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KEYWORD

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Abstract

The concept of the organic serves as a keyword capturing emerging practices and epistemologies through which Africans navigate increasingly toxic lifeworlds. Noting a growing preoccupation with this term, the authors unpack its meaning based on their ethnographic fieldwork concerning two East African idioms: *kienyeji* and *kiasili.* What it means to be(come) organic is tied to older notions such as life flow, tradition, and the natural. Tracing how this concept engages with central themes in Africanist debates, the authors demonstrate that an Africanist theorizing about it foregrounds critical claims about the vitality of bodies and the viability of environments.

Résumé

Le mot-clé « organique » désigne les pratiques émergentes et les épistémologies qui permettent aux Africains de naviguer dans des univers de vie de plus en plus toxiques. Constatant une préoccupation croissante pour l'organique, les auteurs analysent ce que l'organique implique sur la base de leur travail ethnographique sur le terrain concernant deux idiomes est-africains qui représentent l'organique : kienyeji et kiasili. Ce que signifie être (devenir) organique est lié à des notions plus anciennes telles que le flux de vie, la tradition et le naturel. En retraçant la manière dont l'organique s'engage dans ces thèmes centraux des débats africanistes, les auteurs démontrent qu'une théorisation africaniste de l'organique met en avant des revendications critiques sur la vitalité des corps et des environnements.

Resumo

A palavra "orgânico" é essencial para captar as práticas e as epistemologias emergentes através das quais os africanos se movem em mundividências cada vez mais tóxicas. Tendo observado que se verifica uma preocupação crescente com o orgânico, e tomando por base o seu trabalho etnográfico de campo relativo a duas designações africanas de orgânico – *kienyeji* e *kiasili* —, os autores exploram tudo aquilo que esta palavra envolve. O significado

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de se ser ou de se tornar orgânico prende-se com velhos conceitos, tais como os de fluxo de vida, de tradição e de natural. Reconstituindo o modo como o orgânico se tem interligado com estes temas centrais nos debates africanistas, os autores demonstram que a teorização africanista acerca do orgânico traz para a ribalta as reivindicações em torno da vitalidade dos corpos e dos ambientes.

Keywords: organic; toxicity; vitality; more-than-human; capitalocene; food sovereignty

Mots-clés: Anthropologie; sciences humaines de l'environnement; études sur l'alimentation

Introduction

> Njeri holds a few Royco stock cubes in her hand.
> "When men try to have sex, their battery is low because of Royco"
> She asks people to read on the Royco package the numbers that are mentioned:
> "7 8 9," she shouts. "This is Swahili time."
> She writes down European time, "1 2 3" next to the Swahili time, and deducts the European time from the Swahili time, ending up with "666":
> "So look at the devil and his wife ... This number cuts the veins of men" [*Si ndiyo, angalia shetani na bibi yake. Numba 666 hiii inakatakata mishipa ya wanaume*]
> She explains it is a reference to the "end of time."
> "Remember that if you see these numbers, they are being forced on you. Nowadays people can't do anything without their KRA [Kenya Revenue Authority] pin. You won't be able to do anything anymore without numbers: it's all signs of the 'end of time.'"
> People are curious to see the Royco mixed with water. Njeri explains this is the way women make broth nowadays.
> "Look at *chakula ya mama* [literally "mum's food," but here referring to the vagina]. It's been ruined with this thing known as Royco. My *brotha*; if you want to know if your wife has this problem, try to eat her food [referring to penetration], it's too cold .... Know this my *sista mami*, you have been spoiled with this dirt called Royco.
> She holds a broiler egg up to show it to her audience.
> "Magufuli doesn't want these kinds of eggs in his country" [*Magufuli alisema hataki kuona hiyo mayai kwake*]
> She continues to explain that these eggs are produced by "prostitute chicken" [*kuku Malaya*], never "fucked" by a real "cock" but produced in incubators. She posits that Magufuli refuses these kinds of eggs in Tanzania and that all the chicks hatched from such eggs are being killed.

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Njeri is a renowned Gikuyu herbalist based in Nakuru, a city about 100 miles northwest of Nairobi. In the heart of the city's Central Business District, locals respectfully call her *daktari*, meaning “doctor” in Kiswahili, a title often given to esteemed healers in the realm of herbal medicine. The above vignette is a transcript of one of her herbal performances. She was often seen at marketplaces or intersections, showcasing the impact of processed foods on Kenyan bodies (see also Rahier 2021). As Njeri’s demonstrations unfold, she underscores the importance of rekindling a connection with a more *kienyeji* way of life, which is best translated as “the ways of those who possess a particular place” (Holtzman et al. 2004, 68; Rahier 2023, 86). The idiom kienyeji links ideas of authenticity with notions of belonging. Njeri educates her audience on how indigenous foods act as a shield against harmful food adulterations. She also sells all kinds of herbal concoctions (*dawa*), some of which promote colon cleansing to get rid of *kemikali* (food chemicals) that build up in the linings of the stomach and gut. The Royco stock cubes Njeri criticizes are a prime example of these growing concerns about increasingly toxic and unnatural lifeworlds. The same anxieties are present in neighboring Tanzania, where people seek defense against harmful contemporary foodscapes by turning to *kiasili* foods. The term kiasili is closely related to kienyeji and literally means “original” yet bearing the connotation of “natural” and “traditional” in Kiswahili.

Both idioms capture a polysemic set of meanings and practices seeking more natural, indigenous, pure, and nourishing lifeworlds, which we translate as organic. Our analysis starts from a noticeable increase in Africanist literature focusing on organic-related notions as a point of reference to make sense of the destructive effects of agrochemicals, food additives, and forced excessive growth. By proposing the keyword organic, we draw attention to the ways in which African imaginaries and practices related to this keyword are not isolated from the rise in similar discourse across the globe (for the Himalaya region see Galvin 2021; for pigs in the US see Weiss 2012; for Southwest China see Klein 2009) that emphasizes the need to create a more “habitable” (Langwick 2018) planet. We also underscore the particular developments and local perspectives that define the term organic within the East African context and throughout various regions of the continent. We do so by contextualizing the concept within the extensive history of localized health ideologies, human-environment interactions, and perceptions of well-being. We ultimately show how vernacular expressions, practices, and concepts can help us theorize global discourses addressing the organic. While the term organic typically denotes foods devoid of synthetic agrochemicals, its etymology traces back to attributes related to, or derived from, living organisms (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2023). The term thus encapsulates how concepts like kiasili and kienyeji draw attention to the liveliness of organisms, and to the conditions necessary for communities of organisms to sustain life. The concepts kiasili and kienyeji, among other related discourse and practices, convey skepticism towards what food processing and industrialized agriculture are doing to the vitality of humans and other organisms.

