubers are sun-dried, ground into flour, mixed with peanuts and spices, and cooked into



loaf-like delicacies eaten at ceremonies and as urban street food. The growing market provides livelihoods for women harvesters and traders, linking forests, food systems and cultural heritage. Yet overharvesting threatens orchids and woodland ecosystems (Gattuso, 2019). If managed sustainably, chikanda could support eco-friendly enterprises, forest conservation and its role as a heritage food central to Zambia's cultural identity (Gattuso, 2019).



The original *chilanga mulilo* tradition

Among the Bemba people of Zambia, *chilanga mulilo*—literally 'showing the fire'—was a pre-marriage ritual marking the groom's formal welcome into his bride's family (Simataa et al. 2024). For the first time, he ate food prepared by his future mother-in-law, symbolising trust, respect and family ties. Traditionally involving only close relatives and women trained in marriage customs (*banachimbusa*), the cooking process was accompanied by songs conveying moral and cultural teachings, reinforcing respect, diligence and hospitality (Simataa et al. 2024).

Indigenous foods in Zimbabwe

Teff (*Eragrostis abyssinica*) is an annual traditional summer crop grown for human food and livestock feed. Planted September–November when soils reach 15°C, it tolerates most soils except heavy clays, requires minimal inputs



and suits smallholder and commercial farms. Teff can be cut 2–3 times per season for hay, which provides 15–25% protein depending on growth stage, supporting grazing, haymaking and silage systems with low weather-related losses (Icon Foods International, 2025). For human consumption, teff is ground into flour for flatbreads, porridges and baked goods. It is gluten-free, contains 11% protein, high lysine, calcium and iron, with 100 grams of teff bread supplying 45% of daily iron needs (Icon Foods International, 2025). It aids in digestion, gut health and acts as a prebiotic, while it may lower risks of heart disease, bowel disorders, kidney disease and type 2 diabetes, making it a climate-resilient, health-promoting crop for Zimbabwe's farming systems.

Sugar Plum (*Uapaca kirkiana*), known as *nsuku*, *mazhanje* and *chilundu*, grows up to 12 metres and is central to indigenous agroforestry systems in Zimbabwe (Wellsforzoe, n.d.). Forming mutual associations with



mycorrhizae, it improves soil fertility, prevents erosion on hillsides and offers termite-resistant wood for long-term cultivation and multipurpose use. Fruits are eaten fresh, sold in markets, brewed into wine or made into fried cakes, providing seasonal nutrition and income for rural households (Wellsforzoe, n.d.). Root infusions treat indigestion and dysentery, while roots yield a blue dye for cultural practices. Wood serves in carpentry, fencing and charcoal production, while the juicy, honey-like fruit supports biodiversity and food security stewardship.

Termite Mushrooms (*Termitomyces schimperi*) appear after the first rains, coinciding with termite swarming, and are harvested mainly in mid-January before deterioration or insect damage (Naturally Zimbabwe, 2025). They



cannot be cultivated artificially, growing only in termite 'fungal gardens', making them a unique product of termite–ecosystem relationships. Traditionally, roots and caps are removed before mushrooms are fried, grilled, boiled or sun-dried for storage, with some frozen after light frying (Naturally Zimbabwe, 2025). Rich in protein, carbohydrates, fats, vitamins and minerals, they provide a key protein source for communities with limited access to meat, serving as seasonal delicacies that support biodiversity, dietary diversity and ecosystem-linked nutrition in Zimbabwean food systems.

Mukwerera a rain-petitioning ceremony

Mukwerera is a traditional Zimbabwean ceremony calling on the ancestors for rain, led by the *svikiro*, who is believed to intercede with the spirits. When drought threatens, people seek the *svikiro*'s permission to hold the ritual. At sunset, elderly women carry corn porridge (*masvusvu*) and tobacco to the sacred site, offering them to the spirits before returning home. At sunrise, the community gathers to sing and dance under the *svikiros*' direction (Sango, n.d.).



Conclusion

Drawing on centuries of ecological wisdom, indigenous food systems offer nutritious diets, climate-resilient livelihoods, biodiversity conservation and cultural and spiritual renewal in the face of climate change and the harms caused by industrial agriculture.

Urgent action is needed to:

- Reform policies to recognise indigenous food systems in climate, nutrition and biodiversity strategies and align them with African and global frameworks.

- Invest in seed banks, processing, school feeding programmes and research to strengthen indigenous food value chains.
- Revive cultural knowledge by supporting women farmers, elders and youth networks to preserve seed-saving practices and ecological traditions.

For faith communities, this is more than an agricultural agenda. It is a moral and spiritual imperative to honour the Creator, care for the Earth and ensure justice for generations to come.

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