

Hunger, Healing, and Citizenship in Central Tanzania

Kristin D. Phillips

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Abstract: This article draws on newspaper commentary, Nyaturu hunger lore, and ethnographic research to describe how central Tanzanian villagers accessed food aid from the state during the East African food crisis of 2006. Through leveraging their political support and their participation in national development agendas, rural inhabitants claimed their rights. Yet it was through these exchanges that the state converted food aid into political power. The article argues that the highly ritualized gift of food aid naturalizes a contemporary political and economic order in which, counterintuitively, it is rural farmers who go hungry.

Kocc Barma said if you want to kill a proud man, supply all his everyday needs, in the long run, you will make him a slave, dakngaydon, dak.... If a country is always taking aid from another people, that country, from its children, from generation to generation, will be able to say only one word...thank you! thank you! thank you!

From *Guelwaar*, written and directed by Ousmane Sembene
(transcribed in Fofana 2005)

Introduction

In late 2005 and early 2006 drought and hunger spread across East Africa. In the Singida region of central Tanzania, villagers faced skyrocketing food prices, dwindling stores of grain and access to cash, and delayed promises

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from the state for relief food—what the Nyaturu refer to as *ufoni*, or the “healing” of their hunger.¹ For several months villagers struggled to lay claim to state resources. But as aid trickled down through national and district bureaucracies, Singidans’ right to food threatened to be “eaten” by officials, diverted to other communities, or funneled too narrowly only to the very poorest citizens. Tensions came to a climax when young men of Langilanga village went on strike, announcing that until sufficient food aid for all had arrived they would refuse to participate in village development projects.² The construction of teacher housing, the repair of school latrines that had collapsed in the previous year’s rains, the digging of a deep-water well—all of these projects would come to an abrupt halt without village labor and resources.

In this article I draw on newspaper commentary, Nyaturu hunger lore, and ethnographic research conducted in Singida between 2004 and 2007 to describe how Singidan villagers accessed food aid by leveraging their political support and their participation in national development agendas and by invoking a Tanzanian idiom of political critique that centers on metaphors of food and feeding. My analysis places theories of food scarcity and distribution (Cliggett 2005; Lipton 1975; Sen 1981; Thompson 1971) in conversation with the literatures on food and politics (Appadurai 1981; Bayart 1993; Schatzberg 2001) and on exchange and gifts (Mauss 1990; Graeber 2001; Piot 1999; Strathern 1988) to explore three questions. First, how do flows of food and the exchange relationships that govern them generate relationships of reciprocity, authority, and patronage among rural villagers and the Tanzanian state? Second, how do villagers’ protests against the terms of these exchanges both articulate and obscure a broader critique of the contemporary system of producing and distributing food? And finally, what is the state’s return on a system that watches the cheap and discreet export of food from Singida in a hunger year only to later reimport it with great ceremony, cost, and delay? I argue that through these exchanges, the state converts food aid into political power. I go on to demonstrate how the highly ritualized gift of food aid naturalizes a contemporary political and economic order in which, counterintuitively, it is “rural food producers who most often go hungry” (Shipton 1990:361).

Hunger and Healing in Rural Singida

“Ufoni uaja!” “The healing has arrived!”³ In March 2006 word traveled quickly from homestead to homestead, along cattle paths lined with tall young millet, across Langilanga village’s forty square kilometers. Within hours, hundreds of villagers were milling around the village office and its surrounds. Groups of men rolled tobacco into old newspaper and exchanged news of the newly arrived government food aid. The young men who had been playing *bao* at the roadside when the grain arrived recounted the number of sacks they had hauled from the truck into the village office.

Women, too, congregated, with ragged empty sacks bearing the faded blue emblem of the World Food Programme (WFP). Many nursed children after the long walk as they soberly exchanged guesses about the amount of food the leaders would distribute to each household. In a side room representatives of the village government—a council of elected men and women of various ages—gathered to “do the math.” Days would pass before they issued any rations.

The mood was less celebratory than I had anticipated. The word on the path was that the food aid would not suffice for all those suffering in the village. As we sat in my room at the village office, Nyajuli, a mother of four in her forties, predicted that with the limited amount of aid, leaders would target only the hungriest of the hungry. “But hunger has now settled with every person!” she lamented. “We are all sick with hunger. That is why we say ‘Old age is miserable. Famine is better.’ At least for famine there’s a cure.”⁴ This seemingly indigenous medical model for understanding hunger, in which state therapy cures rural pathology, struck me as a rather odd euphemism for the situation in which Langilanga villagers found themselves.

During the previous year, the rains had been insufficient and ill-timed, and the harvest had produced a mere one-third of the village’s food requirements.⁵ Villagers had immediately sold much of their meager harvest to pay off debts and make mandatory contributions to the school and to village development projects. With dwindling household stocks, they soon began to purchase back imported grain sold at the local market at increasingly astronomical prices. The price of millet and maize increased fivefold, while the value of the livestock that they traded for food dropped to a third of its normal value. Clever investors who had bought grain low and could resell high made a huge profit, but most cash-poor villagers suffered a great loss. Late rains in 2006 then exacerbated the situation. And when the WFP, without explanation, ceased its delivery of two meals per day to rural Singidan schoolchildren, the situation became grim. The families I knew, even the village chairman’s family, had reduced their food intake to one meal per day.

