

Ivan and Patricia Karp

Social Aspects of Iteso Cookery

The Iteso of Kenya are an Eastern Nilotic-speaking people who live in the northern part of Busia district of the Western Province of Kenya. In 1969 there were about 250,000 Iteso in Kenya. There are also well over 500,000 Iteso living in Uganda, most of whom live in the Teso district. They are separated in space and by the accident of colonial history from the Kenya Iteso. As a result considerable differences in dialect and custom have developed between these two groups.

Our fieldwork was conducted for a period of two years, from 1969 to 1971, among the Iteso of Kenya. During this period, we lived as members of an Iteso family in the Amukura area of Busia district.

In this family Ivan Karp was treated as the younger brother of the household head and Patricia Karp assumed the role of a young Iteso woman learning to be a wife. As such she was taken under the wing of the household head's mother, Fulgaria Toto, and treated as a somewhat dull but eager young woman. From Toto we gained some of the most important insights into Iteso culture and society.

Certainly one of the first and most continuous aspects of Iteso society that impressed us during the two years of our fieldwork was the importance (for the Iteso) of the sharing of food and drink. This is stressed in the etiquette of everyday greetings. It is proper to greet people and then to ask for any news. After an exchange of news, the persons involved enquire after each other's health. The Iteso are a forthright people and treat these enquiries as serious requests. After all these issues have been settled, two questions are asked. The first, '*An'ajon?*', asks at whose home beer is to be had that day. The second, '*Inyena inyam'ijo ore kon lolo?*', can be translated as 'What kind of food is there in your home today?' We, as white 'Europeans', were always asked this kind of question because the Iteso assumed that our eating habits would be very different from theirs. When we answered that we were eating *atap*, the Iteso form of maize or cassava and millet bread, people would go into gales of laughter. When asked why, they replied that *atap* was 'African food' and not for Europeans.

From the Iteso point of view, one of the sad features of the colour-bar that accompanied colonialism in Kenya was the refusal of Europeans to share an African's food or his food with an African. Hence, Iteso often tried to make us welcome in their homes by giving us foodstuffs to take home instead of sharing a meal in the more usual fashion. They were surprised and pleased by our willingness to share food and drink. If there was hospitality to be offered, we asked to be fed like kinsmen or neighbours, instead of being given food to consume in the privacy of our hut like selfish strangers. Once we were taken at our word and served the meal of the day. It consisted of cassava bread, without the usual millet added. The relish was composed of a vegetable gathered in the bush, boiled in sour milk and flavoured with salt made from the ashes of the leaves of certain grasses. This was the only meal we had while among the Iteso that we found unpalatable; under the circumstances of our declaration, there was no choice but to eat stoically.

Virtually all rituals are accompanied by the sharing of a meal and beer made from finger millet, the traditional Iteso food. This quality of willingness to share is also part and parcel of the judgments that Iteso make about each other. One of the worst terms that one Iteso can call another is *epog*, which most English-speaking Iteso translate as meaning 'selfish'. The term is a little different from the conventional meaning that we assign to the word. The Iteso also mean by *epog* something we might translate as 'self-sufficient'. A person who is *epog* is someone who believes that he can get on without anybody else's help. As a result, he does not feel an obligation to share the food in his home with his kin and neighbours. The Iteso describe someone who is *epog* as the type of person who eats in secret. Their image is of a greedy and foolish person hiding in the darkness of his hut consuming his year's supply of food. Anyone who is like this is foolish because, as Iteso will point out, technology is limited and the environment is uncertain. As a result, people need to share with each other in order to build up a set of reciprocal obligations which will provide a hedge in difficult years. Hence Iteso neighbourhoods and kin-groups fulfil the function of distributing subsistence products under conditions of scarcity. We might say that, for some purposes, an Iteso neighbourhood has a common economy reinforced by the values of mutual commensality.

