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Greener on the other side: tracing stories of amaranth and moringa through indenture

Pralini Naidoo 

abstract

My research, with its focus on women and food seed through the lens of indenture, has led me into the world of leafy green vegetables and their intimate connection to women who had been brought to South Africa to service colonial plantations. Leafy greens are currently buzzwords in the fitness, health, vegan, and vegetarian vocabulary. Occasionally, another leaf is *discovered* by the doyens of fancy cuisine, researchers or experts, elevating an *unknown* dark green leaf to superfood status. In the past few decades moringa and amaranth have gained popularity in scientific and culinary circles. This sudden spurt of interest in a food that has been traditionally eaten for years in ex-indentured communities, among many others, has often elicited from this community, wry amusement, confusion at its celebrity status or pride at its recognition. Delving into research transcripts and fieldwork notes, I observe, not only, how these communities consume moringa and amaranth, but the variety of ways the human and other-than-human stories are entangled. I also consider the impact/benefits of the commodification of foods and seeds such as moringa and amaranth, on the many invisible people who have been propagating, consuming and storying the plant before its *discovery*.

keywords

decolonial, herstories, seeds, indenture, epistemology

Years after leaving my childhood home in Northdale, an Indian township in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, fleeing all things parochial, restrictive and oppressive, I found a strange yet familiar vegetable in a suburban franchise. I was filled with a strange feeling akin possibly to a reunion. I almost went up to the vegetable and exclaimed “What are you doing here?” Tied in a rubber band were a cluster of long and fluted drumsticks! Drumsticks are the seed pods from the moringa tree. Many childhood associations were evoked as I was reminded of my mother who used to refer to the leaves of the tree by its Tamil name, *murungakkai keerai* which means drumstick greens. *Kai* means vegetable in Tamil, and the names of nearly all

vegetables end with this suffix. My mother had been conscientious about this naming even though Tamil had long been erased from our everyday conversations, discouraged as we were from speaking Tamil in South Africa. Colonisation had convinced us that Tamil was not the language of the educated. I was also reminded of my grandmother who had had a moringa tree in her backyard, as did many other women from the community a few generations ago. My grandmother (and her backyard) had also been instrumental in inculcating within me a value and reverence for the earth and the food gifts that could be found and grown. Seeing a humble bunch of *murung’ keerai*¹ in the store had somehow reminded me of lost mother tongues, ancestral foods and

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seeds, ways of propagating, fading knowledges, and the stories that wove all of these together.

My curiosity about the appearance and survival of this childhood vegetable in the suburbs, led me back to a township called Chatsworth in Durban, and to one of its markets that still sold *Indian* vegetables. I tracked down, and interviewed four women who were growers and traders from Demat, Tongaat, Umkomaas and Cliffdale, all situated in KwaZulu-Natal, within a 60-kilometre radius of Durban. All the women, to their knowledge, had a history of indenture in their lineage. My original intention had been to search for women with backyard gardens. This had proven really challenging as many of the women did not feel equipped (or expert enough) to be interviewed. I was steered, instead, towards women farmers.

My interest in indenture is rooted in my own ancestry. My great-great grandparents had been brought to South Africa, through indenture in 1879, and had been assigned to a farm in Pietermaritzburg where the cash crops included tobacco, cane and flowers. After their period of indenture came to an end they were given the option to purchase a fraction of the farm for subsistence farming and market gardening. My own grandmother had been brought up here by her ex-indentured, market gardening grandmother (Naidoo 2022).

Indenture through colonialism had changed the natural landscape of South Africa, where colonial planters used indenture's cheap labour to capitalise on monocultures such as cane. The indentured were equally exploited, not only for their labour under indenture but later, as free peasants and market gardeners. After their five years of indentureship, many ex-indentured were allowed to lease or buy land, mainly marginal, and in many cases, not optimally arable. Initially, the "peasants" were able to supply white planters with cheap produce (Freund 1991, p. 266). The ex-indentured may well have surpassed white agriculturalists had the latter not implemented strategic legislative roadblocks to curtail this growth. Land redistribution, the Group Areas Act, the Asiatic Land Act, the three pound tax, Apartheid policies, and capitalism had all negatively impacted on the farming lifestyles of the market garden community (Du Bois 2012; Freund 1991). Within this capitalist

and white centred agricultural narrative, market gardening had become increasingly unsustainable for the ex-indentured. Moreover, traditional techniques were less valued. Generally viewed as unprogressive, they were systematically being erased in favour of modern agricultural methods.

