



**FROBENIUS-INSTITUT**  
FÜR KULTURANTHROPOLOGISCHE FORSCHUNG  
AN DER GOETHE-UNIVERSITÄT FRANKFURT



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# **Contested Millets in Africa and Asia: Past and Present**

**International Workshop  
March 28th - March 29th, 2019**

**University of Groningen  
Organizers: Peter Berger, Roland Hardenberg**

# Workshop outline

Presently, millets experience a revival in different parts of the world. They are promoted as healthy food (or “nutri-food”) and as a particularly sustainable crop that can adapt to dry weather conditions and poor soils. Only a few decades ago, however, some of these millets began to be branded as symbols of poverty and backwardness and slowly disappeared from the cuisines of those who formerly consumed it as a staple on daily basis. This rise or fall of millets seems to have occurred at various times and in different parts of the world. From the perspective of the organizers of this workshop, these changing evaluations of millets are best understood by using a holistic and interdisciplinary approach that focusses on the following three socio-cultural aspects of millets:

First, millets often occur as one element within complex networks consisting of crops produced and used for subsistence and/or commercial activities. The fate of millet, we hypothesize, depends on transformations within these networks and not simply on actions directly pertaining to millets. The study of the evolution (and devolution) of millets therefore requires an approach that recognizes the interconnections between crops in any given case. What were the main competitors of millets through time?

Secondly, the rise and fall of millets has an important material dimension. On the one hand, different types of millets offer certain material “affordances”, on the other hand people use various material techniques to produce, transform, store and consume millets. The domestication as well as exchange of millets is thus related to material innovations, appropriations and transformations that may – or may not – occur simultaneously. What explanations do we get for the destiny of millets in different parts of the world when we focus on this material dimension?

Thirdly, millets are not only good for eating but also for thinking. Therefore, the rise and fall of millets is strongly related to creativity of the human mind. When millets become a staple, people often develop elaborate cultural representations of this crop in myths, rituals, writings, paintings and other media. These representations are intimately related to the specific materiality of millets, their growth in a specific environment as well as to the (material) techniques developed by people when using millets for various purposes. How is this “millet thinking” affected when millets become marginalized? Is “millet knowledge” necessarily lost in this case or is it preserved as reserve for later times? Is the devaluation of millets the cause or the effect of the recurring demise of this cereal?

This workshop addresses these approaches and questions from an interdisciplinary perspective bringing together anthropologists, archaeologists, archaeobotanists, botanists, historians and historical linguists.

# Program

## Chairs

The workshop is divided into six sessions each chaired by one participant. The role of the chair consists in making sure that presenters adhere to the time schedule, in guiding the subsequent discussion and in summarizing two key issues of the whole session for the general debate at the end of workshop.

## Length of Presentations

Invited lectures have a maximum of 45 minutes for presentation followed by 15 minutes of discussion. All other lectures can last up to 30 minutes and are also followed by 15 minutes of discussion.

## 28 March 2019, Court Room

### Welcome

9:00-9:15 Peter Berger and Roland Hardenberg

### Session 1 - The adoption and abandonment of millets in Sub-Saharan Africa

Chair: Karen Hahn

9:15-10:15 Koen Bostoen (invited lecture):  
On the rise and fall of millets in Bantu speech communities of Central Africa:  
Insights from historical linguistics and archaeology

10:15-11:00 Barbara Eichhorn & Katharina Neumann:  
The adoption, persistence and abandonment of millets in sub-Saharan  
Africa – Late Holocene archaeobotanical evidence of ‘radical changes’ and  
‘radical continuities’

**11:00-11:30 Tea and coffee break**

### Session 2 - Rise and fall of endemic grains in Ethiopia

Chair: Katharina Neumann

11:30-12:30 James McCann (invited lecture):  
The Fate of Small Endemic Grains in the Era of Maize: Ethiopia’s Longue  
Duree

12:30-13:15 Susanne Epple & Sophia Thubauville:  
Contested millets in southern Ethiopia: Cultural meanings and changes

**13:15-14:45 Lunch break**

### Session 3 - Millets and cash crops in West-Africa: Radical changes and continuities

Chair: Barbara Eichhorn

14:45-15:30 Mamadou Diawara & Nikolas Gestrich:  
“A person is nothing but njo”. The changing career of millets in Mali

15:30-16:15 Hans Hahn:  
The Gradual Vanishing of Millet in West Africa. About Shifting Valuations,  
Knowledge and Biodiversity

16:15-17:00 Karen Hahn:  
Shifts from millet to cash crop cultivation in West African savannas: Effects on  
the provisioning and valuation of wild food plants

**17:00-17:30 Break/borrel**

### Film Presentation

Chair: Hans Hahn

17:30-17:45 Introduction by Ivo Strecker & Jean Lydall

17:45-18:30 Film:  
“Dancing Grass: Harvesting Teff in the Tigrean Highlands”  
(by Mitiku Gabrehiwot, 45 min, 2018)

18:30-19:00 Questions and Discussion

**19:30 Dinner**

**29 March 2019, Court Room**

**Session 4 - The Changing Values of Millets in India**

Chair: René Cappers

- 9:15-10:15 Chris Gregory (invited lecture):  
The Values of Millet: From the Global to Some Indian Locals
- 10:15-11:15 Vilas Tonapi (invited lecture):  
Transformation of millets in India: from staple food to health food
- 11:15-11:45 break**

**Session 5 - Grains of India: Imperial Rice and Subaltern Millets?**

Chair: Sophia Thubauville

- 11:45-12:45 Kathleen Morrison (invited lecture):  
Rice Revolutions: Deep Histories of Rice and Millets in Southern India
- 12:45-13:30 Peter Berger, René Cappers & Roland Hardenberg:  
Competition and Complementarity in Cereal Cultivation in Central India:  
Constraints and Opportunities in Crop Selection related to Ecology, Technology and Culture
- 13:30-15:00 Lunch**

**Session 6 - Research on Contested Grains in Africa and India**

Chairs: Peter Berger & Roland Hardenberg

- 15:00-17:15 General Discussion**
- 17:15-19:00 Joint Tour:**  
Break/borrel and tour through the Groningen Institute of Archaeology  
(by R. Cappers)
- 19:30 Dinner**