The Iteso eat their meals in a variety of places, and the place in which it is eaten is significant for the meaning which the meal has for them, as well as the type of cooking that is involved. Most meals are taken inside the sleeping house of the wife that has done the cooking. If a few guests are involved, the meal is served in the husband's guest house. Each wife in an Iteso polygamous family is a separate domestic unit and feeds herself and her children. A husband is supposed to alternate his attendance at each of his wives' homes so that he does not show favouritism to any wife. Few husbands do this and their failure to behave equitably is a constant cause of marital strife. In any case, meals are often served to a larger variety of persons than

a wife and children; food is served, and hood children is c of a friend or an i will have several r from pasture and counsel. These inf who is host. This tion between me: Iteso notions of h are served inside t

The typical l The starch is a 'b or sorghum into l plantains. The re in a sauce consisti is used by most l Austrian friends : head asked our f maize or cassava

The starch: ceptions of cooke is eaten without : the manner in wh two sexes. Only v cooking-house on on the other hand primary occasion during funeral s sacrificed for the were held in the initiated or were happened to pass ated with men, : fits together with opposition betwe encodes it, wom while men are as The meaning of Iteso concerns. I holds is a primar and productivity for the survival exchange with o

a wife and children. Children especially eat wherever they happen to be when food is served, and the sight of a woman eating with a variety of neighbourhood children is common. Men often arrive late in the afternoon at the home of a friend or an important person in order to share a meal. A local notable will have several men drop in at his home after the cattle have been returned from pasture and commonly a meal will be dispensed with his advice and counsel. These informal meals are eaten outside the guest house of the person who is host. This is a sign that anyone who drops by is welcome. The opposition between meals eaten inside or outside is important in understanding Iteso notions of hospitality and sharing. Special guests on special occasions are served inside the house.

The typical Iteso meal is based on an opposition of starch and a relish. The starch is a 'bread' made by pouring a flour of cassava and finger millet or sorghum into boiling water. Sometimes the bread is made of cornmeal or plantains. The relish may be made from boiled vegetables or meat served in a sauce consisting of the broth in which they were cooked. Curry powder is used by most households as a flavouring. Once we were visited by some Austrian friends and taken to an Iteso household for a meal. The household head asked our friends what was the main food of their country - was it maize or cassava or plantains or millet?

The starch: meat-or-relish opposition is very important in Iteso conceptions of cookery. No meal can be eaten without a starch. When something is eaten without a starch, it is not a meal. What is interesting about this is the manner in which cooking is tied up with behaviour associated with the two sexes. Only women can cook a starch, and it must be cooked inside the cooking-house on the women's fireplace constructed with three stones. Men, on the other hand, can cook meat, but only outside and only by roasting. The primary occasions when roasted, as opposed to boiled, meat is eaten are during funeral sacrifices and, during precolonial times, when oxen were sacrificed for the age-set ceremonies of the men. These age-set ceremonies were held in the bush during the dry season and only men who had been initiated or were about to be initiated were allowed to attend. If any women happened to pass by, they were tortured. The opposition of roasting, associated with men, and boiling, associated with women, is very important. It fits together with the opposition between inside and outside and a further opposition between nature and culture. As the Iteso system of categories encodes it, women are associated with boiling, the home, and domesticity, while men are associated with nature, the outside world, and political life. The meaning of this can be understood by relating this set of categories to Iteso concerns. In a society that is subsistence-based, the survival of households is a primary concern. Given the uncertainty that Iteso face about rain and productivity of land, most households follow a strategy of producing both for the survival of their members and in order to maintain relationships of exchange with other households that will insure the sharing of subsistence

products under conditions of scarcity. This strategy induces a tension between the satisfaction of domestic wants and the satisfaction of requirement for production for the needs of neighbours and kinsmen. This tension is reflected in the different context of cooking associated with men and women. On the one hand we have cooking and eating associated with the inside and women. In this context, it is primarily the requirements of a family unit composed of a mother and her children (sometimes a husband) that are satisfied. On the other hand, we have cooking and eating on the outside associated with men. What are satisfied in these contexts are the requirements of a household as a social group associated with other households which will help each other in times of want.

In what follows we describe Iteso patterns of cooking and eating. *Atap* (called *posho* or *ugali* in Swahili) is the basic starch food. We provide two recipes. The first, for *akapulu*, is for a vegetable relish that we often enjoyed in Iteso homes. The second, for *alaboro*, is a special dish, probably adopted from the Baganda, that is served on special occasions.

The Iteso begin their day with a small meal. Most people eat a very thin porridge made of cassava flour or millet flour and water. A few people, those with some income, sometimes purchase a loaf of white bread and a tin of butter at the local store, and this serves as breakfast. A very small number of people eat eggs for breakfast, a custom probably learned from the Europeans. A common breakfast food is a piece of boiled cassava. The common item at all breakfasts is the beverage – a strong, smoky-flavoured tea, made by boiling tea and water together with large amounts of milk and sugar.