From November 2005 on, people were anticipating the food aid that their president had promised them. In the early months, when the more well-off villagers were still hopeful that the rains would fall early, they hired day labor to help with rigorous plowing and cultivating. Women still brewed beer to make a small profit with which they could buy more grain. And life seemed to be going on as usual in the months of scarcity. But by February, when the rains had still not come, and women woke at three in the morning to draw water from the sometimes-trickling well, distress was palpable. As Senge, a 26-year-old security guard working in Singida Town described the situation, “There is no assistance in these days, no opportunities for day labor to be found. Now is hunger. People fear the sun, this sun of drought. Their hands are deep in their pockets. The young men have fled to the cities. They are afraid of this sun.”⁶

As the weeks went by, tensions rose. Concerned about the delay of village development projects and the loss of government funding, village leaders threatened young men at a village assembly in February 2006: “If you don’t do the work of building the nation, you won’t get any food aid.” The young men offered a counterthreat: “If we don’t get any food aid, we’re not building the nation!” Villagers also flung accusations at the village and school leaders about the missing school food. “They’re selling it!” complained Abdallah, a notoriously querulous father of four in his fifties. “Thieves, all of them! Worse than lions, they are hyenas! They don’t just eat that which fills them. They eat everything and its remains!” (interview, Feb. 8, 2006, Singida Rural District). The news that some regional and district leaders had come by sacks of grain to sell at increased prices raised suspicion about the real whereabouts of food aid. Though people considered the purchasing and reselling of grain to be honest business during harvest months, they called it deception during the hunger. “The businessmen hid the maize,” accused one young mother. “Now they will make a devil’s profit from it” (interview, Feb. 9, 2006, Singida Rural District).

As the arrival of food aid was increasingly delayed, accusations flew that government leaders had “eaten the rights” of their constituents by selling it off for their own profit. The head of the household of one of the poorest families waved the chairman out of the tree-lined *kraal* adjacent to his *tembe* compound, cursing him: “All you people do is show up and write reports on us. Help never arrives! Don’t come back until you bring me assistance. I don’t want to answer your questions in vain anymore. Perhaps it is you who have ‘eaten my right!’”⁷ The scene echoed a political cartoon published around the same time by the civil society organization Hakielimu (see figure 1), in which villagers reject poverty researchers from the city: “We are fed up with your endless studies...”; “Give us some money first!”

Rumors began to fly that people in the valley were dying of hunger, that even in Langilanga people were “starting to swell.” The two salaried government officials in the four-village ward received a constant stream of guests whom they were obliged to feed. One lamented his own dwindling grain supply:

They will come all the way to your home to ask for help, to the ward councillor, to the head of the district, even to the head of the region. Since the weekend they have been at [another local leader]’s house, saying they have not eaten in three days. Then they move on to my house. Before you even drink your tea in the morning, you have guests. Hunger is the worst. It’s even worse than war. War you can run from. But hunger...where will you go? (Interview, Feb. 28, 2006, Singida Rural District)

But officials did still have a way out. When their guests became too many, the leaders simply left the village.

Nyamariamu, a widow in her early forties, was known as a villager who “doesn’t even own a chicken.” By February word had spread that she and her



Figure 1: Cartoon by Marco Tibasama, *Hakielimu Annual Report*, 2004.

three children were in trouble and Mama Lili, the chairwoman of the Committee for the Children from the Most Vulnerable Environments (MVC), and I set out to visit her. Finding her not at home, we checked in with two neighbors. “She is truly in a bad state,” said a woman from the deceased husband’s clan. “Unless she goes to pick wild greens to sell now, she doesn’t eat.” Mama Lili, herself a widow who had been spurned by her in-laws after her husband’s death, later lamented, “if her neighbor says she is that bad, she must be *really* bad. We get envious of each other and don’t like it when others get help and we don’t. If her sisters-in-law are saying she is in a bad state, she is truly in trouble” (interview, Feb. 9, 2006, Singida Rural District).

When Mama Lili and I finally found Nyamariamumu at home she looked exhausted and had shrunk dangerously. The small dirt yard outside her mud-roofed house was littered with pits of the small watery *zambarau* fruit. “For a while, when it was raining, greens had no value,” Nyamariamumu said, “but now that it has stopped, they have a little. I get 50 shillings [approximately 5 cents] for one bowl. So I have to sell eight bowls to get one liter of grain a day.”⁸ The day before she had walked the twelve kilometers to town to sell her greens, and had to keep going farther in the other direction to find a buyer. She had left her small child at home and returned at 8:00 p.m., having walked 30 kilometers in the round trip to finally sell her greens at a very low price. She continued: “My children leave school at noon and pick

fruit in the valley and then we try to have one meal at night. We get a little flour from the neighbors [her mother-in-law's family] if I promise to pay them back after the cattle market." I was acquainted with Nyamariamu's older son, Hassani, a tall 17-year old in seventh grade whose buttons strained on his too-small school uniform. According to Nyamariamu, Hassani was studying for the all-important seventh-grade exam—the narrow gateway to higher education—on less than a meal each day.

Finally in March a small amount of food aid arrived—thirty sacks of grain (each approximately 100 kilograms). The village government relayed district orders that food be distributed only to the poorest households.⁹ Langilanga erupted in protest as people demanded "their right." Several men refused to do the heavy work of building the rock wall for the village cattle watering place unless they were given food. The rest of the villagers not designated for food aid soon followed suit. With no alternative, the village representatives returned to several days of calculations to decide how the grain would be distributed. In the meantime, two elders stood guard outside the village office each night. I wondered at this, for the office had often stored more economically valuable items like construction tools for development projects and no such precautions had been taken. The chairman explained, "Yes, but this is food. The tools are not so desirable. But right now a person can be killed for just one bucket of grain. In Nyaturu we say 'The year of the lions does not loan doors.' You cannot trust anyone with food when it is the time of hunger."¹⁰

In the end, village leaders in Langilanga made their allocations according to the village government's three-tiered grouping of households: at the top level, those who could buy grain received no aid; at the lower level, a few of the poorest households were given a small amount of grain (12 kilos) at no charge. Everyone else was allowed to buy 12 kilos of grain at 50 shillings (5 cents) per kilo. While this policy spread the aid more widely to include the middle households, it meant that those in the most dire situations received very little relief from their more desperate hunger.