Knowledge of farming techniques have therefore been acquired from parents, which perhaps explains the traditional approach to agriculture which market gardeners are generally considered to possess. With the assistance of the Agricultural Extension Services, however, a gradual but slow process of diffusion of knowledge concerning agricultural techniques and soil conservation is occurring (Padayachee 1986, p. 14).

Ironically, while indenture had severed many plants and people from ancestral environments, the market garden era had, I believe, rekindled an intimacy between plant, earth and people, particularly women. Within farming communities, men, women and children had, through necessity, worked the land (Freund 1991). As men were thrown into a competitive and capitalist trajectory, women, would have had to find ways to nourish themselves and their families. As such, many women found themselves straddling the home and the farm. I believe that the space of the backyard has not fully been explored as a place of safety and sovereignty for women and seed. The backyard would have been in close enough proximity to the kitchen but within access to the operations of more formal farming activities. The backyard is less formal, less regimented, and not required to yield a particular quota of product to the market. These backyards were not vast tracts of land but tiny spaces just outside the kitchen area. Having spent time in many a backyard, I wanted to investigate this space as somewhere where seed, plant, woman, and traditional knowledges had an opportunity to relate, beyond the narratives of commodification, proprietorship or separateness.

Kimmerer writing on Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the relationality between plant, seed, earth and people says, "Something essential happens in a vegetable garden. It's a place

where if you can't say "I love you" out loud, you can say it in seeds. And the land will reciprocate" (2013, p. 127).

"She [my mother] knew how to take out seeds, dry them, and keep stuff like that. After my father passed away she had seeds and she gave me and she said 'You know what, these are the seeds what dad had kept'" (Interview: Nila,² 7 February 2019)

A plethora of greens, a weaving of relationships, a scattering of stories, unlikely kinships

While I focus primarily on two plants, amaranth and moringa, both of which are embedded in the traditional foods of my community of origin, other plant kin surface in the stories. These two *keerai*, amaranth and moringa have more recently gained superfood status. The stories that follow are a scattering of anecdotes interwoven with my own personal reflections.

Why are these seemingly unspectacular stories about the *keerai* important? My hopes were that these stories would reveal the entanglement of women and

plant/ seed; would bring to the surface other ways of being and knowing – particularly within the context of displacement; and perhaps also disrupt notions of expertise and ownership. In South Africa, leafy greens are embedded in the food narratives of most traditions, and each of these traditions has its own umbrella term for them, such as *morogo*, *imifino*, *imbuya*, *bhaji*, *keerai*, *muhoro*. *Keerai* is diverse and interesting. Although many vegetables and their seeds would have travelled from India with the indentured³ (Samaroo 2021), *keerai*, I discovered, was a mix of the indigenous and the exotic. Arum lily leaves, potato vine, dandelion leaves, wood sorrel (often confused with clover), purslane, pumpkin leaves, and innumerable other leaves have all become part of the *keerai* family. There are so many different kinds of *keerai*, I wondered why they were not more readily available to more people and why they were not the protagonists in all our traditional food narratives. Why did I need to travel to the market in the heart of a township to rediscover this plethora of strange leaves?

Leafy greens are, ironically, buzzwords in the fitness, health, vegan and vegetarian vocabulary. We are told that the darker the green of these edible leaves, the healthier they are for consumption. Yet as we scour the shelves of the grocery stores for these wonder foods, we are most often greeted by two main players, kale and swiss chard (generally referred to as spinach). Once in a while another leaf is *discovered* by the doyens of fancy cuisine, researchers or experts, elevating an *unknown* dark green leaf to superfood status. In the past decade moringa and amaranth have gained popularity, scientifically and in culinary circles (Aderibigbe et al. 2022; Foidl, Makkar & Becker 2001; Price 2007; Tucker 1986). I decided to investigate these two *keerais* within the lives of growers and planters in the Durban area in order to trace their lesser-known trajectories. I uncovered interesting insights, not only into how people consume them, but in the variety of ways human and plant relate.



