

Research Article

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Influence of food taboos on nutritional patterns in rural communities in Cameroon

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Abstract: Food taboos are observed in all traditional societies. In Cameroon, various taboos ranging from food to religious and social have significant impact on the diet of the people. Specific food items are regarded differently by different communities. While in certain communities, some food items are seen as fit for consumption, others deem it unfit. Although food taboos related to culture are more subject to change due to the level of literacy that prevails in the society and due to cultural contacts, violators of taboos suffer grievous consequences. Methods used included key informant interviews, focus group discussions and observations in all studied communities. The objective of the study is to understand how culture (food taboos) influences consumption patterns in traditional communities and the impact of disobedience on the people. This study of Cameroon food taboos has showed that dietary rules and regulations govern particular phases of life and is associated with special events like pregnancy, childbirth, lactation etc. In traditional societies, festivities such as hunting, wedding, and funeral are marked by specific food items. Punishments to violation of food taboos vary across food items and communities as what are considered a taboo in one community is not a taboo in another. Food taboo in some communities is considered as a way to maintain identity creating a sense of belonging.

Keywords: Food taboos, nutrition, rural communities

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1 Introduction

Food taboos exist in all African societies and in Cameroon, each cultural society is governed by traditional values, rules and taboos which has its consequences if neglected or disobeyed. A taboo is a law or unwritten order or declaration by the head of the community and his entourage that make certain objects sacred or prohibited to the members of that society. In Cameroon, taboos range from food to religious and social events and have significant impact on the consumption patterns and diets of the people. While in certain communities some food items are seen as fit for consumption, others deem it unfit. Although food taboos related to culture are more subject to change due to the level of literacy that prevails in the society and cultural contact, violators of taboos suffer consequences.

While a social anthropological research on eating and food taboos sees food taboos from a utilitarian approach (Harris M. 1985; Harris, et al. 1987 & Mintz S. et al. 2002) and with religious motives, a functionalist view food taboo as a mechanism for conserving resources and human health (Whitaker A. 2005). This view however, has been less popular (Whitaker A. 2005) although having good supporting evidence. Research has shown that rituals and food taboos (spiritual, religious, magic etc.) can involve plants or animals, solid or liquid and do have an origin (Harris et al. 1987; Simoons F. 1998 & Colding J. et al. 1997).

Food taboos are known from virtually all human societies. Certain religions in Cameroon such as Islam declare certain food items fit and others unfit for human consumption (Fomine L. 2009). Events such as menstrual period, pregnancy, childbirth, lactation that govern particular phases of the human life cycle and special events (in traditional societies) like preparation for hunt, wedding etc. are linked to certain dietary rules and regulations. Seemingly, many food taboos seem to make no sense at all, as what may be declared unfit by one group may be perfectly acceptable to another. However, food taboo has a long history and has been respected and

recognized by members of the community as a custom and rule (Fomine L., 2009). The existence (and persistence) of taboos in a given culture shows its importance. This study will present examples of food taboos selected in some groups in the community illustrating how food taboos (culture) influence consumption patterns in traditional communities and the impact of disobedience on its people.

2 Methods and Materials

The study was carried out in some rural communities of the Western and North West Regions of Cameroon. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the research communities regarding knowledge, usage and restrictions related to various foods in the communities. In parallel, we also considered the socio-economic aspects of the interviewed population such as age, gender, education and occupation.

Before interviews were carried out, informal conversations were conducted to 25 inhabitants of each community in order to determine the type of information needs to be collected. Based on these conversations, semi-structured interviews were designed for the study. Field work lasted for several weeks (three weeks) in each community during which the interviewers stayed with the locals in the communities to study their cultural practices related to food taboos. Information from the field was gathered from more than one informant both males and females. In these interviews, 30 people were surveyed on their knowledge of the selected food items, along with their usage- variation in use over time and reasons for restriction from consumption of the items.

3 Presentation of research findings

Results from the study show that there exist permanent and temporary taboos in the research communities. While permanent taboos remain the same and do not change over generations, temporary taboos change as a result of time, age etc. Permanent and temporary taboos in the research communities are categorized into several categories such as food taboos during pregnancy, lactation, during menstruation, taboos as an expression of empathy, food taboos to monopolize a resource, for resource protection and to protect human health. The study shows that dietary rules and regulations govern particular phases of life such as pregnancy, childbirth and lactation; special events in the communities such as hunting, wedding, funerals while some taboos are associated to specific sex and age of members of the community. For example, some taboos

target specifically men, women and children of varying ages (young and the elderly). Punishments to violation of food taboos vary across food items and communities as what is considered a taboo in one community may not be a taboo in another. Certain food taboos as shown in this study acts to maintain community identity creating a sense of belonging.

3.1 Food taboos to protect human health

There exist food taboos in many communities related to the well-being of the people. Majority of respondents indicated that certain illnesses associated especially with children and pregnant women are as a result of disobedience or violation of taboos. Likewise, in Nigeria traditional healers sometimes attribute childhood ailments to breaking food taboos (Odebiyi A. 1989) and in Senegal women and children are made to avoid poultry products (Gueye E. et al. 1995) to avoid certain ailments.