The rain did return in March and April 2006. With a few ears of fresh maize now available, the prospect of a decent (though late) harvest, and the few kilos of grain distributed as aid, hunger dissipated. But so did the outspoken critique against the political and economic circumstances of rural Singidans. With a victory won over the immediate object of struggle—food aid—the larger war was left to be fought another year. "*Tule, tupone!*" "Let's eat, so that we may heal!" people called to each other from doorways. Presents of pumpkins and peanuts flowed from those who had borrowed and begged to those who had helped. Resolution was in the air, not revolution.

Food, Entitlement, and Exchange in Singida

Singidans are no strangers to hunger. In the last decade alone rural Singidans, primarily agropastoralists of the Nyaturu ethnic group, have faced

three severe food shortages.¹¹ The region, semi-arid and boulder-strewn, straddles the escarpment of the Great Rift Valley. Farming conditions in an area of sandy, nutrient-poor soil and irregular rains are unreliable at best, especially since the decline of herding and the attendant lack of manure for fertilizer. And like elsewhere in Africa, the incidence of famine and the problem of water insecurity has steadily increased.¹² Local histories, relief organizations, and national reports all detail the official history of hunger in Singida in terms of natural disasters or climate issues (e.g., ReliefWeb 2007): grasshoppers, locusts, birds, drought, and floods are among the most commonly cited. These issues of weather, pests, and climate certainly shape the local supply of food during periods of food crisis. However, they do not explain why, when so much abundance exists elsewhere in the world, and even nowadays in Tanzania, food finds its way out of, and not into, rural Singida.

With his theory of entitlements, the Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen offered a powerful explanation for how rural food producers are often the first to go hungry. According to Sen, access to food—or any commodity—“depends on the entitlement relations that govern possession and use in that society. It depends on what [a person] owns, what exchange possibilities are offered to him, what is given to him free, and what is taken away from him” (1981:155). This entitlement theory has helped temper faith in the ebbs and flows of local and global marketplaces and the commonly held view that famine is caused by natural disaster. The market, Sen notes, has little concern for need:

Viewed from the entitlement angle, there is nothing extraordinary in the market mechanism taking food away from famine-stricken areas to elsewhere. Market demands are not reflections of biological needs or psychological desires, but choices based on exchange entitlement relations. If one doesn't have much to exchange, one can't demand very much, and may thus lose out in competition with others whose needs may be a good deal less acute, but whose entitlements are stronger. (1981:161)

In the case of Langilangans, village leaders' entitlements to the annual harvest (for development projects and school contributions) as well as those of creditors (who have lent out money in the hungry months) are stronger than farmers' own claims for their yearly consumption. During the harvest months, when people have access to cash, village and school leaders go to great pains to collect local taxes for development (“contributions” in the local parlance) and secondary school fees. Within a few months of the harvest many poor Singidans find their stores drained for virtually no profit.

Food crises do not come about because there is no grain left in Singida, therefore, but because most people cannot afford to keep it. As E. P. Thompson wrote in his own study of food economies, Adam Smith's invis-

ble hand entails a “de-moralizing of the theory of trade and consumption.... [It is] disinfested of intrusive moral imperatives” (1971:90). Through market transactions, the distribution of food becomes a process unhindered by moral questions and detached from human agents. Around the harvest time, when prices are low but the need for cash is high, food quietly—even invisibly—leaves Singida.

So, when cash and household stocks of food have dwindled for Singidans and the price of grain has skyrocketed, government and international aid organizations intervene in rural famine to provide relief, or “healing.” Yet it is notable that these aid agencies do not intervene in Tanzanian food markets by regulating trade policies and practices to create fair play, providing support to villagers to time their sales more advantageously or to sell locally rather than to exporters, or purchasing rural food supplies at fair prices for local storage against famine. Rather they allow the cheap export of food to city businessmen when villagers are pressed for cash and—with great ceremony, publicity, and flourish—they re-import state aid during famine at high cost for both food and transport. But before I examine how government officials build political legitimacy and secure political support through framing these transactions as gifts, I first explore the flows of food within and beyond Singida, the binding ties they produce, and food’s resultant semiotic value in political life.

The Gender of the Gift: Food of the Farm and the Food of Wealth

In her landmark work *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (1988), Marilyn Strathern examined how pigs, in the process of exchange, come to embody different types of gendered relationships. Here I want to argue that food flows themselves are gendered in Singida and that two patterns of food circulation—the “food of the farm” and the “food of wealth”—generate different kinds of social relationships. Whereas the flows of food among women (food of the farm) generally tend to produce material reciprocity, flows of food among men (food of wealth) tend to produce political obligation. I go on to show how local political hierarchies founded on the food of wealth contrast with state structures that co-opt national and international flows of food to produce state power.

In Singida, food is constantly on the move. Whether served as the stiff porridge *ugali* to kin and clan, brewed as beer for business or pleasure, or left uncooked—the staple crops of maize, millet, and sorghum flow at a dizzying pace among households and to and from markets. Indeed, where cash sources are few, food often serves as the currency of everyday life. These flows form an intricate system of giving and taking, of requesting and granting, of borrowing and lending that characterizes village life.

These transactions, which I call “the food of the farm,” are structured by a kind of hunger protocol that people selectively invoke and modify in their daily lives. Hunger and other disasters (becoming widowed, sick, or

disabled) constantly loom as real possibilities, if not probabilities. “It could be you tomorrow” is a common saying. Others are: “He who is hungry is not laughed at”; “He who cries for food is not rebuked”; “The sound of someone eating creates envy.” Moreover, in a context in which envy is seen to lead (through witchcraft) to disastrous, if not murderous, consequences, one had better share what little one has.