Even the simplest meal involves a great deal of work for the women, whose responsibility it is to grow or purchase whatever food is necessary, collect water and firewood, and prepare the meal. A woman and her children collect as much firewood and water, the latter in tin containers holding 4 gallons (about 18 litres) each, as they can carry on their heads. They usually have to make more than one trip to the bush and stream in any one day.

The fire for cooking is started on the floor of the cooking hut on a fire-place built on a foundation of three stones. On these stones rests an enormous pot of water which must boil for the porridge, tea, or *atap*, the main food of the Iteso. When the water boils (and it seemed to take forever when we were hungry) the cassava or millet, or combination of the two, is added in the form of ground flour, and this is cooked until the right consistency is reached. Each person has a small bowl of porridge and as much tea as he or she wants.

This Iteso meal was sometimes supplemented by cutting or buying a piece of sugar cane. Children, especially, cut large pieces of cane and peel it with sharp knives or *pangas*. They pull it through their teeth, extracting the sweet juice and fibrous strings of sugar cane. It is a very filling snack.

It is recognized that children need more food than adults. Some foods are referred to as a 'children's food'. We grew raspberries to which children would help themselves. Children also collected other fruits and berries,

including wild gooseberries from the bush, and ate them as they walked along or played. We often ate such things with the children and the Iteso were mildly amused by our taste for 'children's food'.

The second and last meal of the day is the late afternoon or evening one. This calls for more extensive preparation than breakfast. This meal consists of *atap* ('sold food') and an accompaniment, referred to as a 'relish' or 'vegetable' by the Iteso. Again, the woman of the home builds a fire in the cooking hut. First she prepares the relish. This can be either a vegetable or meat. The meat is always beef or, for special occasions, chicken, and the vegetable is usually something that grows wild and is collected by the women during the day. A favourite is *ekwala*, which is similar in taste to spinach. The meat will be boiled for hours in a little water and curry powder. The vegetable may also be cooked for a very long time, usually with spices or with sour milk. The relish may be flavoured with mushrooms. They are usually gathered by women, but it is not uncommon for a man to find mushrooms as he is walking through the bush and bring them home to his wife to dry and cook.

While the relish is simmering, the *atap* must be prepared. The large pot of water is put up to boil, then the cassava or millet flour is added.* It is cooked until it forms a thick, solid mass. By now the relish is ready and the *atap* is turned out onto a large plate and covered until everyone is ready to eat.

Some people have tables and chairs made by local carpenters. Most, however, sit on the floor of their huts. *Atap* is taken from a communal plate, but each person has his own small bowl of relish. No Iteso use silverware, but may have some on hand to be used by distinguished visitors. A small amount of *atap* is taken, always with the fingers of the right hand, and formed into a ball. Then a depression is made in the centre of the ball with the thumb. It is then dipped into the relish and eaten. Pieces of beef and chicken are also eaten with the fingers.

Other food is collected from the bush by children. After a rain, the air becomes filled with flying white ants. The children run into the bush at dusk and pick hundreds of these ants out of the air and stuff them into tin cans. While they are doing this, they eat as many as they put into tins. All the termites collected in the tins are brought to the children's mothers. The ants are then light fried in *ghee* (clarified butter) and eaten by the men and children of the home. They are quite tasty prepared in this way.

* See Anne Sharman's recipe for *kwon*.

Bush Vegetable (*Akapulu*) (To serve 2-4)

1 lb (450 grams) fresh spinach or	3 tbsp <i>ghee</i> or butter
1 8-oz. (220 grams) pack frozen spinach, defrosted	2 tsp curry powder
1 medium onion, coarsely chopped	1 tsp salt
1 tomato, chopped	2 cloves garlic, finely chopped (optional)

Wash spinach and remove stems. Cook in the water that clings to the leaves, until tender (about 5 minutes). Drain and set aside. Cook the onion and garlic in *ghee* until lightly browned, stirring occasionally. Add salt, curry powder and tomato. Cook about 1 minute. Add the onion mixture to the spinach and heat through. Serve as an accompaniment to *atap*.

***Alaboro* and Groundnut Sauce (To serve 2-4)**

6 green plantains (<i>alaboro</i>)	1 tsp salt
1 large onion, coarsely chopped	3 or 4 tsp groundnuts, chopped or ground
5 tomatoes	1½ cups water
2 tsp curry powder	

Peel and wash the plantains. Boil until about half-cooked. Add onion, nuts, salt, tomatoes and curry powder, stir well and cover. Cook over low heat, stirring occasionally until the plantains are soft. May be eaten as an accompaniment to *atap*.