

The principal food of the natives consists of all kinds of vegetable produce, which is partly harvested from the rich array of wild-growing plants, but for the larger part from cultivated plants. As the production of the numerous vegetable foods and drinks has already been discussed in the
fourth chapter of this volume, I need here only mention their prepara-
tion. Although quite a lot of rice and maize are grown by the natives,
especially further up into the interior, these cereals shouldn't be regarded
as the main staple foods. Particularly among the tribes in the regions to
the east of Monrovia, these are manioc (cassava) and sweet potatoes. The
cultivation of these tubers has also already been discussed previously. Just
like the cereals, these are boiled in water. The water is left to evaporate to
such an extent that they appear almost dried out. Thus prepared, the food
is heaped-up onto large wooden bowls—sometimes European washbas-
sins are also used for this purpose—which are then placed on the ground
and surrounded by the table companions. If palm oil is available, some of
it, usually raw, is poured over the rice. If there isn't any, one will be no
less content.

Among the eastern tribes, manioc is the most popular and nearly the
only cultivated staple food. Manioc tubers can be eaten raw, and if they
are of a good quality they have a slightly nutty taste. While travelling,
when there's not enough time to boil them, they are roasted at the fire or
in hot ashes. This primitive method of preparation is also used for fresh
maize cobs and unripe bananas. Prepared in this manner, manioc tubers
are very floury and tasty. A highly favoured dish among all of the tribes
who cultivate manioc, which has also become very popular among the
Liberians and might indeed be called a national dish, is a sort of tough
manioc mash. The Vey call this dish *dombai*, the Liberians *tomboy*. In order
to prepare it, cassavas are cut into pieces, boiled, and then pounded into
an extremely sticky, tough mash in wooden mortars. With wetted hands
(because of the stickiness) it is shaped into bun-like elongated clumps,
placed into a dish and a soup from meat, fish or palm oil is poured over
it. These clumps are decorated with many red peppers, even though the
soup is already quite peppery. The most peculiar trait of this dish is that
one cannot chew it, because one's mouth would then get glued together.
In order to prevent this from happening, one uses a wooden native spoon.
It is dipped into the soup, and then used to cut off a piece of the clump.
Next, this piece is rolled around in the soup, after which it is swallowed
whole without biting into it. I still have vivid memories of the general
hilarity which my unfamiliarity with this peculiar trait caused among my
native hosts when I first made the acquaintance of this dish.

Among the Congos cassavas are also used for the preparation of flour.
To this purpose baskets filled with fresh tubers are lowered down into
running water and left there until the tubers have attained a degree of
maceration. They are then removed and laid out to dry in the sun; while