Hospitality is even more critical in times of hunger. “A locust in famine is divided,” people say. A story from the 1998 hunger circulated widely in Langilanga. I never verified its truth, but it certainly functioned as a “rural legend” that served to remind people of the shame involved when someone, receiving no assistance, died of hunger. As Mama Lili narrated:

In 1998 a woman from—I think it was [a neighboring village]—had run out of food. That year, there were many wild fruits. She saw that she had no food left and she went to go look for day labor. She searched for work until dark to no avail. So she went to pick fruit to take home to her children. The children ate it, even though fruit is not the food that takes care of hunger. They cried with hunger, but in the end they bore the discomfort until the next day. In the morning, she left again to look for work in another village. But she wandered again until evening without any luck. She wanted to find sweet potatoes, because in that year that was all there was to eat after the grasshoppers ruined all the food. On her way home, she asked herself, “Again I have failed to get food. What will I do for my children?” So she put stones in her bag so that when her children came to greet her, she could tell them, “I brought you all potatoes. Go on and play outside while I cook your dinner.” So they stayed outside and played with joy because today there would be no lacking food. They would eat! Their mother, on going inside, took a clay pot and put the stones and water inside it. She lit a fire and covered the pot. And then she went into the bedroom. The children, when they investigated the first time, asked, “Mother, aren’t the potatoes ready?” They heard only silence, but saw that the pot was beginning to boil. So they went outside again. The second time they came in to the kitchen and saw again that their mother was not there. They started to cry from hunger, so they opened the pot to see if the potatoes were ready. When they opened it, they saw only rocks and cried. On looking into the inner room they saw that their mother had hung herself. They began to ‘cry the cry for help’ and people came to see this horrible sight. (Interview, June. 3, 2009, Singida Rural District)

The story circulates to remind villagers of their most vulnerable households—those who are female-headed, living among hostile or unhelpful neighbors. Although in the story it is the shame of the mother that drives her to suicide, the story functions to shame everyone else involved—in particular those better off who refused her plea for work or assistance.

Yet hospitality and selflessness are not always advisable when a family must subsist through months of scarcity. Stories traveled throughout Langilanga of how people both with and without food manipulate these social

mores in difficult times. A guest may strategically arrive at the door at the time of the mid-morning meal. His host, likewise, may delay cooking or serving the food. But the guest, if very hungry, may remain until he has been fed. It is also said that in hungry times people do not cook their ugali all the way through, since ugali that is thoroughly cooked gives off the savory aroma of roasted corn. It is better not to let one's neighbors know when one is eating. In any case, when calamity strikes, a husband dies, or a grain store is ruined, a woman hopes she can rely on the web of mutual assistance she has woven. For, as Singidans say (Olson 1964), "a debt is wealth.... The creditor has a bank in other people's pockets." Relationships of reciprocity and exchange—spread within and across villages—offer villagers their strongest social security.¹³

Until the decline of cattle-herding in Singida in the 1980s and '90s and the rise in cash crop agriculture, farming was primarily the domain of women. As a result, even in a polygynous household food produced through farming was owned and managed by individual women who were charged with feeding their own children, their husband, and his kin.¹⁴ Women produced their own grain stores, reserved seed grain, brewed beer to earn cash, and managed the flow of food across households while economizing to make it last throughout the year. In 2006 the management of domestic grain stores (in contrast to cash crop harvests) also remained primarily in the hands of women, who assisted others—and were themselves assisted—with careful accounting.

With the ever-shrinking supply of arable land and the politics that shape its distribution, the size of a harvest varies from household to household, but not dramatically: after all, agriculture in Langilanga is the result of the hand hoe and one's own manual labor. Real differences in wealth emerge either from access to cash through a salaried position (either with the government or a wealthy mission), from livestock, or through interregional trade. During times of hunger, when purse-strings tighten among one's own kin and clan, it is these wealthy households to which the needy flock in the hope of finding compassion. But one will find that this kind of aid—the "food of wealth" (offered in the form of food, money, or the lending of livestock)—is managed primarily by men. And its unidirectional flows produce not relationships of material reciprocity, but rather of political obligation. Whereas a person who is generous with food of the farm will find herself with more friends on whom to rely and more household assistance, a person generous with the food of wealth will find himself enjoying the labor of his debtors, public authority, and opportunities to govern and offer advice. That is, he finds himself in the position of patron: for "if one offers a gift so lavish that the other party could never possibly reciprocate, the result is to reduce him to the same level as a member of one's household, a child or a dependent rather than an equal" (Graeber 2001:221). Yet this political power is not unchecked, for political support demands constant patronage. In Langilanga, local authority endures only as far as one's pockets and one's generosity allow.

As I have described, the food of wealth is distributed in Singida not only by local patrons, but also by the state, which funnels both the food it purchases and donations of food from abroad to needy populations. As I go on to demonstrate, however, a distinct difference exists between the relationships produced by local food of wealth and those produced by state food of wealth. Whereas local authority remains fluid, subject to collapse where resources either do not suffice or are not permitted to be redistributed, state authority endures. The state is constantly reinforced and reproduced through exchange—whatever its terms.

“Eating Rights” and the Right to Eat: The Semiotics of Food in Tanzanian Politics

As a number of scholars have shown, Singidans do not have a monopoly on food as a discourse and instrument of power (see Appadurai 1981; Kahn 1986; Mintz 1985), particularly in African contexts (see Bayart 1993; De Waal 1997; Schatzberg 2001; Watts 1983). In this section I describe how food elaborates both contemporary Tanzanian statecraft and populist critiques of the dramatic swings in governance of the last fifty years—from colonialism, to socialism, to a market economy and multiparty democracy.