We do, however, recognize how the productivity of agrochemicals, and the taste and prestige of processed foods are also very much desired by many of the interlocutors we feature in this article. Worries regarding the harmful effects of processed foods do not diminish their association with ideas of desired “progress” (*maendeleo*). Many interlocutors consume industrial food and use agrochemicals daily. Farmers often feel compelled to use productivity-boosting agrochemicals due to economic pressures (see Waltz 2020), and obscure interests dictate the types of foods available in stores. Moreover, the enticing blend of fats, carbohydrates, and sugars makes present-day foods hard to resist for many. The categories organic and nonorganic are therefore not so easy to separate from each other. Holtzman (2006, 371) similarly observed that processed foods can represent both cultural decay and an embrace of modernity among Samburu communities in Kenya. Stein and Luna note that scholars should not only attend to its destructive toxicity, but also to the "puzzles of desire, aspiration, and expectations of modernity" (Ferguson 2006; Li 2014) informing agrochemical use in sub-Saharan Africa (Stein and Luna 2021, 100). Although we recognize this ambiguity, we focus primarily on the organic as an emerging practice and discourse against the perceived toxic influence of late capitalism and its imperial food systems. There is a strong resonance between the burgeoning concept of organic and the profound feelings of intrusion and vitality loss—sentiments often linked to notions like witchcraft, (food) taboos, and purity. What it means to be(come) organic is ultimately tied to, though at times presented as a break from, older notions such as life flow (**mʊ̀jòjò*, proto-Bantu), the potency of the bush, tradition, and indigeneity. We argue that the organic is becoming more than a buzzword—it combines a set of polysemic practices and experiences that Africans use as a compass in a world adrift. It serves as a critical beacon to steer towards more sustainable and healthier lifeworlds on a planet increasingly flooded with toxins.

We recognize that organic practices vary significantly across classes and regions, both urban and rural. One approach would be to look at how organic practices are linked to a growing market of "healthy" foods targeting middle-class consumers. This trend has given rise to new groups of herbal entrepreneurs who often charge soaring prices for their remedies. Urban herbalists like Njeri encountered skepticism from traditional healers who viewed them as mere conmen exploiting herbal knowledge for profit. These healers believe that charging money for herbal medicine is taboo. However, the diverse range of organic products catering to both affluent and less affluent consumers suggests that these products and their associated discourses address shared concerns across various social groups. Noting this, we emphasize an ethnographic exploration of how these practices address shared epistemological uncertainties related to increasingly toxic lifeworlds and the loss of (more-than-human) autonomy and vitality.

The organic as restoring the flow of vitality and natural growth

Organic food and medicine emerged in Tanzania and Kenya as remedies for the so-called *magonjwa ya kisasa* ("diseases of nowadays" or "modern diseases") such as sexual impotency, diabetes, obesity, and stomach ulcers that have dramatically risen over the last twenty years. These "present-day diseases" are popularly attributed to the equally recent rising use of agrochemicals, improved seeds, and processed foods. This trend is evident in the rapid expansion of major retail chains such as Shoprite, Nakumatt, and Tuskys across large African cities, alongside the widespread presence of agribusiness shops that extend from urban centers to the most remote villages. Nutrition research confirms that sub-Saharan Africa is experiencing a nutrition transition towards processed foods, resulting in an increase of noncommunicable diseases, a medical category that shows significant overlap with the vernacular category of present-day diseases (Reardon et al. 2021). Driven by financial support from donor countries, development agencies, and agribusiness entities, there has been a marked increase in the use of pesticides, herbicides, antibiotics, growth agents, and other agrochemicals across the continent over the past twenty years (Stein and Luna 2021; Haggblade, Diarra, and Traoré 2022). The growing literature indicating that agrochemical exposure increases susceptibility to noncommunicable diseases (Grados et al., 2022) aligns with popular observations that agrochemical proliferation has driven the rise of present-day diseases.

However, the lived experience and emic understanding of this dietary transition reveal a dimension often overlooked by a purely nutritional perspective; the apprehension towards "present-day foods" (*vyakula vya kisasa*, literally "foods of nowadays") or "Western foods" (*vyakula vya kizungu*) is not solely due to their diminished nutritional value. Interlocutors from West Tanzania and Nakuru emphasize a more profound concern: that industrialized agricultural systems and imported processed foods mess with the transmission of vitality between humans, and within the more-than-human network of soils, plants, animals, and humans.

For many, the present-day diseases are only one symptom of a general loss of vitality apparent in the weakness of bodies, most dramatically in towns and among youth. A number of kiasili and kienyeji medicines and food have emerged as popular remedies for this drainage of vitality. Emblematic organic ingredients are wild foods from the bush such as mushrooms and honey, local breeds of livestock and crops such as kienyeji chicken (Rahier 2023), and leafy green vegetables (see also Brückner 2020). Interlocutors from the towns of Kigoma and Mpanda, and rural Katavi in West Tanzania emphasize that these products are not only healthy because they are low in agricultural toxins, but also because they are foodstuffs "that grow themselves" (*zinajiotea zenyewe*). As a merchant in Kigoma explained, honey is a strong cure for many of the "diseases of nowadays" because it is created by bees mixing flowers from a variety of trees that "grow by themselves." The flowers of these kiasili trees are already medicinal, in contrast to those of the "modern trees" (*miti ya kisasa*) that are portrayed to grow artificially according to human plans. Improved breeds of livestock and crops, described as "modern" or "Western," are desired for their high production, but also considered inferior as their large products are less nourishing.

