

SPECIAL REPORT ON THE DIET OF THE SEPIK RIVER PEOPLE

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The authors of this report, which was prepared in October, 1957, are two native fieldworkers of the Department of Agriculture, Stock and Fisheries. The report followed extensive patrolling along the Sepik River and is presented here with only minor editorial changes. Mr. Henry and Mr. Muia come from the Milne Bay District and their work in the Sepik was successfully carried out, despite the fact that they were patrolling among people who spoke foreign languages and had a completely different way of life and social organization. Their report proved to be of considerable value to departmental officers working in the Sepik District as it threw new light on local diet and barter trade patterns.

TO speak fully on the diet of the Sepik people will mean pages and pages before we can come to an end. Our chief subject will be mostly the common foods they eat and their barter systems, marketing, the growing of economical groups and other trading enterprises.

The foods they eat are as follows:—

Carbohydrates

Sago (*Metroxylon* spp.); taro (*Colocasia*, *Xanthosoma* and *Alocasia* spp.); yams (*Dioscorea* spp.); banana (*Musa* spp.); Mami (*Dioscorea* spp.); sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas*); coconut (*Cocos nucifera*); cassava (*Manihot* spp.); breadfruit (*Artocarpus* spp.).

Proteins

Pork, fish, chickens, ducks, birds, grubs (from dead wood), turtle and crocodile (both including eggs), insects (such as a moth caught in special seasons), wild game (which includes every edible creature in the bush).

Vegetables and greens.

Beans, tomatoes, cabbages, pumpkins, ferns, tulip (*Gnetum gnemon*), bamboo shoots, amaranthus and many others which we don't know. We have included only the ones which we know thoroughly. There are also others which we know only in our own language, which we have left out.

Preparation of Food

A. Sago

Sago is the major food among the entire population of the Sepik and it is cooked by burning and by boiling. By burning, the sago

is first mixed in a pot with a little water and when it is thoroughly mixed it is flattened on a piece of iron or broken pot to be burned. When it is cooked, it is taken by hand and eaten, sometimes with fish but very often without any meat. Occasionally the sago is baked by using bamboo containers.

The second method is similar to the making of starch. The sago stumps are dissolved in cold water until a fine, sticky, watery solution forms. Water is boiled and the solution is poured in with constant stirring until it forms into a substance somewhat like starch or porridge. It is then served in native dishes and is usually eaten by hand. However, very often spoons are used.

B. Taro and "Taro Konkon" (Xanthosoma spp.)

It is mostly cooked whole, but occasionally it is cut into small pieces, and when it is cooked, scraped coconut and eschalot are added to make it tasty. It is then poured into bowls and eaten with spoons.

C. Yams, Banana, Mami, Sweet Potato

These are cooked in the same way as with taro. The baking of such foods in hot stones is greatly adopted by the Seventh Day Adventist Missions. According to their religious rules, most of the foods and green stuffs are mashed together on Fridays to preserve them ready for eating on Saturdays.

D. Coconuts

These are used for food, but only in small quantities. Some coconuts are sold.

E. Cassava

Cassava is rare in the area and the method of cooking it is similar to the ways described above.

F. Breadfruit

The seeded one is often burned in the fire and the seeds only are eaten. The unseeded one is mostly cooked on the fire and roasted.

G. Proteins

There are three methods used in processing meat—boiling, roasting and smoking.

Pork, fish, grubs, turtle, crocodiles, insects and some wild game are often processed in these

The table will show what sort of food is exchanged, in which villages and for what other goods.

Commencing from Mandibit and downwards, most villages sell their foodstuffs at Angoram. The prices we have noted are, for instance, one copra bag full of yams or mami, £1. This applies also to sago.

With the money they get from the market, they very frequently buy foodstuffs such as rice, meat and fish, but very often the money is spent mostly on clothing and some articles such as eating utensils, fishing lines, hooks, axes, bush knives and other tools.

Village	Exchanges	Receives	At Villages
Sango	Sago	Fish and pots	Pagwi
Japanut	Fish	Sago and pots	Yabom
Kadage	Sago	Fish and pots	Yabom
Earange	Fish and Sago	Pots	Yabom
Kambukmeri	Fish and Sago	Pots	Yabom
Engimwangu	Fish	Sago and pots	Yanget
Shotmeri	Fish	Sago and pots	Wabag
Yajan	Fish	Sago and pots	Yami
Palambe	Fish	Sago and pots	Nagusap
Malingai	Fish	Sago and pots	Yamuk
Kanganeamene	Fish	Sago and pots	Kegerop
Tagawi	Fish and banana	Sago and pots	Gegorub
Chambri	Fish	Sago and pots	Murray
Kamanabit	Fish	Sago and pots	Murray, Yambi, Mulasort, Togwinibit

ways. Smoking plays an important part in preserving meat to be kept and used in times when it is hard to find fresh meat.