Through the historical shifts in governance, Tanzanian adults have experienced a wide range of relationships with those who govern them.¹⁵ In the early years of independence and Tanzanian socialism in the 1960s, Tanzanians saw themselves as engaged in a joint effort with their leaders to build the nation. According to a 1965 study by the linguist Carol Scotton, people used the Swahili word *mwanasiasa*, or “politician,” to refer to any person who “sacrifices his wages for the nation” or who “has no thought of advantage or gain” (1965:535). This contrasts sharply with ideas about Tanzanian government officials today, who preside not over a socialist, self-reliant, and hopeful new nation, but a nominally multiparty market democracy deeply indebted to foreign nations. To many Tanzanians their leaders today seem more concerned with brokering aid money and translating their political service into money-making endeavors than with representing constituent interest on the national political stage. The headline of a Tanzanian *Guardian* article (September 3, 2005) charged, “Ikulu [the Tanzanian presidential palace] only good for a big stomach, heavy pockets.” A political cartoon in the Tanzanian *Guardian* (see figure 2) shows a pot-bellied man in a smart business suit holding out a bowl labeled “food aid.” With his other hand he is dragging an emaciated half-naked villager by the hand saying, “Come! You’ll make the perfect impression on the donors.” A bubble above his head shows that the politician is daydreaming of a pile of money.

Like this cartoon, and Langilangan accusations that their leaders had “eaten their rights,” many Tanzanians frame charges of political corruption and complaints about the unfair distribution of resources in terms of food. “They ate the money” is a frequent charge laid at government officials when



Figure 2: Cartoon by David Chikoko, *Guardian*, February 21, 2006.

questions emerge as to the whereabouts of development funds. A *Majira* political cartoon in March 2006 showed sacks of food aid with grain spilling out of large holes. A large fat rat labeled “village executive directors” sits on the high walls guarding the food aid, but is presumably responsible for the leakage of grain.

Tanzanians often charge leaders with overeating their share. During the hunger in January 2006 a newspaper political cartoon by Anwary (*Majira*, January 26, 2006) depicted a member of the Tanzanian parliament seated at a table, getting ready to dig in to a whole roasted chicken while he demands a larger salary. A small citizen sits at his feet, holding an enormous burden of “sickness,” “poverty,” and “hunger.” A sideline observer asks the parliamentarian in Swahili: “Have you seen the condition of those who put you up there?”

During electoral campaigns food metaphors thrive in the official campaign arena and in its critique. Politicians draw on ideas about food to distinguish themselves from other candidates. During his campaign for the presidency, Kikwete warned voters to “beware of hungry politicians.... They just want to fill their bellies. They will not seek to improve the welfare of the people. You must avoid them” (quoted in Kasumuni 2005). Likewise, Tanzanian voters jokingly refer to campaign season as “harvesting season”—the season of exchanging votes for *takrima*—gifts of money, which are often referred to as “food,” “soda” “sugar,” or “tea.” In a Tanzanian *Guardian* edi-

torial titled “Vote Buying Benefits a Few, Kills Democracy,” one journalist wrote:

I give you a pair of cloths, a kilo of sugar, or I feast you with the mouth watering *pilau*; in return you give me your vote, that is, you vote for me and you ask those with whom you shared the 50 kilos of sugar I gave you to vote for me. That will be the end of our unwritten contact. That is why this period is dubbed “harvesting time”, the time for plenty and it comes every five years.... That is how election time “harvests” are so meager and meaningless to the voter who is forced to “starve” development-wise for five years (or for the rest of his or her life if he or she continues to sell his or her vote). (Hillary 2005)

In the editorial, the author blames not only the manipulative self-interest of politicians, but also the irresponsible appetites of voters for stagnation in development, which he equates with developmental starvation.

This is not to say that Tanzanian politicians are necessarily corrupt. Takrima gifts are to a certain extent legal, if not often-debated, in Tanzania.¹⁶ Moreover, much overconsumption (to borrow the Tanzanian concept) occurs (as it does all over the world) through legitimate market transactions, in which a few have become richer and richer while the majority of people grow relatively poorer. Food simply becomes a powerful yet safe idiom through which to express outrage over Tanzanians’ rude awakening to the excesses of capitalism and the limited realization of democratic ideals since the liberalization reforms of the 1990s. And it is within this context of takrima gifts that food, both literal and figurative, changes hands quickly and often during the election season. The meaning and significance of food aid then, regardless of its origin, is intercepted by this symbolic field of exchange that elaborates political relationships through food.

The Politics of Hunger

The above examples illustrate a set of widely accepted ideas about the connection between political legitimacy, the appetites of the state, and the material well-being of citizens. The conspicuous consumption of the Tanzanian elite and the increasingly visible suffering of the rural and urban poor have raised a vocal critique of the current political and economic order. As Michael Schatzberg has noted, in the predominant paternal discourse of many “middle African” contexts, “if the father nourishes and nurtures, he has the right to rule...and the right to ‘eat’ as long as his political children are well nurtured” (2001:150). The representation of Tanzanians’ well-being, therefore, becomes a site of intense struggle.

When the newly inaugurated Tanzanian president, Jakaya Kikwete, spoke at Namfua Stadium in Singida in January 2006, the *Sunday News* reported that

he warned regional and district officials that they must report on hunger in a timely manner (Nkungu 2006). Acknowledging that some leaders prefer to paint a rosy picture of their jurisdictions in order to further their own career, he demanded that they provide accurate and timely reports. He ended this stern warning with the oddly worded statement: "I will not tolerate press pictures of lean and bony people who we are later told are victims of famine." This concern—less for hungry people than for bad press—demonstrates the social and political shame that hunger deaths produce.