Additionally, improved breeds raise suspicions due to their unusually rapid maturation and their fragility, often necessitating veterinary care and pesticides. Interlocutors from West Tanzania framed the feeding, medication, and use of fertilizers on modern breeds as "making them grow before their time." Rather than being subjected to forceful feeding with fortified feed designed to accelerate their growth, kiasili animals are allowed to independently select a wide variety of foods and self-medicate while roaming freely. Maulid, a herbal medicine merchant in Mpanda town stated that animals and plants know themselves what foods are good for them and with what herbs to heal themselves. He explained that if they lack the autonomy to feed themselves properly, as do modern breeds confined into feedlots, they cannot grow into healthy food for humans. His statement resonates with several others' who directly linked the concept of kiasili to the condition of organisms' autonomy.

The agribusiness's neglect of broader more-than-human autonomy is equally evident in widespread sentiments about how fertilizers push crops to grow at an unnatural pace and beyond their inherent capacities, draining them of *vitamini* ("vitamins"). The consequences can be heard in the widespread laments of farmers in West Tanzania, who complain about how their "soils have grown tired" (*ardhi zimechoka*) and "grown old" (*ardhi zimezeeka*) prematurely due to fertilizer use. The adverse effects of these forced growth practices reverberate into the human population who consume foods said to be low in vitamini, manifesting in weakened physical states despite appearances of good health. An often-quoted example is how children exposed to these agrochemicals and shelf-life extending food additives experience accelerated growth, often appearing physically mature beyond their actual age. While individuals may appear well nourished and large, their true vitality is compromised, making them appear "older than their age" and "feel tired." These expressions on forced growth convey an implicit logic; industrialized agriculture forcefully overuses the life force of soils, crops, and animals, speeding up life cycles and draining vitality, including those of human consumers.

Testimonies about excessive growth also find traction in Kenya, where some interlocutors lament about the transition from the traditional, seasonal, and time-imbued process of farming to the hurried, hormone-enhanced "fast-farm" products (Rahier 2023). Livingston (2003) documented similar images of the "quickening life cycle" in Botswana in the late 1990s. People entered puberty and old age prematurely due to lifestyle changes and a shift away from wild foods and organic farming. In her recent book on Botswana's "self-devouring growth," she notes the accelerated cattle life cycles of industrialized livestock mirroring the accelerated human life course (Livingston 2019, 56). Statements she quotes resemble those from West Tanzanian interlocutors: people were "becoming old before their time" (Livingston 2003, 157), and children, though bigger or stronger, were seen by elders as physically weaker than in earlier times (Livingston 2003, 154). According to Livingston, "bodies seem to be moving through life too fast, expending—not replenishing—their life force." As a result, she notes, "[t]he 'average' person may be living longer, but the 'average' person's body is weaker, more polluted, and out of harmony with the proper rhythms driven by nature" (Livingston 2003, 142). She highlights the crucial aspect of vitality and life force that, as we will argue, is fundamentally at stake in the organic imaginary.

Anxieties over declining health echo older analyses of the widespread Bantu cognate derived from the proto-Bantu stem *mʊ̀jòjò, central to many Central and East African notions of well-being. *Mʊ̀jòjò includes meanings such as "soul," "life," "existence", and "life force." Africanist scholarship shows that the well-being denoted by *mʊ̀jòjò cognates encompasses more than physical health. In this literature (De Boeck 1991; Devisch 1993; Ruel 1993; Taylor 1988), vitality is a relational condition produced and transmitted among kin, ancestors, and the natural environment, rather than an isolated state of the individual or a purely nutritional matter. While addressing new problems with novel ideas and methods, contemporary manifestations of the organic maintain important continuities with these older notions of well-being centered on the transmission of vitality. Our ethnographic data underscores the fact that humans are not the only entities impacted by the disruption of vitality in the web of life. Other entities, too, are experiencing a loss of sovereignty at the hands of agribusiness. The kiasili discourse in West Tanzania, for instance, recognizes how soils, plants, and animals are also losing the autonomy to feed themselves properly and are forced to expend their vitality too fast. Plants, soils, humans, and animals alike are all described as "growing old before their time," "becoming tired," and lacking vitamini.

Although the relational transmission of vitality within more-than-human communities has not been theorized extensively in the Africanist literature, it is clearly present in older anthropological literature. Consider, for example, the work of Geissler and Prince (2010) on the experience of the AIDS epidemic that started in the 1980s in Kenya. They assert that among the JoUhero the epidemic became intertwined with local understandings of soil deterioration, shifting family dynamics, and economic struggles. The JoUhero poignantly referred to this crisis as "the land is dying," a direct reference to overall diminishing vitality and growth apparent all around. Observe the remarkable similarities between the images documented by Geissler and Prince in the early 2000s, and those in the contemporary kiasili discourse. Both refer to a deeper understanding of the pervasive decline in vitality experienced by humans, plants, animals, and the environment at large. As they acknowledge, the expression "the land is tired" has older roots and had been used in Luoland for decades before the advent of the AIDS crisis (Cohen and Odhiambo 1989, 95–99 as cited in Geissler and Prince 2010, 32n6). The various crises experienced by JoUhero are unified by "a notion of growth, in which the well-being of cosmic and social worlds, the fertility of the land and its inhabitants, people and animals, living and dead, form an interconnected whole, and in which seemingly disparate dimensions of growth are dependent upon one another" (Geissler and Prince 2010, 9).

The connectedness of humans', livestock's, and crops' vitality and growth is especially central to Myhre's (2018) analysis of Chagga practices in Tanzania. This connectedness plays out in transfers of life force between various more-than-human beings and materializes through networks of plant roots and animal veins, or powerful foodstuffs such as beer. In nineteenth-century Buhaya, northwestern Tanzania, life force was also a profoundly relational matter between, among others, individual coffee plants, their human owners, and the fields upon which they were planted (Weiss 2002). Iheka (2018) more recently highlights the intertwining of human and nonhuman realms in African literature, emphasizing overlooked narratives of "ecological proximity." He attributes this oversight to the colonial legacy of depicting Africans in dehumanizing, animalistic terms, which has hindered engagement with multispecies relationships in literary and African studies. This colonial mindset justified "civilizing" missions and influenced postcolonial studies' reluctance to explore these entanglements. We align our concept of the organic with Iheka's call to recognize the critical role of ecological proximity in African lifeworlds while adopting a postcolonial and environmental justice lens to avoid perpetuating colonial stereotypes.

