

Devin Smart. 2025. *Preparing the Modern Meal: Urban Capitalism and Working-Class Food in Kenya's Port City*. Athens: Ohio University Press. 252 pp.

In Fall 2023, while discussing food and labor across rural and urban Sub-Saharan Africa with Devin Smart, he mentioned that his book, *Preparing the Modern Meal*, was in press. The timing felt urgent. Despite food's centrality to urban vitality, rural livelihoods, gender dynamics, governance, and local economies, the historiography of working-class food in African cities had remained strikingly underexplored—until this work.

Spanning colonial and postcolonial Mombasa, Kenya, Smart's book unfolds in five chapters, examining how food systems shaped rural-urban migration, transformed rural and urban economies, structured colonial and postcolonial labor, and created modern urban food infrastructures—cafés, saloons, cafeterias, bakeries, and street-food vendors (p. 13). Central to the argument is capitalism's reshaping of food production and consumption. Household-based provisioning, where men and women farmers fed kin and workers, shifted under colonialism. Rural domestic supplies gave way to institutional rations for urban laborers, severing ties from household women to kin and channeling food through urban systems (p. 19). While framed as a business history of street vendors, the book effectively traces the labor history of Mombasa's informal economy, highlighting the social and economic forces behind the city's modern foodscape.

Smart opens with a discussion of East Africa's agrarian heartlands, where agriculture sustained village life. Women performed most farming, turning crops like millet, maize, sweet potatoes, bananas, and beans into cuisines that fueled rural economies "like fuel to a machine." Colonialism shattered this balance. As Mombasa grew into an economic hub, the British introduced *posho* rations—distributed as wages via the uneven *kibaba* measure (pp. 32-33). Smart traces how "the new working-class food system that migrants entered on Kenya's coast had its origins in Britain's empire" (p. 33), rooted in racial paternalism. Precolonial gender divisions—men hunting protein, women cultivating staples—ensured self-sufficiency. Mass male migration to the coast broke this system, severing workers from household supplies and placing rationing under colonial control. Preparation shifted to men, tastes often turned unpalatable, and gender roles inverted.

The coastal climate intensified the need for street food. As Smart explains, "while temperatures in Mombasa were lower during morning hours, heavy humidity usually awaited people when they arrived at work, adding immediate strain to the hard labor of a busy port" (p. 76). These conditions heightened hunger and spurred the growth of street food near workplaces. Workers in transportation, oil companies, breweries, and small manufacturing plants flocked to stalls during lunch breaks. By the mid-twentieth century, street food had become a defining feature of the city (p. 85), introducing foods that shaped Mombasa's urban culture. Breakfasts often included *chai*, a sweet milky tea, served with *mahamri*, a fried dough made from wheat flour, sugar, coconut milk, and cardamom (p. 86). Street food reshaped domestic cooking rather than replacing it. Single migrant men often cooked collectively, using meal preparation to gain acceptance within migrant networks (p. 97). When living with wives, cooking largely remained women's work, and fish remained central to both home-cooked meals and street food.

By the late twentieth century, street food vending came under government regulation as authorities debated whether informal food businesses should remain part of a modernizing city. Drawing on media sources and oral interviews, Smart shows how postcolonial governments adapted colonial regulatory practices (p. 107). Enforcement proved difficult because vendors were essential to urban life. By 1957, there was even “a ‘gentleman’s agreement’ that until sufficient food-vendor canteens existed there would be ‘no serious enforcement’ of bylaws against illicit eateries...until a new basis for social reproduction had been established” (p. 113). Street vending became central to independence politics, with politicians relying on vendors for support and occasionally defending them against regulation (p. 117). Attempts by officials like C.D. Ronsenwald, who viewed vendors as obstacles to modernization, met resistance (p. 118). Licensing, taxation, and sanitation rules continued to create tensions.

Towards the century’s end, street food became woven into Mombasa’s urban fabric, surviving through adaptation. Private employers avoided calls for offsite worker cafeterias, opting for coastal resorts instead, while large firms like Bamburi Cement maintained farmlands and canteens (pp. 138-39). Street vendors persisted, asserting agency through cases such as Priscillia Mwaneki Murundi advocating for her food truck (p. 155) or Emma Mundanya, whose stall was demolished under Sharif Nassir’s regime. Such demolitions often served political aims, clearing proletarian opposition under KANU’s “development” agenda. Even with the arrival of KFC and Pizza Hut, the working class continued to rely on street food.

Preparing the Modern Meal deepens our grasp of urban food and labor in sub-Saharan Africa. While contemporary studies of vending and regulation proliferate, Smart historicizes the phenomenon, showing street food’s rise is inseparable from capitalism’s arrival—and its gender shifts, informal resilience, and subaltern vitality. Drawing on British Library and Kenyan National Archives records, as well as over seventy oral interviews with vendors, officials, and consumers, the book brings profound depth to Kenya’s working-class experience.

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