To date, archaeobotanical research on finger millet in Africa is limited. Its place of domestication remains uncertain and there has not as yet been a concerted effort to understand its role as a food crop in the African past. Problems of preservation and retrieval of macrobotanical remains have meant that there is a paucity of evidence for the role of finger millet cultivation in past African societies. However, the site of Ntusui in southwestern Uganda has yielded significant evidence for the cultivation of finger millet, suggesting that this was already a crop of some significance by the first half of the second millennium CE.

While it has become superseded by crops such as bananas, cassava and maize, finger millet remains significant in Uganda, largely due to its status as a ‘traditional’ crop. Despite its nutritional value and efficacy against malnutrition, its popularity has waned owing to its labour intensive cultivation.

During the summer of 2017 I undertook ethnographic research in the southwest and east of Uganda to better understand the different stages of the cultivation and processing of finger millet, and its preparation as a foodstuff and as beer. Through ethnographic examination of these processes I hope to generate greater insights for the interpretation of archaeological data, in order to explore the role of finger millet to the societies that produced it and to understand the processes by which finger millet remains enter archaeological assemblages.

**Cultivation and harvesting**

- Iron knives are used for harvesting. Baskets are now less commonly used than plastic bags. In Kanungu, the decrease in use of baskets coincided with increased demonstration; the necessary materials for basket-making have become more expensive.
- The harvested fingers are then threshed. At this stage they can be stored for up to a year.
- One interviewee in Kanungu described how, in the mid-twentieth century, households were entitled to keep a certain portion of their finger millet harvest but the rest was stored communally at the local government headquarters, as a precaution against times of famine.

**Processing and storage**

- The finger millet is stored either before or after threshing and winnowing, and in its unthreshed state can keep for up to ten years. Finger millet that is half-germinated or ground is prone to weevil damage.
- Granaries are used to store finger millet and other grains such as sorghum. Such granaries are made from reeds with a thatched grass roof. The exterior is covered with cow dung to protect the structure, which is supported on wooden posts, from termite damage.
- Granaries are diminishing in number in Kanungu as finger millet cultivation has become less prevalent.

**Grinding and food preparation**

- Grinding-stones are used for smaller quantities of finger millet. Larger quantities (such as those needed for beer production) are taken to communal grinding machines.
- In Kanungu, the cultivation and processing of finger millet is done by women, and it is women who own the grinding stones.
- When it is ground into flour it can be used to make finger millet bread, porridge (hot or cold), or beer. Finger millet flour bread is seen as a traditional food, and one that is served to parents-in-law.
- In the past, newly-wed women would be given gifts of finger millet by their sisters or female friends when they moved to a new household. This would be to help the woman cultivate her own finger millet. However, this tradition has become increasing less common in recent years.

**Beer production and consumption**

- Beer production is done, almost exclusively, by women. Its production entails both expertise and an investment of time and labour.
- I interviewed several women who were producing finger millet beer in Tororo, in the east of Uganda. Most of these women were not growing their own finger millet; they were buying it from farmers in order to make beer. This beer was largely being for commercial purposes. In some instances, clients were buying this beer to draft into another form of alcoholic beverage.
- To make beer, finger millet flour is mixed with water and placed in pits to ferment for about a week. Some of this beer was made from a mixture of both cassava and finger millet. One instance of clients buying beer solely from finger millet for special occasions such as funeral rite, or for extended stay.

**Table showing planting and harvesting seasons in both Ntusui and Kanungu**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>January</th>
<th>February</th>
<th>March</th>
<th>April</th>
<th>May</th>
<th>June</th>
<th>July</th>
<th>August</th>
<th>September</th>
<th>October</th>
<th>November</th>
<th>December</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ntusui</td>
<td>harvesting season 2</td>
<td>field preparation and sowing, season 1</td>
<td>weeding season 1</td>
<td>field preparation and sowing, season 1</td>
<td>weeding season 2</td>
<td>harvesting, season 2</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kanungu</td>
<td>field preparation</td>
<td>field preparation</td>
<td>sowing</td>
<td>sowing (until middle of month)</td>
<td>weeding</td>
<td>harvesting</td>
<td></td>
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