In this way hunger deaths resemble deaths from AIDS. Both cause shame to surviving kin and their local government because they suggest a breakdown of social and political responsibility. In both cases, there is often an attempt to mask the real cause of death by attributing it to a secondary illness (malaria, for example) brought on by a weakened immune system. This ambiguity allows for conflicting diagnoses that reveal the politics and emotions surrounding the issue of hunger. One religious cleric told me that during the 2003 food crisis two people died in a Singidan village. When their bodies arrived for examination at the hospital, doctors concluded and announced on national radio that two people in Singida had died of hunger. Regional government medical officials arrived promptly thereafter to perform autopsies and immediately had national radio announcing that "No one has died of hunger in Singida."¹⁷

In another tragic example from 2006, word spread across Langilanga that a young girl from a neighboring village had died at the hands of a witch. According to her family and village leaders, she had been cursed and poisoned, dying of illness with black spots on her body. A local medical missionary had a different interpretation, more shameful to her village and family: that the young hungry girl had begun to fill her stomach with whatever grew nearby and had accidentally poisoned herself. Witchcraft accusations helped to diffuse blame to the periphery of the family. This sensitivity to the shame of hunger gives villagers particular power in claims for assistance when they begin to assert to government leaders that "people have started to eat grass" and "they have started to swell" (see, e.g., Lugungulo 2006). Such words signal growing desperation, and people use them not only literally but also strategically, to precipitate government action.

So villagers are not without political and social leverage in their claims to food assistance. In addition to the social shame they can leverage, villagers have several other strategies at hand. First, Singidans' labor in development projects is valuable to their leaders because political advancement relies on the success of such projects. In Langilanga and in other villages, labor strikes against village development projects are an effective means of accessing food aid. According to a newspaper article in the *Guardian* (Kisembo 2006), village authorities in Same district, Kilimanjaro region, complained that

"all development programmes are doomed to failure, as many are not willing to work unless they are given food".... He said school building, road

maintenance, trench digging and others are some of the activities that people boycott.... The Village Executive Officer...told the paper that the majority of business people refuse to participate in development activities claiming that they have been marginalized on the food aid issue. Mkumbwa said: "They will tell you that let those who have got food, since they are energetic, go to work."

Second, food shortages undercut not only the moral but also the political legitimacy of elected officials. As we have seen, hunger invites charges that politicians are "eating the rights" of villagers, consuming or profiting from the sale of foodstuffs intended for hungry communities. There may be some truth to these accusations (which may help explain the peculiar timing of food aid, which often arrives *after* prices have already fallen or food has once again become available). Yet one can read accusations of corruption not only as the censure of individuals' behavior but also as a critique of the overall regime that organizes access to political power and economic resources.

Third, people often articulate their support of a particular politician or administration in terms of how they "ate" during their tenure. Likewise, the legitimacy of my own presence in Langilanga, suspect for a good part of my early fieldwork among a rural people quite wary of strangers, was appraised in terms of how I shared my food or wealth or offered assistance. My capacity to represent Singidans' lives, words, and ideas was seen to be directly related to my *huruma* ("compassion") and my physical acknowledgment of their suffering through assistance with food or money. Political leaders, too, gain many points for supplying food in times of need, and even if the timing of aid is awkward or suspect, this is usually overlooked in retrospect as long as food does arrive.

Finally, political leaders are aware that hungry times are volatile times. In both rural and urban areas, young men have been known to participate in group violence; the year before I arrived in Langilanga one such group had killed a woman who had allegedly used witchcraft to protect her son, a known rapist. While such violence is rarely directed toward anyone with political power (for fear of legal retribution), the potential for violence during periods of hunger cannot be ignored; as one ward leader told me, "people have become very angry!" Many district and national leaders, in fact, do not show their face (or more significantly, their bellies!) in rural areas until the hunger has passed.

But food aid for villagers should not be reduced only to its material or caloric value. Obviously villagers want to minimize the loss of life, health, and assets during food shortages. But there is also a more implicit issue at stake—to many Tanzanians, food aid is a reflection of their citizenship and belonging in the nation. This became overwhelmingly clear when in January 2006 a New Zealand woman wanted to donate high-nutrition dog biscuits manufactured by her company to victims of severe drought and



Figure 3: Cartoon by Nathan Kijasti, *Majira*, February 3, 2006.

famine in East Africa. To be fair, the woman claimed that she and her own children often snacked on them; they were perfectly fit for human consumption. But Kenyans (and Tanzanians, judging from the reactions to the article that followed) were angry and insulted by the offer. A cartoon (see figure 3) depicts the shock of Kenyans, while the sideline observer tells a Tanzanian, “See, you eat them!” What I learned in my subsequent time in Tanzania is that people will eat whatever they can in order to get by. But when they accept aid they accept a certain kind of relationship with those who govern them, and they will in no circumstances accept being reduced to the status of animal.

Transacting Citizenship: Legitimacy and Exchange in Famine Relief

Tanzanian citizens, like Singidans with their patrons, leverage their political support, their labor, their vote, and their compliance with state development agendas for a material redistribution of resources and income. But unlike the Singidans’ patrons, who must continue to pay out in order to maintain authority, those in control of state power are far more entrenched and permanent. With only one viable party, Singidans cannot and do not vote with their feet. They therefore find themselves trading ever more of their few assets for an ever smaller slice of “the national cake” (Bayart 1993:90). And with an ever-shrinking proportion of national resources reaching the hands of rural Tanzanians, any small amount arrives with ever greater ceremony and flourish.

District and regional government leaders who visit rural Singida after the delivery of food aid often take personal credit.¹⁸ A leader will remind

his constituents that he has remembered them. He frames state food aid as a “gift” from his party, a donation of personal wealth from leader to citizen (though it only rarely is), or (using a powerful local metaphor of politics) from a father to his children. He may ask them now to help him continue building the nation, but he will steer clear of the language of rights. He will take credit on behalf of himself and his party and ask his constituents to remember both in their votes.