Results show that the research communities have a set of cultural and religious beliefs and rules claim to be instructions from a supreme being with greater authority with the aim protect them from illnesses and safeguard them from evil. Majority of respondents acknowledged that many food taboos related to health originated as a result of behavioural and or emotional changes after consumption of particular foods. Among five of the listed classes of “emotional-induced” changes of eating, is eating to regulate emotions (Macht, 2008). Food items such as snails in the research communities that after consumption resulted to allergies and or negative effects were avoided and sometimes prohibited from consumption. The food items IgE-mediated allergies such as in shrimp (Samson K. et al., 2004) identified could lead to avoidance and consequently total ban of them. Pregnant women in the Bansa community are forbidden from eating egusi known as *atungnah ngesi* as according to respondents, pregnant women who consume it bleed resulting to miscarriage.

In both regions, certain foods are prohibited from pregnant women, during lactation and menstruation mostly on the basis that these foods will make them to become sick or affect their unborn babies. A pregnant woman in Bansa in the North West Region is prohibited from eating a snake. Snakes (green snake) represent a god to children in this society. Snakes therefore are used as sacrifices to the gods usually on a particular day called “*contry Sunday*”, during which nobody is allowed to farm. Violation or failure to respect this rule by pregnant women will result to giving birth to a malformed baby or a baby is resembles a snake who may die before his first birthday or become mentally deranged. In both

Regions, pregnant women are prohibited from eating meat from wild animals (leopard, crocodile, monkey,) It is believed that eating these animals will result to the child behaving like the animals and having some features of the animals. For example, the child would become wild and will not respect the parents. If the pregnant woman eats in ignorance, a cleansing ritual will be performed by the traditional society and she will be restrained from communal meetings and duties for a certain period of time depending on the kind of animal she ate.

In Kom, it is a taboo for a woman who has not put to birth and has not had menstruation to break an egg. In this society, breaking an egg is a sign of maturity and since she has not had menstruation, she is not mature. Disobedience to this rule will lead to infertility and until a ritual is performed to cleanse her from the curse, she remains barren. Usually, this affects the women and they remain single as no man would want to get married to a barren woman. It is considered a taboo for a young woman in Nyen-Mbo community to eat a liver of a partridge known as “*choc ben*”. This is because she would become barren if she violates the rule. A garden egg in Nyen-Mbo community is not eaten by a young man after marriage as it is believed that it causes sterility. It is also a taboo for a pregnant woman in this community to consume garden egg. A pregnant woman stops eating garden eggs immediately she becomes aware of her pregnancy as continuous consumption will lead to development of a pile. It is considered a taboo in Kom for the inhabitants to consume snail known as “*atah*”. It is believed in this community that anyone who violates this rule will suffer from epilepsy (disorders of the nervous system causing convulsions and unconsciousness). Also, a pregnant woman eating snails will give birth to a weak child who could become an invalid or very slow in growth.

3.2 Food taboos to monopolize a resource

In both research communities, certain food items are declared a taboo for one sex while the other sex is allowed to consume these food items. In Cameroon, some cultures prohibit women and girls from consuming some delicacies like the heart/liver of some animals, gizzard of fowls. In both communities, some parts of the animal such as gizzard of a fowl are consumed by men while women and girl children are prohibited from consumption. This usually leads to the monopoly of the resource by the remainder of the people in that community as they believed that it belongs to them and they therefore have the power to decide on the resource.

In all the studied communities, it is considered a taboo to eat food offered to gods. Only members of the secret society are allowed to consume the food. Violation will result to death or being infested with strange diseases until rituals are performed. In most communities like the Nyen-Mbo in Momo Division and Pinyin in Mezam Division, food that has been offered to the gods is eaten by members of the secret society only. In Nyen-Mbo, chicken known as “*nkomp*” offered to the gods is eaten by a members of the secret society called “*nkwifon*”. It is believed that anyone who eats of the food is liable to death.

In most communities of the North West Region, the gizzard of a fowl is eaten a male member of the family usually the father and if absent, the male elderly children. The mother can only eat this part in their absence. Failure to obey will lead to severe stomach ache which could only be treated by the head of the family or traditional councillors by performing traditional rites.

Children are prohibited from eating Kola nut in some traditions in the North West Region. It is consumed by the elderly and is believed to be a source of wisdom. It is also used as an accompaniment to strong drink and children also prohibited from strong drinks. Children who violate the rule develop rashes on their bodies and are only cleansed through a ritual organised by village elders. According to beliefs in this society, sweet potatoes are not eaten by adult men. The sweet nature of the food and the fact that it is considered weak makes it suitable for children and women. More so, it is considered to weaken the reproductive organ of men and can even lead to infertility. Hence, it is belief any man who eats sweet potatoes will have problems with penis erection and would not be satisfied with sexual intercourse. The consequences can only be stopped through ritual cleansing.