The kiasili discourse critiques contemporary food systems for undermining these vital exchanges between humans and the broader network of life. Anchored in longstanding notions of vitality, it emphasizes the organic as a collective effort involving more-than-human participants. This concept of shared vitality, which has been insufficiently explored in African studies, underscores the intricate interdependencies that sustain life across species and ecosystems. It aspires to a metabolic system where soils and organisms freely harness their life force, seeking and conveying vitality according to their needs.

The organic as contemporary forest mediation

Beyond concerns about industrial agriculture and food processing dominating food life cycles, there is growing worry about limited access to forests. Ethnographic and historical studies across sub-Saharan Africa (Herbert 1993; Jackson 1982) show that forests have been vital for accessing medicinal plants and spiritual forces. Serving as the realm of ancestral and nature spirits, and at times of valuable iron and ivory, the forest has been a potent source of both economic and medicinal powers. The ambiguous potency of the forest was mediated—for destructive or generative ends—by healers, cult members, chiefs, witches, hunters, and metallurgists (de Luna 2015; Stroeken 2018). However, access to forests has become restricted. Since colonial times, African landscapes have been portrayed as needing protection from locals to restore "pristine wilderness" (Neumann 1998), obscuring indigenous histories and enforcing separation between people and forests. This "fortress conservation" approach (Brockington 2002) has intensified with militarized and neoliberal conservation strategies (Marijnen, de Vries, and Duffy 2020; Büscher and Fletcher 2020). As vast expanses of forest were incorporated into restricted conservation zones, it became progressively difficult to tap into the forest's healing potential. Acquiring medicinal foods such as mushrooms, wild meat, and other edibles deemed highly kiasili and kienyeji have become more arduous. Losing access to their workspace, the healing work of older types of forest mediators such as traditional healers, chiefs, and cult members has been taken over by a group of experts we refer to as herbalists. They mediate the healing powers of a source akin to the forest: the organic.

In Nakuru, Kenya, and West Tanzania, herbalists use titles like *daktari ya kienyeji* ("doctor of indigenous medicine") and *daktari ya tiba asili* ("doctor of natural treatment") to distinguish themselves from older forest mediators. The terms "herbalist" and "herbal medicine" are also used in English as alternatives for the Kiswahili daktari and tiba asili. We use "herbalist" consistently throughout the article to translate the various local idioms used for the herbal experts we quote. Herbalists are keen to clarify that they have nothing to do with the perceived backwardness and occult work of traditional healers who similarly use plant medicine. Former President John Pombe Magufuli, in his anti-imperialist stance promoting herbal medicine for Covid-19, assured citizens that herbal medicine is beneficial and distinct from witchcraft (Dar 24 2020). Herbalists are also popularly perceived as standing in opposition to biomedicine and its toxic associations. Nevertheless, they adopt the aesthetics of biomedicine, including branded packaging, the utilization of medical instruments, and the typical attire of biomedical professionals. They thereby embody the state's reimagining of traditional healing into a sanitized natural medicine devoid of spiritual guidance (Nichols-Belo 2018; see also Langwick 2010).

In Tanzania and Kenya, herbal medicines can be locally sourced from nurseries or foraged, but they may also come from distant places like India, China, and the US, manifesting as repackaged Ayurvedic, traditional Chinese, or organic supplements. Similar to biomedicine, the potency of herbal medicines is seen to reside in the substance of the plant instead of in relation to localized ancestral and nature spirits often residing in the forest. Herbalists' detached approach to herbal medicine contrasts with the practices of, among others, Bende and Tongwe traditional healers known as Bhafumo in West Tanzania or Gikuyu Ando Ago in Kenya who must contend with the spiritual relations embedded in plant medicine. Bhafumo healers follow intricate rituals to seek consent from the plant and the spirits governing it. The opposition between herbal and traditional medicine is, however, not as stark as herbalists like to present it. Herbal practices partly draw on, and overlap with, traditional healing. A herbalist in rural Katavi, for instance, chuckled while admitting he gains knowledge about plant medicine by presenting himself as a patient to traditional healers. He uses the plants recommended to him for his own patients, but without observing any spiritual protocols while preparing the medicine. There are also similarities in how certain herbalists in Mpanda town try to respect plants' autonomy. They worry that if the plant is relocated or fertilized, it may not agree to mature into medicinal form. This stance corresponds to the principle present in the reflections described earlier: for plants to retain the vitality needed for nourishment and medicine, they must grow under autonomous conditions rather than being forced.

While herbalists often source ingredients from multiple locations, contrasting with the localized spiritual ties of traditional medicine, both medicinal systems share the concept that the outside possesses potent medicinal properties. As demonstrated by Stroeken (2018), a common theme in Bantu-speaking healing systems is that the power to steer vitality and healing comes from a relationship with the unfamiliar, wild outside. He situates the historical roots of the attribution of power to the outside in the reciprocal relationship between hunters and the spirits of the forest. The principle of the powerful outside was extended beyond the realm of the forest to unfamiliar places and groups. Their undomesticated fertility was to be mastered by the healer and the chief, who thus gained the capacity of regulating life by means of, what Stroeken defines as, "the forest within." Contemporary herbalists appear on the healing scene as the new mediators of the ambiguously potent outside—no longer the outside of the forest, but the outside of powerful herbal medicine from far away, to deal with the intrusion of dangerous foods and agrochemicals that often come from far away as well (infra). Whereas some herbalists emphasize the local character of their medicine, others brand their medicine with labels ensuring customers that the herbs were tested by laboratories in the capital or sourced from "original" plants from China. Njeri, the Nakuru-based herbalist featured in the opening vignette, indexes her access to international networks by frequent code-switching to regional and international languages. Through her Tanzanian husband, Njeri taps into Tanzania's reputation among many Kenyans as a neighboring country known for its potent medicine, hence Tanzania as a potent "outside" from the point of view of Kenyan herbalists. She also sources Ayurvedic medicine with properties similar to indigenous shrubs and repackages them under her own brand. While some interlocutors interpreted this as trickery (*ujanja*), others trusted Njeri for her ability to Africanize potent sources of medicine and integrate them into the trusted realm of indigenous herbal practice. Herbalists like Njeri serve as gatekeepers mediating powerful external sources, akin to the "technicians of the forest" in South-Central Africa described by de Luna (2015). From the mid-eighth to the mid-thirteenth century, "bushcrafters" from Botatswe-speaking communities elevated their status by depicting the forest as a generative yet dangerous space, navigable only by the adept. Mavhunga (2014) describes the hunter among viShona-speakers as a master of guided mobility, relying on spiritual guidance to traverse the forest. Similarly, in Western Tanzania, Bende and Tongwe traditional healers (Bhafumo) are seen as akin to initiated hunters (Bhajheeghe) for their unique ability to navigate unknown terrains.