Singidan villagers counter this ceremony with a very different narrative. Under the duress of hunger, vocal Langilangans (the vast majority of whom are men) strip the veneer of volunteerism embedded in the narratives of the “gift” and “participation” and resort to a bald economism. They still couch their claims, however, in the rich language and metaphors of *ujamaa* (Nyerere’s policy of Tanzanian socialism and self-reliance). If they are to do the work of building the nation, they will remind their leaders, they are all equal and the food in his hands is the food of the nation to which they are entitled. While such language leverages the rhetorical power of *ujamaa* to remind a leader that “you are not above us,” it also obscures the fundamental inequality that exists at the village level by arguing that every villager should receive the same amount. It also disregards the value of women’s work and the number of households (often female-headed and without access to farmland) who have sunk to more desperate levels of poverty. This exclusion reveals the attributes of the citizen who can make claims on the state—the laboring male head of household. The village chairman, though aware of the risks of spreading food aid too widely, sighed resignedly when I asked him about it: “They demanded their right, what can we do?” In this instance we see that the moral economy of the poor is often articulated at odds with the interests of those who suffer most.

So how can we understand this economy of exchange, existing as it does in this slippery field of overlapping and contradictory narratives and histories? When politicians refuse to speak in terms of rights or entitlements, what exactly are they eliding? And when villagers shun the idea of the gift, what do they gain? Today Tanzanians and their leaders are negotiating a rapidly transforming system of distributing wealth and resources. When leaders become politicians, what are the implications for rural Tanzanians? When building the nation seems to be elevating the few and not the many, why should the overlooked majority participate at all? If we think about the exchange going on around food aid, it helps if we understand that it is not only an exchange of nourishment for power, but also a debate about the terms under which wealth and poverty are produced. It is not only a conversation about food, but a conversation about postcolonial and postsocialist politics. When politicians refuse to frame food aid as an entitlement, they affirm their own right to private property, and to become rich and powerful individuals. They deny claims of the masses to the resources at their disposal, even when it is not their own property. When villagers refuse to speak in terms of gifts, they capitalize on the language of *ujamaa* that has long been

used to nationalize resources. They not only assert their claims to food and their right to receive aid, but they also protest politicians' power to give it.

Let me offer a final story. During the worst of the hunger, I realized that my own private gifts of food to friends and neighbors who asked for help were not necessarily reaching the people who needed it most. The village chairman, the chair of the Committee of the Children from the Most Vulnerable Environments, and I made it our task to come up with a list of villagers likely to fall through the cracks of social and aid networks (the list was composed almost entirely of *vikongwe*, elders whose age made them unable to work and who lacked the children that would qualify them for most aid efforts).¹⁹ I purchased several gunnysacks of grain to be distributed to these households but asked to remain anonymous, as I had long since learned how my food of wealth had complicated my research. I anticipated that there might be some complaint about the fact that we had distributed this aid to specific households, instead of spreading it around more equally, but our concern for one elderly woman in particular, who had allegedly "started to swell," overrode this concern. Unexpectedly, most people agreed with the tactic, as it was these very destitute households that were draining the resources of their neighboring kin. People were relieved that the village was taking some responsibility. What concerned them was the notion that the donor wished to remain unnamed. At the next village government meeting, several men insisted, "Tell us to whom we are indebted. We must know whom to thank." As Marcel Mauss has noted, "The gift is therefore at one and the same time what should be done, what should be received, and yet what is dangerous to take. This is because the thing that is given itself forges a bilateral, irrevocable bond, above all when it consists of food" (1990 [1954]:59). People were unwilling not to know to whom they were bound and beholden.

In response to this query about my identity (at which I was not present), two members of the village government who had been party to my purchase of the grain seized the opportunity and took credit for the gift. Yet they quickly leaked the truth about my role after they were overwhelmed with demands for assistance that their newfound but short-lived status mandated. Unlike the state officials who took personal credit for state and international food aid, these local leaders did not have the permanence of the state's wealth and authority to back them. My own wealth and status were understood to have their limits. As Singidans pragmatically say about their *wazungu* ("white") guests, "The guest is a river": it brings good things but does not stay, so you take what you can from it before it passes.²⁰

As I and my partners in charity learned the difficult way, "there are no free gifts," either to give or to receive; for "gift cycles engage persons in permanent commitments that articulate the dominant institutions" (Douglas 1999[1954]:ix). I would add that there are no anonymous gifts, no state entitlements that are not marked by the hands that pass them on, regardless of their original source. Every gift has a face that gives it, and a face that

receives it. These transactions put both of these faces in relationship with each other and make them different from each other. It is here that distinctions between citizens and the state, between the powerful and powerless, come into sharper relief.

Conclusion

I sat in my room in the village office on the morning when those being given food at no cost were called to pick it up. These poorest of the poor families trudged in silently and left with little comment. Yet I was also present in the afternoon when food was distributed to those middle-level households (still poor by all standards) who had fought to access some of the aid marked for their poorest neighbors. I noticed that there was something in their posture besides relief at being handed the food. They straightened their spines, stiffened their lips, and ceased their accusations. They seemed to have reacquired respect for government leaders. At the time, I understood this shift as an appreciation for being recognized by the government: of having the state of one's life and hardships honored and recognized as deserving of assistance. These were the people who had fought for their right to assistance and who, in receiving it, felt vindicated. I thought maybe that was the "healing."

But in retrospect, I also understand that Langilangans were honoring the exchange, as unfair and unjust as it was. For if, in the words of Marcel Mauss, "to give is to show one's superiority, to be more, to be higher in rank, *magister*" and "to accept without giving in return, or without giving more back, is to become client and servant, to become small, to fall lower, *minister*" (1990[1954]:74), then Langilangans were holding up their end of the exchange to provide their political support, to go on building the nation, to offer what they could in return. Villagers had demanded and been granted their rights, while politicians had bestowed and been thanked for their gifts. The healing itself was provisional, if not, in its meager quantity, farcical. Yet the encounter of food aid had allowed for a process in which a new social fabric was temporarily woven of disparate histories and disproportionate exchanges.