Fig. 1. A dish of amaranth and su-su seeds collected for me after a stroll through Nila's backyard

Moringa: *Murungakkai keerai*

Moringa's ability to grow in almost any climate, requiring very little maintenance



Fig. 2. Various *keerai*, including wood sorrel, arum lily, potato vine, red amaranth and sugarcane amaranth on the stands at a market in Chatsworth, near Durban

or water, while providing a range of nutrients and health benefits to people, have seen the tree grow in popularity, especially in Africa, as a possible answer to hunger and malnutrition (Foidl, Makkar & Becker 2001; Seifu & Teketay 2020)⁴. In the health food sector, moringa powder can be seen on most shelves. The sudden spurt of interest in a food that has been traditionally eaten for years often elicits wry amusement, confusion at its celebrity status, or pride at its recognition. Moringa, as exotic and non-indigenous as it once was, has been heralded as a miracle tree in the scientific and agricultural communities. I began to wonder how moringa's discovery and commodification had impacted on or even benefitted the many women who had already been propagating, consuming and storying the plant?⁵

A local vendor, Kogi had discovered that moringa powder had become a buzzword in health circles. She seized the opportunity to dry the leaves from the tree in her son's garden, powder them and supply the local market. Although she had been selling moringa leaves and drumsticks for many years, the monetary value of her product did not equate to the nutritional value of the moringa. Now, however, she was able to capitalise on the humble *murung'* *keerai*'s elevated status to moringa, the superfood. At the market, Kogi sold moringa powder at a significantly lower price than that fetched at pharmacies and health shops, yet far more than she was able to earn before.

Kogi and the moringa tree were experiencing other challenges with modernity, however. Her son's upmarket house in a previously white suburb was already surrounded by a well-manicured garden, a tennis court, paving, and a

pool. His mother's moringa tree did not fit the modern aesthetic. Kogi had to negotiate daily for the moringa tree to be spared. She confessed conspiratorially that she also had a secret patch on the banks of the suburban plot where she allowed her double beans, coriander, pumpkin and amaranth seeds to sprawl. Although Kogi was proud of her son, she complained that the garden made no sense to her. Yet Kogi protected the moringa tree and facilitated the growth of myriad seeds in an environment that had become increasingly hostile to food growing. The seeds not only provided Kogi with monetary independence, but was also a source of nourishment. The vegetables that she had grown up with had become associated with poverty (Njeme, Goduka & George 2014) and was increasingly denounced in favour of meat, which had become a sign of wealth. Despite this, Kogi had surreptitiously defied her lawn loving relative, and kept the plant alive.

Unlike Kogi who had been harvesting, drying and powdering moringa leaves from one resolute tree, Vitae had deliberately invested her efforts in establishing an organic moringa farm in a neighbouring rural area of Durban. Vitae began growing moringa, because she "loved the herb" (Interview: Vitae, 6 March 2019). She was uncertain about the quality of the moringa powder she purchased at local stores – "I don't know what they are mixing in that product because moringa is supposed to be green" (Vitae, 6 March 2019). She wanted to make and supply a moringa powder that she could be confident of. She had purchased her *organic* seeds from India even though her mother had been growing moringa for years.

"We cooked it once a week, we had the drumstick in the dhall or she (her mother) put it in the chutney. This was something that we ate all the time [as children]. When we started this (the business) we didn't realise that you could use a little bit of the stem. We would pick each leaf and by the end of the day we've got so much work. So now we realised you can use the finer stems. The thicker ones are too chalky. I think the problem why everyone's gone away from it, is the cleaning. It's too time consuming" (Interview: Vitae, 6 March 2019).

Moringa leaves are small and the stalks are unpalatable. Thus, picking moringa leaves off their bitter stems for cooking is a painstaking endeavour. However, customarily, at large gatherings, like weddings or funerals, a host of people, usually women, avail themselves for vegetable preparation, with a bit of tea and gossip to facilitate the laborious leaf picking. In my home, however, *keerai* preparation was a ritual that my teacher parents enjoyed together. Cleaning *keerai* after my father's Friday afternoon market shop was their way to share school stories while preparing for the following work week. It is possible that busier lifestyles and sparse community gatherings have contributed to the decline of the ritual of cleaning moringa and other herbs.