Chickens, ducks and birds, including the eggs of crocodiles, are often cooked straight away in the pot and eaten, including the gravy. Very rarely roasting is used. Every meat stuff is eaten with carbohydrates, which have been mentioned above. However, moth-like insects are often caught and sometimes boiled. But more often they are wrapped in sago leaves, smoked and then soaked in cold water to soften them before eating.

H. Vegetables and Greens

Generally all vegetable and green stuffs are cooked in pots together, but very often they are mixed with the food and sometimes with the meat.

Barter Trade

So far the barter system appears to be the major trading system among the Sepik peoples.

Sago and fish are traded mostly to other villages; taro, yams, mamies, banana, fowl, etc., are traded to the Government Stations, to the businessman and to other people who wish to buy them.

We found that most of the people along the Sepik River exchange goods. They sell fish to the bush people in exchange for which they get sago. In other villages, they buy pots and stoves by means of exchanging fish and sago. A ready-washed piece of sago, which is approximately one foot long, is worth one big pot or three small pots; more than one foot long is worth one big pot or a big stove. In such villages as Kamburindo, Anduwa, etc., they buy sago and pots for money. A sago six feet to seven feet long is worth 10s.; four feet to five feet long is worth 5s.; the whole palm, about 20 feet to 30 feet, is worth £1 or £2; the smaller one, 10 feet to 15 feet, is worth 15s.

The bigger pots, used for ceremonial cooking, are worth £1 and the slightly smaller one is worth 15s. The smaller ones used in daily cooking are worth 5s. to 10s. We do not know their weight.

A hen is worth 10s. and a male is worth 5 s. A bag or half a bag of potatoes is worth 5s. and the same applies to taro. It may even be worth only 3s. to 6s. So it can be seen that these essential articles are not of comparative prices.

Food Preferences and Distribution

In each district in the Territory of Papua and New Guinea, the people eat and grow the foods which are best suited to the majority. The same applies to the foods eaten by the Sepik people.

However the percentages below will show you the food they like best and those, too, which are not eaten very much.

Proportion of diet.

Food.	Per cent.
Sago	45
Yams and mami	30
Fish	10
Meat	8
Bananas	5
Taros	2

This shows that the most popular food is sago and fish and the people seldom eat the other foods.

Ceremonial foods

Generally speaking, the foods used at ceremonial times by the Sepik people are much the same as in other districts. However, there are slight differences.

Ceremonies are held mainly during Christmas, but also at times when a man, child, girl, or woman dies, marriage times, and at the times when they cut a man with a razor or piece of glass to give him a mark. This is mostly in Sepik No. 1, which is looked after by the District Officer and the Assistant District Officer, Ambunti.

At these ceremonies, the people in the villages collect the food on a special day. It is all piled in one or two groups and when the time comes, the women and girls get together and commence cooking, some roasting on stones and some boiling in native saucepans. The men kill pigs, etc.

Food distribution

All along the Sepik River, the sago seems plentiful, but in some villages, such as Sandersi, Kamburindo, Iwarumo, Hagurumara, Kundi-man, Agunuim, etc., sago is scarce. Generally speaking, food is plentiful, although some villages do not have as much sago as they would like.

During high water, the people have few taros, yams, mamies, sweet potatoes, etc. This is because the ground is covered with water. Aibon, Saburi and Timbunmeri are not always short, because the people plant their crops on the mountains during high water and along the river banks during the dry season, or low water.

Labour distribution

The cooking is done by the women and girls. Women cook the food, men only eat. Women clear the scrub for the making of gardens and men cut down the big trees. Men and women plant the crops, but the harvesting is done by the women.

Cash crops

Rice and peanuts are the most important, and most villages are planting them. These crops are high priced. Most of the rice and peanuts are sold to the Government at Ambunti and Angoram. Sago, fish and native pots are also sold.

Eating habits

The people in this area use tin plates, mugs spoons, etc., which are bought from the stores. The people have two meals a day, breakfast and supper.

We hope their diet in the future will change slightly, not to let them eat only sago all day or at every meal, but to introduce them to some of the crops which will help change their diet and get them to eat some of the newly-introduced vegetables.