

School of Social Science

Archaeology Working Papers

Time: Friday, 27 October 2023
3:00pm – 4:00pm

Room: 443; Michie Building (9)

How have food systems changed in southern-central Africa over the last 2000 years and what are the implications for food security in the region today?

Jeremy Farr

Archaeobotanical investigations were undertaken of four sites in Zambia from the first and early second millennium CE, spread across two biogeographical regions: the Wet Miombo and Dry Miombo. The study also addresses the taphonomic challenges of archaeobotanical research in the tropics and also investigates the relationship between environment and site formation. The results provide the strongest direct evidence so far for agricultural practices in Zambia during the middle-first early-second millennium CE.

The preservation conditions at the Wet Miombo site were poor, however, endocarp and wild grass species were recovered from the archaeobotanical record, raising the prospect of more archaeologically ephemeral staples such as mushrooms, yam, truffles, and other tubers that remain an important dietary component in Zambia today.

In the Dry Miombo site, three drought resilient African cereals; pearl millet, sorghum, and finger millet, were recovered consistently in each phase of a site that covers a period of more than 600 years. The high frequency of endocarp fragments across the sites underlines the enduring importance of wild plants for people in Zambia, as an important component of nutrition and palate.



The results present a compelling argument for the importance of diversified food systems for ancient societies in Zambia living with the capricious climates brought about by the El Niño-Southern Oscillation. More evidence is needed to determine the extent to which biogeography shaped food systems in the past, however, the results can be considered in the context of relatively recent changes to the food system under colonialism, and current issues of food security in Zambia today.

About the presenter

Jeremy Farr is an interdisciplinary researcher working across environmental sustainability and social science, specialising in ethnobotany and archaeobotanical analysis, working primarily in Zambia, as well as working on material from South Africa and Sudan. He has spent the last 5 years at the University of Queensland where he recently submitted his thesis on the archaeobotany of food systems in southern-central Africa. He is currently a CSIRO Early Research Career Fellow working on food system dynamics and the enablers and barriers for food system transformation.