A few years ago, an Angolan friend made me cup of authentic Angolan moringa tea. He had been seeking refuge in South Africa because Angola had become politically unsafe for him. Angolan moringa powder had travelled with him. Was the moringa seed which bore the leaves of my friend's tea a miracle of pollination or of intrepid journeys overland from those seeded by my ancestors? Or had the Angolan moringa seed travelled because of well-meaning hunger alleviating projects (Price 2007)? It did not matter. Moringa had become embedded in another displaced individual's sense of home.

Amaranth: the multiple narratives

I was drawn to amaranth initially because of its proximity to indentured labour. The sugarcane herb, a variety of amaranth that

grew between the cane in the canefields, had lured me to this research. According to botanist Prof. Himansu Baijnath⁶, sugarcane herbs, *Amaranthus thunbergii* Moq., are indigenous to South Africa (Naidoo 2022). Within the hostile plantation, where food rations were severely inadequate (Desai & Vahed 2007), and amaranth was regarded a weed, had the displaced labourers, recognised this local amaranth, somewhat familiar to the amaranth back in India, as food? In 2022, however, within the microcosm of an Indian market, the sought-after sugarcane herb can be difficult to find. During one of my excursions to the market none of the Indian vendors had sugarcane herbs on display. "No sugarcane herbs anywhere", they told me. On the periphery of the market, however, I spotted the herbs on another stand. After a conversation in broken isiZulu with the vendor, I learned that all the produce on her stand had been harvested from her farm in the south of Durban. I went on to ask her how she prepared the herbs and she responded that the Indians knew. Even though this farmer had been cooking the herbs with maize meal (pap), she had realised the value of sugarcane herbs to the Indian community. The Indian traders, on the other hand, had begun to rely solely on one supplier for sugarcane herbs. Whenever he had a bad crop, there would be none at any of the stands of the Indian traders. Ironically, this single supplier had monopolised the sugarcane herb market, thus creating a scarcity of a plant that had once been classified as a weed.

Sugarcane herbs are not the only amaranth species enjoyed locally in traditional Indian cooking. In recent years, franchises have begun to stock another favourite known colloquially as red and green herbs⁷. At the 'Foodlovers' store in my neighbourhood, these are perfectly presented in neat little bundles. After some investigation, I realised that they, too, were supplied in bulk by big farmers. Mass production has led to hybridisation, and the use of pesticides and fertilisers on a plant that once grew prolifically. Farmers and growers have been convinced that hybrid seeds are superior to seeds that are saved.

"The hybrid is better. Long way better. I feel when it grows it grows much better.

When it produces there's more and it is quality. Like a name brand thing. You can buy from Pep Stores or you can buy from Edgars⁸" (Interview: Malai, 5 June 2019).

Unfortunately, this has meant purchasing not only seed from *reputable* seed merchants, but pesticides and fertiliser. Over and above the environmental and health issues around pesticides and chemical fertilisers, small scale farmers are impacted financially by having to repeatedly invest in them. As one farmer reflects:

"From the time I've been farming up to now, there's no changes of prices. Forty years ago, you got R2 for lettuce. Up to today we still get R2 for lettuce. With the price of fertiliser, labour, chemicals and all, it's all gone high. But not the price of vegetables" (Interview: Malai's husband, 5 June 2019).

The shelves of the informal market, however, tell a story which is more nuanced. Vegetables such as carrots, potatoes, tomatoes, garlic, ginger and a host of other fruits and edibles, including the "*exotics*" are primarily sourced from big farmers. The red and green *keerai* are less so. I had visited the homes of many of the farmers. Even those who relied heavily on pesticides and fertiliser on their fields, did not use them in their backyards. These backyards usually accommodated *keerai*, and other vegetables growing amidst flowers, trees and fences. As Nila quipped about the self-seeding red amaranth "that thing is just growing – as we clipping, we just eating" (Interview: 7 February 2019). Nevertheless, even though red and green herbs were not always intentionally planted, they were taken care of.

