

## Could a Return to a Traditional Diet save your Health?

I recently had the honour of spending time with Ambuya Muchero on her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday discussing her life growing up in the rural area of Goromonzi. She described how her diet and lifestyle had changed over the years with the colonial influence and how a move to a more urban environment impacted her health.

Before I go on however I think the term 'traditional diet' needs some validation. Nowadays when you ask most people what a traditional Zimbabwean diet is they may say, sadza and relish (primarily made with rape or covo vegetables) with some gravy, meat or beans. However, as you'll see from my discussion with Ambuya Muchero a traditional diet is much more wholesome, varied and interesting.

### Excerpts of my Interview with Ambuya Muchero

LM: 'Ambuya Muchero please tell me a bit about your background'

AM: 'I was born in 1936, I am now 80 years old. I have 5 children and 3 step children. I live in Goromonzi. I got married in 1954 at the age of 18 and went to live with my husband in the city. I only then used to go back to our village for holidays'

LM: 'What was your traditional diet as a child growing up?'

AM: 'Porridge in the morning, made from either sorghum, maize or millet. Extra was made in the morning which was eaten as pap/sadza later, or we used the meal to make maheu or bumhe (like non-fermented Chibuku). We used peanut butter in everything; in porridge, with our spinach or rupoko and in stews. We also fried the peanuts and then squeezed the oil out for cooking. We didn't use any other cooking oil. We ate a wide variety of vegetables such as okra, pumpkin leaves, nyeve, hibiscus leaves and shoots, avocado, wild mushrooms, mufushwa (sun dried vegetables). We ate roots and tubers like kasava and sweet potatoes. For something sweet we had fruit or sugar cane. Much of the fruit grew wild, such as mazhanje, wetland grapes, maroro, tsambatsi, wild gooseberries, tsubvu and then we also ate mangos, guava, melons, watermelons and bananas. The sugar cane made our teeth very strong. We also used the ashes from the fire to rub on our teeth and make them white. We didn't use toothpaste back then.'



For special occasions or at Christmas we had some meat from goats, cattle or pigs. We often dried the meat and had it with peanut butter. A special treat was bread with Sun jam or some sweets.'

LM: **'Did you ever eat insects?'**

AM: 'Yes, we ate flying ants or ishwa mostly'.

LM: **'How did you prepare them?'**

AM: 'We added them to mufushwa with potato and peanut butter, or garlic, tomato and onions.'

LM **'How did you prepare the rest of your food?'**

AM: 'Most of our meals were cooked slowly in a three-legged pot'. Our meat was cooked with water and salt. It was very tasty.'

LM: **'How did colonialization and the move to the city impact your diet?'**

AM: 'From about the 1950's we started to see sugar on the market but it was very expensive so not everyone could afford it. We started drinking tea with milk and sugar, when we had it. We also began eating more meat, some chicken and eggs and some other vegetables. Our methods of cooking started to change from the slow-cooked method to much faster methods. Also the way crops were grown changed. Instead of using composted manure we started using fertilizers and this changed how foods tasted. The soil became poor because of overplanting and no rotation. We were able to exchange our excess produce for blankets.'

LM: **'How has your health been through this transition?'**

AM: 'I was very fit and strong before I was married. Women used to carry full cans of water on their heads for a long way. We used to work the fields. Most women could give birth and then be back in the field working the land a few hours later with the baby on her back. It was unusual for someone to be sick. When we were sick we used natural remedies where we could.'

I was then diagnosed with high blood pressure and cholesterol in 1971 (when I was 35 years old). I learnt healthy ways of controlling this with diet and exercise so that's fine now, however my weight continued to increase and I have now struggled with arthritis and diabetes for the last 15 to 20 years.

## **My Conclusions**

Growing up in rural Goromonzi Ambuya Muchero's diet consisted largely of wholegrains or roughly ground grains, a little meat, wild, locally and organically grown and seasonal vegetables, mushrooms, a good variety of fruit, very little sugar and sweet things. Cooking and food drying methods were wholesome and meant nutrients were not lost in the process. She had a healthy, active, outdoor lifestyle with very little stress.

In contrast, post 1950's, her lifestyle changed dramatically and her diet gradually became more westernised. She was less active, more stressed and her diet included more sugar, refined



carbohydrates, red meat, other animal protein and a smaller variety of conventionally grown vegetables.

The deterioration of Ambuya Muchero's health seemed to correlate with the change in diet and lifestyle post 1950 and although she has put measures in place now to support improved health I believe she would have enjoyed better health for longer had she kept to the tradition of her childhood. I wonder how her story relates to your experience growing up? I would love to hear your story and invite you to post in the comments section below.