But this temporary resolution is most certainly the wrong place to end an analysis. For without real change, the beginning and end of this story and this cycle is also hunger, as much as it is healing. For as long as people conflate eating their share of food aid with eating their share in the nation, it is unlikely that they will assert their own interests in the politics and big business of national development. As long as food is removed from Singida through an impersonal market that is (to again borrow E. P. Thompson's words) "disinfested of intrusive moral imperatives," and as long as it returns reenchanting, descending from a moral high ground through the politicians that bestow it, then Singidans lose political ground. For "power belongs to him who gives and to whom no return can be made. To give, and to do it in

such a way that no return can be made, is to break exchange to one's profit and to institute a monopoly" (Baudrillard 1988, in Mazzarella 2003:54). To be sure, when I asked one elder why he continued to support the party in power, despite Singida's lack of development and the representation of their interests, he answered, "What, and refuse the hand of the father who has fed us? It is not possible." Singidans are left, as Ousmane Sembene's title character Guelwaar predicted, with little choice but to say, "thank you! thank you! thank you!" and to go on building the nation.

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Notes

1. Singida Region comprises three districts (Singida Rural, Iramba, and Manyoni) and one municipality (Singida Town). Singida Rural District (population: 401,850) consists of a donut-shaped land area encircling Singida municipality and its peri-urban surroundings (population: 115,354) (United Republic of Tanzania 2002).
2. Due to the political nature of my research, my interviews were conducted with the condition of confidentiality. To ensure this confidentiality, names of people and villages within Singida Rural District are pseudonyms. Personal and geographical attributes are accurate, however. The chosen pseudonym for my primary fieldsite, “Langilanga,” is the Nyaturu word for “sorghum,” the staple crop of Singidans.
3. “Kinyaturu” is the language of the Nyaturu people. Both the language and people are also known as “Rimi.” Since independence, Swahili has been the national language of Tanzania and is a second language for the Nyaturu that is spoken in schools, other government settings, and mixed-ethnicity situations.
4. Interview, March 14, 2006. For the translation of Nyaturu proverbs here I have been greatly assisted by the Rev. Dr. Howard Olson’s (1964) “Rimi Proverbs.”
5. With information from village surveys, the executive director for Langilanga’s four-village ward wrote to the Singida Rural District Agricultural Officer in June 2005 (in anticipation of a 2006 famine) to estimate the following food shortage: Expected harvest for 2005: 2176 sacks; Shortage: 5276 sacks; Percent of food needs met by farming: 29.2%; Total food needed for 2005–6: 7452 sacks; Shortage: 5276 sacks; Total aid received by Langilangans in 2006: 128 sacks.
6. Interview, February 13, 2006, Singida Town. All quotations were transcribed from interviews in rural Singida. A research assistant provided translations from Kinyaturu to Kiswahili. The translations from Kiswahili to English are my own. In my translations, I have attempted to remain faithful to the illustrative quality of villagers’ language. “Building the nation,” for example, is a term that references the postindependence socialist practice of voluntary labor for national development and is still used in rural Singida to mean “to participate in development projects.” The comparison of leaders to hyenas and the phrase “that which fills them” indexes Swahili’s heavy reliance on relative clauses, and villagers’ fondness for evocative “*lugha ya picha*”—pictorial language.
7. In February 2006 I helped to carry out a survey by the Committee for Children from the Most Vulnerable Environments on the food situation of the village’s poorest households. This comment was relayed to one of the team’s members.
8. Interview, February 9, 2006, Singida Rural District. If Nyamariamamu and her two children living at home were to eat two meals a day, they would need 3 liters of grain.
9. Village meeting, March 13, 2006, Singida Rural District.
10. Interview, March 14, 2006, Singida Rural District. According to a January 2006 article in *Nipashe* (Mamushu 2006), thieves as well as guardians had best be wary: it reported that neighbors had caught and beaten to death one resident

of Shinyanga region who had broken into a private home and stolen three buckets of grain worth a total of 10,000 TSH (\$US 9).

11. Singidans experienced widespread food shortages in 1998, 2003, and 2005. The United Nations World Food Programme (2006) estimates the prevalence of stunted growth in Singida region at over 40%, one of the highest rates in Tanzania.
12. Rampant cattle disease struck Singidan herds in the 1980s and 1990s, causing many households to lose 5%–20% of their stocks, and some to lose all. The perceived insecurity of this form of wealth has led to a further decline of cattle herding as a primary livelihood for Singidans. And with little manure to fertilize the arid soil, agricultural crop yield has declined proportionately. On the subject of water insecurity, see Swarup (2007).
13. Elsewhere (Phillips & Stambach 2008) I have described these relationships of reciprocity in greater detail.
14. National and international agricultural policy has encouraged the substitution of subsistence agriculture for cash crop agriculture. Singidans are increasingly farming finger millet, sunflower, cotton, and peanuts for regional export. The practice of polygamy has declined only in the last two decades in connection with widespread conversion to Christianity and a perception that life has become too expensive for the support of many wives and children.
15. In the limited space of this article, I focus on Tanzanians' experience of the transition from socialism to a multiparty market democracy. But Singidans have undergone considerable shifts in governance since they were first colonized by the Germans in the late nineteenth century and later by the British after World War I.
16. See, e.g., Daudi (2005); Lusekelo (2005); Msafiri (2005).
17. Interview with Irish missionary, August 15, 2005, Singida Rural District.
18. In 2005 I attended numerous election campaign visits by parliamentary and ward councilor candidates and officials from the ruling party that were filled with this kind of rhetoric about the food aid they had given during the 1998 and 2003 famines.
19. See Cliggett (2005) on the particular vulnerability of elder men and women to famine in rural Africa.
20. Due to rural Singida's remote location and lack of exploitable resources, virtually all *wazungu* in the district are either volunteers, missionaries, or representatives of development organizations. Nearly all come bearing resources to support their particular agendas. There is neither tourism nor Western business operating in Singida at present.