"And you need to take care of it. Like how you taking care of someone like a child is growing up, so that is how a plant is. You don't just go plant it and leave it like that and say you don't care about it. It has to be nurtured. The more you nurture and you talk to the plant, and you love that plant, that is how the plant is going to blossom and come up" (Interview: Nila, 7 February 2019).

Often on the shelves of an Indian market, it is not uncommon to find, amidst the

assemblage of mainstream produced vegetables, bunches of *herbs* – usually pesticide free – that have been harvested from backyards.

Keerai has a way of becoming entangled in marginal stories and spaces. A few years back I was part of a project that was situated in a derelict house in the centre of Durban. The building had been neglected for years and sat on a pile of debris and human waste. Most of what grew around there were considered weeds. Dandelion, black jack and, of course, amaranth (the pavement variety) had overridden the plot of land. The initiator of the project had begun to open up the property to the community who were mainly workers. A few metres away was a block of flats let out to the elderly. These flats were surrounded by other flats, factories and offices. On one of my visits, I bumped into a woman in her late seventies who was plucking young amaranth leaves from the forest of weeds. She was of mixed heritage and had been cooking for her Indian husband of fifty years. *Keerai*, was one of his favourites. She said that he loved *keerai* but they had no easy way of finding them in the city. Her husband was confined to the flat where they lived and she walked with a cane. As she carefully plucked the youngest leaves, she spoke nostalgically of days when there were yards that harboured plants and things you could eat. The weeds that had grown uninhibited on an abandoned piece of land had given her a way to nourish her husband. But more importantly, the embodied ritual of harvesting seemed to nourish her.

Embodied ritual seemed ever present in the deliberate seed saving of some of the older farmers. Even though amaranth bears seed prolifically and does not necessarily require deliberate seed saving, I encountered one such ritual on a visit to a small farm on the outskirts of Durban. The farm belonged to a couple in their late eighties. They sat on their little veranda, shaded from the late afternoon sun, a huge plastic bowl in front of them full of amaranth seeds. The woman was stamping the seeds with a large wooden instrument to separate the seeds from the husks. Drying in the sun on a piece of hessian were mounds of amaranth seed. The ritual had felt ancient and reverent. It is one I was fortunate enough to witness in my

grandmother's home. It is probably how all people once saved seed, in a slow, deliberate and conscious way. As mainstream farmers, the couple also bought hermetically sealed packs of 'guaranteed for growth' seeds yet the rituals embedded in acts of seed saving persisted. As I left, the old couple offered me seeds and laughed at my curiosity in the humble amaranth seed.

Their generosity in sharing their food seed was not uncommon. All of the women, who I had spoken to for this research, had gifted me with a voluptuous package of vegetables and seeds from their gardens. Nila was convinced that the amaranth growing in her backyard was *special*. It had been growing in her rapidly shrinking garden for as long as she could remember, the amaranth reseeding as the dense tufts spilled over again and again. She claimed that it was from her father's original seed and swears that the colour was brighter, and the leaves tastier than the hybrid varieties in the shops. Nila had no problem sharing her own heritage seeds with me. A few months later, however, Nila had an apparent change of heart. She told me that I should not distribute the amaranth seeds because her husband had warned her that they were precious and should not be shared far and wide. A month before, Nila, generous to a fault, had even considered sharing the seeds with the big sugarcane herb farmer. This was the same farmer who had refused to share his valuable seeds. This was a sign of the times where control, ownership and monopoly reigned. I wondered whether the idea of clutching, of ownership,

of losing something valuable had been introduced because of my own conversations with her. Or was it that Nila's husband had suddenly grown suspicious about the research that was going on around his wife and the seeds from their plot. I realised that I was also embedded in this particular seed narrative. My questions and conversations had impacted on how the seeds from Nila's garden would be pollinated. Nevertheless, the seeds were now planted and growing in my garden and would disperse of their own accord – by the wind, bees, birds and me.⁹