Despite herbalists' efforts to distance themselves from traditional healers, they resemble these "technicians of the forest" in their skill at navigating unfamiliar terrains. As forest access becomes increasingly rare, herbalists position themselves as new mediators of the potent qualities and autonomy once associated with the forest, now embodied by the various affordances of the organic. In the next section, we address how these contemporary forest mediators handle toxic intrusions.

The organic as countering toxic intrusions and restoring relationality

Njeri's stance towards Royco stock cubes underscores the rising apprehensions among Africans regarding the trustworthiness of global food systems and the agribusiness sector. Royco seasoning products were first introduced in Kenya in 1955 by Unilever, around the same time when the famous Maggi stock cubes (produced by Nestlé) were introduced continent-wide. In Europe, Maggi and Royco are products of the industrial era when families grappled with nutritional deficits and upcoming emancipation among women required reduced kitchen time. Stock cubes and prepackaged foods became a symbol of the working class. On the African continent, stock cubes and other processed foods have similarly become popular ways of reducing cooking time among urban dwellers (Reardon et al. 2021). When Unilever Kenya introduced Royco Mchuzi Mix in 2017, Njeri incorporated the cubes in her performances to resonate with anxieties about the loss of control over food production. Stock cubes exemplify the perception that ruling political and business elites, in tandem with global food corporations, are implicated in food adulteration. They are believed to occult the industrial processes of food production, hiding them behind the complex veils of capitalist production systems (Rahier 2023, 89–90). There are widespread beliefs linking stock cubes to witchcraft. Njeri provides numerous examples of these practices, citing cases from both the DR Congo and Uganda. Denham describes how in Northern Nigeria, some people believe Maggi cubes contain the blood of cult members, thinking that consuming them would convert people into followers (Denham, n.d.). Such beliefs are often fueled by Pentecostal discourse on freemasonry and devil worship. In Nakuru, the Pentecostal community views the city as the focal point of Kenya's spiritual battles, highlighted by Nakuru's history as the "heart of the white highlands" and its current role as the nation's breadbasket. Colonial legacies, with large tracts of farmland retained by British families like the Barclays, Nightingales, and Delameres, and properties held by notable political figures, contribute to this distrust. Nakuru's link to the birth of East Africa's biggest processed food retailers, such as Tuskys, Nakumatt, and Naivas, predominantly influenced by powerful (often foreign) investors, amplifies these sentiments. These elites dominate vast sectors of the agricultural landscape, including major bakeries and butcheries, wielding significant influence over Nakuru's—and the broader region's—agro-economic arena. Similar suspicions are voiced in Tanzanian coffee houses, where men discuss the hidden agendas behind unhealthy foods imposed on African markets. Some point to how Tanzanians were deceived into abandoning their kiasili farming methods, starting in colonial times with the promotion of large-scale agriculture.

Others point to the entanglement of local and global elites who impose an unhealthy food system draining the vitality of African bodies for their own financial benefit. Organic discourses in Nakuru and West Tanzania thus confront "gastrocolonialism," a term coined by Perez (2013) and further developed by Chao (2022). This concept critiques how global food and agro-industrial players impose alimentary regimes that erode indigenous foodways and health, perpetuating the racialized violence of capitalism and imperialism through food (Chao 2022, 813).

Important for our analysis is how the preoccupation with the organic ties into increasingly individualized societies. Whereas healing practices were always a collective endeavor, the pentecostalization of African societies has resulted in the marginalization of diviners and healers and their sessions "losing significance at the level of collective release" (Stroeken 2017, 265). Divination and healing as a collective endeavor have been taken up by the pastors and prophet healers of the Pentecostal churches who preach more intimate and individual forms of religious cleansing, especially in an era where discerning trustworthy figures becomes increasingly challenging. Rumors abound throughout the region about the rising prevalence of counterfeit priests and fraudulent prophet healers (Pype 2010). The preoccupation with the organic follows this trend. Herbalists like Njeri often emphasize one's personal responsibility to properly navigate increasingly toxic environments. This aligns with the global increase in personal wearables such as Fitbits and fitness apps to keep track of personal data such as consumed calories, steps taken, food and sleep. While a detailed analysis of wearables' impact on African self-perception is beyond this work's scope, it is notable that these devices have become important for middle-class urbanites invested in "healthy lifestyles," especially since Covid-19. Through meticulous data analysis tracking various facets of oneself and converting them into numbers, these wearables induce the "optimization" of the self (Pantzar and Ruckenstein 2015) without having to rely on others. These devices bring health, healing, and nourishment to an intimate level, in contrast to the earlier reliance on ritual experts and medical professionals, who dealt with communal health, toxicity, and pollution. Njeri's performances also aim to educate Africans on autonomously managing their metabolic lives and reducing the impact of food industries seen as controlled by unfamiliar "toxic-outsides." Self-reliance and anti-imperialist sentiments are thus at the core of the vernacular understanding of both kiasili and kienyeji, materializing a conjunction of morality, authenticity, politics, geography, and temporality in deeply embodied ways (Rahier 2023, 93).