3.3 Food taboo as a sign of respect

In the studied communities, women and young girls are regarded with low esteem if they are constant liquor consumers but men consuming the same liquor are seen as normal and as a sign of manhood. Especially pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers are prohibited from strong drink such as whisky and liquor. It is believed that constant consumption will lead to miscarriages, premature births and poor health of new born babies. Failure to obey by pregnant women or breastfeeding mothers would result to excommunication from their marital homes by the husband and family members. The entire society considers her as irresponsible and wicked as she does not consider the health of her new born. Members of the

community will refrain from her and would advise their children not to associate with her considering her as a bad example in the community.

Children in Bansa are prohibited from eating corn and groundnut, a staple and symbolic food during burial ceremonies in Bansa before the elders. This is because, it is believed that parents will die before their children and thus have to prepare and show the way to the children by eating the food (corn and groundnut) before them. Failure to obey will lead to children dying before their parents. Children who disobey are forced to fetch wood for utilization during the burial ceremony so as to avert dying before their parents.

It is a taboo for a girl child or a woman in the Mankon custom to drink wine directly from the calabash of a fon. Even the wife of the fon is prohibited from drinking from this calabash as drinking from it does not only show a sign of disrespect but also implies that they are of equal rank/level with the fon. Violation of this rule affects different members of the community differently. Violation by a pregnant woman will lead to immediate miscarriage; by the young woman will lead to a cease of menstruation and violation by a married woman will lead to barrenness.

3.4 Food Taboos as an expression of empathy

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. Most people become use to their pets that they consider them as members of the household. Pets like dogs, cats etc. in these communities are provided food and shelter and as such, they place themselves in the shoes of the animals and feel what they feel.

In most communities in Cameroon, pet animals that is, that dwell with human being (domestic animals) enjoy greater protection and are not easily killed. Unlike in other communities where dogs are used as food, generally, a dog in the Bansa community is regarded as a friend to the humans not only in that it assist in hunting to provide for the home but also protects the home especially from thieves.

3.5 Group cohesion and group identity

Any food taboo, acknowledged by a particular group of people as part of its ways, aids in the cohesion of this group as it helps that group stand out amongst others, assists that group to maintain its identity and creates a feeling of “belonging”. Thus, food taboos can strengthen the confidence of a group by functioning as a demonstration of the uniqueness of the group in the face of other groups.

Members of certain secret societies in Bansa are prohibited from eating (sharing) plantain with others who are not members of that secret society. The consequence is that, you will be relief from your position and responsibilities in that secret society if this rule is violated. In Nyen-Mbo community, children are prohibited from consuming the head of the fowl as violation will lead to continuous bleeding from the nostrils until traditional rites are performed. While Nyen-Mbo community considers it a taboo for children to consume the head of a fowl, the Kom community encourages children to consume it since they believe that this will lead to intelligence. According to Kom tradition, the elderly are considered robbing the children of their rights if they eat this part of the fowl and as a consequence, they will die early.

Okro is prohibited to all men in the palace or men who have responsibilities in the palace. Any male member of the palace or other males in the community working in the place are prohibited from eating okro or any food that is slippery for it is belief that it makes them to be lazy. If violated, the violator pays a fine like a cow, a goat and drinks to the elders in the palace.

Preventing of allowing a certain group of people in the community to certain taboos gives them an identity and causes them to be in cohesion..

3.6 Food taboos as an ecological necessity to protect the resource

Several studies (McDonald D., 1977; Colding J. et al. 1997 & Begossi A. et al. 2004), food taboos reveal that food taboos have an ecological background. These taboos may lead to full utilization of a particular resource or could leads to its protection. For instance, some ecological consequence can be ascribed to the custom among some communities to kill specific animals such as chimpanzee, monkeys as certain parts such as bones, liver, heart are used to cure certain ailments in the community. The custom of the Ka'aor Indians of the northern Maranhao allows only menstruating women, pubescent girls, and parents of new-borns to consume the meat of tortoises (Freuchen P. 1961). Some specific animals like bat, green snakes, snails (Nsie-Bamessing community), partridge, snake (Ngyem-Mbo community), snake, dog, leopard (Mankon community) are protected as it is considered a taboo to kill them. However, in the Mankon, community a python is considered as a totem and believes to have multiple functions thus protecting the community. The eggs and oil from the snake are used for the treatment of diseases and the skin for arts and craft work. Hence, it is only killed occasionally and on instruction from the traditional

authorities by specific hunters selected by the traditional council. Of 70 existing examples of species-specific taboos in the world, identified and analysed, 30% were found to prohibit the use of species listed as threatened by the IUCN Red Data Book (Colding J. *et al.* 1997).

4 Conclusion

Food taboos exist in all the communities and do vary from one community to another. While some foods considered as a taboo in one community, in another they are not seen as taboos. Food taboos are general and specific in nature as some taboos involve the entire community and others a specific section of the community such as women, men and youths.

Irrespective of whether food taboos are permanent or temporary, specific or general, they have different impact on the community and so do the consequences of violation. Although taboos are generally “negative” in nature, that is, prohibiting the people from consuming or carrying out certain activities, they also bring a sense of unity, identity and belonging to the people in a given community.

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