The politics of naming, pollinating and propagating

My mother-in-law wanders around my garden, and emerges with some uprooted mint, the slips of several plants and plucked seed pods. She is proud of her haul. My mother-in-law, like my grandmother and so many women like them, have been propagating in this way for years. I knew that those slips and seeds were taken with reverence and that I would probably find them nurtured into growth elsewhere. It used to embarrass me that the older women in my family would pinch a bud or a slip from parks and botanic gardens, yet I, too, have never been able to resist helping myself to a few seeds which are either hanging off branches, dry and ready for the taking or fresh vegetables and fruit headed for the table. I even have paprika, brinjal and moringa seeds smuggled from distant lands in my collection. We are told that this is how alien [plant]s either take over, upset or become



Fig. 3. Amaranth seed drying

the natural order of things. And yet, unlike non-indigenous monocultures like sugar-cane, tobacco, and paper trees like eucalyptus that have taken over large tracts of arable land in the name of agriculture, these humble methods of pollination precipitated by “desire” have always existed as humans have travelled, or been displaced (Pollan 2001, p. 20). As a person brought up to revere the growth of all kinds of things, and as an activist deeply concerned with the natural environment, I have often felt conflicted within South Africa’s environmental circle that privileges one life/ story/ plant over another. This is when I have questioned whose seed it is, who gets to introduce seed into a geographical location and why. Who gets to introduce and implement the laws? And who gets to name what is alien, invasive, indigenous, naturalised, superfood, exotic, weed. Who benefits economically? Many of these issues are embedded in the dynamics of power still implicit in this country of inequity.

While scientific research does bring to light the value of many plants, foods that are disconnected and extracted from their many marginalised stories, invisibilises the social and environmental nuances of how plants and people survive and thrive (Cook & Crang 1996). Weaving narratives around how subjugated peoples have associated with plant/ seeds, reveals agency and entangled ways of being. The stories above – nuanced, messy and plural – reveal a difficult dance with ways of being, knowing and becoming. Yet there are irrefutable threads of interconnectedness and re-imagining that remind us of the power of reciprocity, relationality, and re-storying between women and seed/ plant/ food. Association and story are important tools for the re-memory of people who are no longer connected to the source of their food. In the same way, plants may find, in the margins, multiple ways of being that are not necessarily part of the capitalist regime. Perhaps within these stories, and the many others that have been rendered insignificant in South Africa’s oppressive history, there is an opportunity to remember fractured selves, and remember important intergenerational wisdom – the ability of women and seed to rekindle their intimate relationships, under less-than-ideal

circumstances – in the backyard, on verges, in abandoned spaces.

Notes

1. Most people abbreviate the name to *murung’ keera*.
2. All names are pseudonyms to protect the identities of the participants.
3. Many labourers had brought with them small parcels crammed with seeds, cuttings, and other precious items. Some scholars and historians of indenture, particularly within Caribbean studies refer to these as *Jahaji* bundles. *Jahaji* is the Hindi word for ship. I have not come across the Tamil or Telugu equivalent of this term.
4. While moringa is well known for its leaves, these studies show that almost the entire moringa plant is beneficial with numerous nutritional benefits. It is thought to be drought and pest resistant, while its seeds can apparently be utilised for water purification. The idea of a *miracle tree* could of course lead to its exploitation.
5. Although, both amaranth and moringa, have been consumed traditionally in local communities in South Africa, I focus, in this instance, solely on women with a connection to indenture. In South Africa, the labourers were brought in mainly from South India where moringa would have featured strongly in traditional diets. The study by Seifu and Teketay (2020) focuses on households that had been growing moringa trees in their backyards in Botswana with relative ease.
6. Prof Himansu Baijnath PhD, University of KwaZulu-Natal (Email communication, 23 September 2019).
7. *Amaranthus hybridus* L. subsp. *hybridus* var. *erythrostachys* Moq. and *Amaranthus hybridus* L. subsp. *hybridus* var. *hybridus* (Prof Baijnath, email communication, 23 September 2019).
8. Malai is speaking from the standpoint of a grower, and has distinct value preconceptions based on popular constructions of quality.
9. A version of the stories that appear in this article were presented at the Critical Food Studies Mini Conference in November 2019.

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