Before exploring how the organic acts as a social leveling mechanism to address distrust, it is essential to examine the backdrop of this skepticism and how distrust in processed foods and agribusiness aligns with wider debates about the escalating occult nature of regional economies since the 1990s. Blunt (2004, 297) points out that "[s]tate agents, institutions, and artifacts became suspect, rumored to be the very mechanisms by which Satan collected the life force of Kenya's regular folk". White's (2000) analysis of circulating rumors about bloodsucking vampires is equally of relevance here. She argues that vampires feeding on the life force of Africans mirrors the way Africans perceived colonial intrusion—as entities extracting the continent's resources, both material and human. Colonial power, much like vampires, had an unquenchable thirst for Africa's vast resources. But their quest was not limited to tangible assets like minerals, lands, or labor. The colonial endeavor was also about influence and control over the African way of life. Yusoff (2018) considers this extractive business an important marker for the beginning of the Black Anthropocene, emphasizing the systemic and historical aspects of "blackness" as it relates to geological and environmental exploitation and the ongoing neocolonial dominance over the continent's resources. Njeri's stance toward stock cubes hints at the same. She elucidates that food additives (kemikali) represent neocolonial occult assaults, preying on the *moyo* (life force, Kiswahili cognate of *mʊ̀jɔ̀jɔ̀) of Africans. This is effectively demonstrated through Njeri's interpretation of the food codes found on stock cube packaging. She convincingly illustrates to her audience that there exists a concealed connection between food additives, (neo-)colonialism, and malevolence. By subtracting the food code she associates with European time (789) from Swahili time (123), the result is "666," which is recognized as the symbol of the devil.

Njeri's discourse highlights concerns of "toxic outsides" intensified by the excesses of late capitalism that brings toxic interference permeating both individual bodies and entire nations. Agri-food industries strip away the deeply entrenched socio-material relational entanglements of food practices—sharing a meal and growing food as embodiments of relationality—and threatens the natural rhythms of life and growth (also see Weiss 1996 on "eating slowly" among Haya communities in Tanzania). Herbalists present "adulterated and processed foods [as] invert[ing] roles of eater and what is eaten" (Rahier 2021, 464). As such "Kemikali [food chemicals] eat, and life force is eaten" (Rahier 2021, 464). Hence, food chemicals and agribusiness influence relationships. They not only "cut veins" but also cause relationships between people, plants, and the soil to be "cut off," or "obstructed" due to kemikali's consumption of life (Rahier 2021, 464).

Views on forced growth, diminished vitality, and the fragility of both humans and other living beings resonate with the previously introduced notions of "vitality" and "life force," referred to with cognates of mʊ̀jòjò in Bantu-speaking Africa. However, here we do not consider them in terms of exchanges between individuals and their surroundings (supra) but rather in relation to the perpetuation of kinship bonds and interpersonal connections among people. Using Njeri's analogy of "prostitute chicken" bred in incubators and the claim that Royco stock cubes diminish sexual drive provides a compelling framework to delve deeper into this topic. Her claims link the consumption of processed foods to sexual potency and genitals, historically an important topic in healing discourse across eastern Africa. Breasts and the penis are often considered "transmitters of force" (Gutmann 1926, 659), vitality, or life and therefore tied to metabolic processes channeling "pollution and toxicity, including their political, economic, spiritual and social causes and consequences" (Rahier 2021, 465).

Older analyses of life force or *mʊ̀jòjò cognates link vitality to experiences of social growth and kinship: it is through productive transfers and transformations of life flow that kin ties are (re)produced and the vitality of a community is maintained. Malcolm Ruel (1993) cites a related term in Kuria communities: *omooyo*, which denotes "life," "health," "well-being," "windpipe," or "alimentary canal." Taylor (1988) similarly examines how vitality is expressed through the unimpeded flow of liquids such as beer, milk, honey, blood, semen, and saliva in precolonial Rwanda. Proper "Flow of these liquids … symbolized the ideal of smoothly proceeding social life—continuity in production, exchange, and fertility" (Taylor 1988, 1344). These references reflect a *longue durée* connection between passageways for water, air, semen, and food and broader notions of communal well-being and vitality. One of the important diagnoses for diminishing life force documented in Africanist literature is witchcraft attacks, whereby the witch feeds on the life flow of others. The orifices of the body through which life is metabolized are considered particularly vulnerable for such occult attacks. Njeri refers to this when she explains that Africans have been "spoiled with this dirt called Royco." Eating brings potential toxic outsides in touch with healthy insides and the stomach and gut serve as "contact zones" where food chemicals feed on life force (Rahier 2021, 463). Eating inevitably involves the influence and agency of others. While older accounts of witchcraft attacks often tied them to food consumed within the "intimacy of the house" (Geschiere 2013) and prepared by close relatives, contemporary instances of vitality loss are often associated with the wider nexus of agents behind the processed food industry and agroindustry. For example, food scientists involved in creating Royco stock cubes as part of food fortification initiatives are among those implicated in Njeri's description of depleted life force due to processed and adulterated foodstuff. Langwick (2018) refers to this as "a politics of habitability." She draws attention to life burdened by toxic loads or "the condition under which life is attenuated, diminished, depleted, exhausted, or drained away" (2018, 418) by disrupted relations between people, plants and the soil. Rahier (2021, 462) argues that Njeri's performances hint at Mbembe's (2003) notion of "discounted bodies" or Nixon's (2011) idea of environmental pollution as "slow violence." Njeri's arguments indicate that through the use of chemicals, synthetic fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides, African bodies and landscapes are subjected to continuous neocolonial harm, leaving them "kept alive but in a state of injury" (Mbembe 2003, 21), thereby eroding them of all vitality. Her use of the idiom kemikali to talk about the harmful effects of foods also brings to light the notion of "chemical injuries," a key term in postcolonial eco-poetics that reveals how the scars of industrial harm are often invisibly embedded within the bodies of subaltern communities (see among others Davies 2022; Shapiro 2015).

It is against this background that the increasing focus on the organic can be interpreted as a new leveling mechanism to channel deep-seated mistrust towards the foods and environments shaped by late capitalism. We refer here to Geschiere's (1997) analysis of witchcraft as a social leveling mechanism to control and regulate social inequalities. When individuals gain too much power, wealth, or status, accusations of witchcraft can emerge to "level" them or bring them back down to a more balanced state, akin to the dynamics observed in "joking relations" (Radcliffe-Brown 1940) or through humor (Lee 1969). This dynamic serves as a social regulator, ensuring that no one becomes too dominant or powerful, potentially threatening social harmony or creating too much disparity.

A comparable mechanism can be witnessed in relation to the experienced intrusion by agri-food industries that are seen as wielding excessive power and influence. Yet, new forms of leveling are at play. Traditional distinctions between toxicity and purity are becoming increasingly blurry. Concepts such as "dirt," "danger," "illness," and "taboo"—older forms of toxicity and pollution—were long understood as "matter out of place" (Douglas 1969), examples of the dangerously powerful outside breaching beyond the protected domain regulated by specialists like healers, hunters, or blacksmiths. The concept of the organic evolves from and contrasts with these traditional distinctions of "inside" versus "outside" and concurring mediations. Against the backdrop of increasingly polluted environments and bodies, the toxic outside now permeates body and mind beyond control, becoming an inescapable aspect of daily life, altering bodies and landscapes beyond the domain of the ritual expert. This leads to epistemological uncertainty about how to make sense of a world riddled with toxins and how to counterbalance the overwhelming power exerted by agri-food industries. Herbalists like Njeri present the organic as a new leveling mechanism to fill this epistemological void. They harness the forest's potential through the active deployment of the organic—both in terms of a potent metaphor and an actual source of medicine—and position themselves as experts guiding Africans through evermore toxic landscapes affecting health, vitality, and the conditions that allow more viable lifeworlds.

The organic as African pride

Herbal interventions have been gaining momentum across the continent. Especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a surge in African herbal solutions, driven partly by concerns about Africans being targeted for vaccine testing. Many Africans embraced traditional home-based remedies, partly steered by aforementioned anti-imperialist responses to perceptions of the "West" as being involved in neocolonial endeavors, a sentiment underscored by the global pharmaceutical competition during the pandemic. A prominent example is "Covid-organics," often referred to as "CVO," which was endorsed by the president of Madagascar, Andry Rajoelina. Produced by the Malagasy Institute of Applied Research, CVO were widely publicized on social media, even reaching as far as Kinshasa. Pype (2022) argues that in "Digital Kinshasa" (the online equivalent of the city), Kinois contended that the true innovator of the Covid-organics was the Congolese medical specialist Jérôme Munyangi, who was reportedly working in Madagascar during that period. She reports on videos in which Dr. Munyangi clarified that he was arrested as a result of the malevolent influences of the global pharmaceutical industry, which perceives Covid-organics as a threat to their businesses.

In Kenya, a similar turn to "homegrown" solutions was noticeable during the pandemic. Provincial lockdowns disrupted food supplies to the capital, prompting residents to turn to homegrown kienyeji foods, cultivating them between buildings and even in flowerpots on their balconies. This shift ignited discussions about the increasing prevalence of industrialized food production eroding traditional culinary practices imagined as prioritizing relationships and livelihoods that are sustainable, rooted in solidarity, and approached with care. In Burundi, Bashizi et al. (2021, 206) report on a similar surge in herbal remedies. The most notable example is Tisane Kira 2020, a herbal tea brewed from various indigenous plants, often used for the flu, malaria, and other ailments which mirror Covid-19 symptoms. Amid the pandemic, its reputation as a potential treatment for Covid-19 gained traction on social media. Similarly, the practice of therapeutic steaming, known by the Kirundi term *ukwiyubikira*, reemerged as a popular herbal treatment, where the leaves of medicinal plants are boiled to produce a healing steam bath. Similar practices gained popularity in DR Congo and Tanzania (Lee, Meek, and Katumusiime 2023). The Covid-19 pandemic intensified discussions on African sovereignty, rooted in the conviction that African countries could manage the health crisis independently of Western intervention. Countries like Madagascar and Senegal epitomized this stance in their foreign relations (Bashizi et al. 2021).

Ideas about African sovereignty in health and pharmaceuticals have a long history in South Africa. A notable example is the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the late 1990s and early 2000s when South Africa had one of the highest HIV infection rates globally. During President Thabo Mbeki's tenure (1999–2008), his administration controversially addressed the crisis. Mbeki and Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang were skeptical about the HIV-AIDS link and questioned antiretroviral (ARV) drugs' safety and efficacy. Tshabalala-Msimang promoted traditional remedies like garlic, beetroot, and African potatoes, earning the nickname "Dr. Beetroot." In international forums, she advocated for organic foods and traditional practices, critiquing Western pharmaceutical interventions and their exploitative relationship with Africa. This stance aimed to validate local health practices as alternatives or complements to Western medicine, facing significant backlash from global health organizations and domestic activists (also see Fassin 2007).

More recently, Donna Andrews and Desiree Lewis (2017) highlight the endeavors of the Rural Women's Assembly (RWA) in South Africa in their study on food sovereignty. Central to the RWA's mission is the principle of "reclaiming" of essential resources like seeds, land, and water from corporate interests. This fight extends beyond resource control, challenging the broader neoliberal systems that perpetuate exploitation, racism, and sexism. Using an ecofeminist lens, Andrews and Lewis draw parallels between the colonization of lands and the subjugation of women's bodies, both crucial to the food sovereignty discourse. The RWA celebrates traditional organic farming methods and the pivotal roles women play in them, viewing this celebration as a potent act of resistance against systemic erasure (see also Wangari Maathai's ecofeminist Green Belt Movement in Kenya [Ochieng 2017]).

Pype (2022) refers to this as "flashes of pride" promoting "African" knowledge and expertise. The celebration of Dr. Munyangi and so-perceived Congolese herbal treatments in digital Kinshasa "allow[ed] Kinois to rewrite the savior narrative: some suggested that this crisis gives black (including Cuban) or African experts an opportunity to assume the savior role" (2022, 6). This, she continues, radiated confidence and hope, suggesting that Africans can not only sustain themselves but also come to the aid of whites. In this context, the organic highlights a green science from the South that is politically mobilized as a counterbalance to the overarching Western influence in global pharmaceutics, agribusiness, and food markets. Discourses and practices associated with kiasili and kienyeji are efforts to reclaim, promote, and declare allegiance to local cultural practices that have been undermined by Western modernity. Langwick (2021, 298) describes how these efforts tie into regional debates about biospiracy or the unauthorized appropriation of biological resources and the aspirations for monetizing traditional medicinal practices under late liberalism. Such fears react to the impact of neocolonial transformations of nature as a living entity, interconnected with humans and other beings, to a resource that can be utilized and manipulated for human benefit (2021, 298). In Tanzania, "[p]ostindependence and socialist dreams had cast traditional medicine as the basis of an indigenous pharmaceutical industry and promised freedom from multinational pharmaceutical companies and global capitalism more broadly" (Langwick 2015, 493).

Pride in organic practices is often driven by memories and nostalgia of African pasts when the interplay between food and gendered relationships was perceived differently—often as healthier and more abundant—and might romanticize social dynamics that did not necessarily unfold as remembered. However, this longing provides valuable insight into people's perspectives on their current situation, their distrust of agri-food industries, and their hopes for a healthier and more promising future (Rahier 2023, 95). It upholds the virtues of an idealized "pristine," "authentic," and inherently "cleaner" past in an era that is increasingly marked by hyper-technologization.

The romanticization of a more organic and natural past also involves less progressive social dynamics compared to the anti-imperialist dimensions we emphasized so far. In Nakuru and West Tanzania, the rise of processed foods is frequently described as a sign of moral decay, reflecting changing gendered social relations. As Reardon et al. (2021) note, important drivers for processed food consumption in sub-Saharan Africa are urbanization and a shift in employment necessitating quicker food preparation. Food processing has facilitated these socioeconomic shifts, particularly female participation in work outside the home, by reducing food preparation times (Sauer et al. 2021). For example, mechanically processed corn, often viewed in West Tanzania as emblematic of unhealthy modern foods, offers considerable time savings compared to the laborious process of hand-pounding corn flour. Laments about the decline of traditional, time-intensive foodways thus reflect gendered food expectations tied to unequal domestic labor. Conservative tones in organic discourses are also apparent in their heteronormative and patriarchal tendencies, exemplified by Njeri's use of anti-queer gossip tabloids during her performances. Old newspapers featuring alarming stories about the decline in male potency associated with "gayness" were strategically placed among various other artifacts like bottles, eggs, condoms, and bags, delineating the edges of her makeshift stage. In a similar vein, members of the traditionalist Gikuyu council of elders, *kiama*, would uphold a conservative discourse regarding the role of women as guardians of the house and their duty to prepare time-consuming kienyeji foods. Notions of the organic and the natural, as well as organic farming practices, have similarly been historically entangled with conservative movements in the West, taking various forms including eighteenth-century Romanticism, fascist notions of the organic state, and ecofascism in present times (Bryant, 2024; Treitel, 2015). Such narratives are part of the vernacular understandings of the organic on the continent and provide a realm where desire, ideas, affects, as well as conservatism and resistance flourish amidst African lifeworlds grappling with escalating toxicity and the embodied harm of gastrocolonialism. It fosters feelings of dignity and pride and is mobilized for political and economic purposes against the backdrop of late capitalist exploitation and environmental degradation. It speaks to the aspirations and visions rooted in the idioms kiasili and kienyeji serving as alternatives independent from pharmaceutical industries, as marketable indigenous medicine, as protected intellectual assets, and as a pathway to forge self-reliance and a reimagining of more sovereign futures for the continent.

Conclusion

We have proposed the organic as an emerging keyword referring to the myriad discourses and practices through which Africans navigate increasingly toxic and unnatural environments. It encompasses diverse imaginaries, holding varied significance for different individuals and sometimes being utilized for contrasting objectives. Whilst acknowledging its polysemy, we have pinpointed several core elements where the term organic—illustrated in this article via the idioms kiasili and kienyeji—exhibits notable consistencies. Being fundamentally concerned with restoring the flow of vitality, the organic is mobilized as an alternative for the power previously found in the forest, representing a transformation in healing methodologies, driven by the emerging challenges of late capitalism. Utilizing new resources and guided by herbalists as contemporary experts, the organic has emerged to face conditions characterized by the intrusion and slow violence by corporate food systems, inaccessible forests, and the continuing pentecostalization and individualization of society. The organic aims to restore the flow of vitality between people, and the more-than-human network involved in food production. The perceived bodily and environmental toxicity has taken an experiential position akin to witchcraft, to which the organic responds as a potent antidote, exorcizing and leveling out the evil of late capitalism. The organic does not represent a singular, fixed perspective. It is above all a tentative practice of making do within a context of toxicity and pollution that many interlocutors define as inescapable. It responds to a global landscape of reckless, unregulated scientific experimentation and the dangers posed to Africans and the global commons by capitalist production and its environmental and biological hazards.

Consuming organic is an attempt to do what the nation's borders fail to keep out: external influences that jeopardize African sovereignty (Rahier 2021). The organic equally does ideological work: promoting pride and idealized pasts to forge better individual and collective futures whilst challenging broader neoliberal and neocolonial toxic systems.

For many Africans, the organic serves as a beacon to *try* and make sense of an uncertain world, offering a vision of a more viable life. The notion of *trying* is important here. Borrowing the concept of trying from Mususas's (2012, 319) work on the Copperbelt region, we conclude that an Africanist analysis of the organic highlights the experimental and poetic nature of efforts to deal with toxicity. It moves beyond rigid portrayals that overlook the multiplicity and explorative character of the quest for healthier, more viable lifeworlds on the continent. Importantly, the critical potential of these explorations and aspirations for healthier lives extends beyond the African context. As we have argued, African reflections on the organic offer a political analysis of the gastrocolonial global system inflicting harm on bodies worldwide. Kienyeji, kiasili, and related concepts of the organic emphasize that our global predicament should be understood as a crisis of vitality and viability, and that remedies to this crisis should be about restoring the relational, more-than-human networks that sustain life.

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