

WESTERN FOODS AND TRADITIONAL DIET IN GHANA¹

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1. Introduction

As indicated by a number of household expenditure surveys undertaken in Ghana, e.g. the surveys by the Office of the Government Statistics of the early and mid-fifties² or those by Golding (1962), Dutta-Roy (1969) and Lawson (1964) of the sixties, or the more recent one by Steckle (1972), consumption of Western foods³ has been increasing steadily, particularly in urban areas.

Some authors have tried to explain this phenomenon by means of the reference group theory. In his "*Eighteen Years on the Gold Coast of Africa*" Cruickshank wrote already in 1853 (pp. 294-295) that

"the tendency, however, at present is strong towards a higher standard of excellence in the objects of their pursuit, which are chiefly based upon an anxious desire to imitate Europeans habits of life, which would appear, especially in external requirements, to be the grand desideratum of young Africa".

Now, it is true that Africans will adopt "what seem to them the ostentatious symbols of a status to which they aspire" (Southall, 1961:20) but, as Goldthorpe has pointed out at the First International African Seminar at Makerere College (Kampala, 1959), reference group theory must be used carefully (Goldthorpe 1961).

Statistical data on the imports of commodities, on the percentage of food outlay for bread and tinned foods, and on the frequency of intake of these items in urban and rural areas of Ghana show only one facet of the phenomenon. The social and psychological aspect of people's behaviour, more difficult to quantify, is, for obvious reasons, lesser known.

The aim of this paper, which should be looked upon as a first attempt to deal with the subject, is to examine and analyse the data related to the introduction, acceptance, and consumption of Western foods and subsequent changes in traditional dietary patterns at village level. The wider frame of the region and the nation has also been given consideration⁴.

2. The Dynamics of Dietary Changes at Village Level

Before considering how Western foods affect traditional diet we should define (i) traditional diet and (ii) Western foods.

(i) Traditional Ghanaian diet is based on a starchy crop made into porridge or dough and always accompanied by soup or thin stew⁵.

1 Field notes on the dietary changes among the Nzema, Western Region, were taken in the course of field research - summer 1973, 1974, and 1975 - sponsored by the Italian Ethnological Mission in Ghana.

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2 Gold Coast, Off. Govt. Stat. 1953 and 1955.

3 Seebelow for the definition.

4 For "policies, activities and personnel (of the region and of the nation) now impinge on the local community in unprecedented ways and with unprecedented frequency." Dalton, 1971: 15.

5 The crops vary according to three geographical areas. In the coastal areas the chief staple crops are maize (*Zea mays*) and cassava (*Manihot sp.*). In the forest zone mainly plantain (*Musa paradisiaca*), cassava and cocoyam (*Xanthosoma mafajfa*); but to some extent also maize and yam (*Dioscorea sp.*). In the savannah area the staple crops are millet (*Pennisetum sp.*), maize and yam. Guinea corn (*Sorghum sp.*), rice and cassava are also cultivated throughout the savannah zone.

The porridge or dough supplies the bulk of the calories' intake while the soup or stew whose ingredients are fish, meat, legumes, vegetables - in the forest region palm oil and palm fruits-supplies fats, proteins, vitamins, and minerals.

See Polemann, 1961: 126-131; Whitby, 1968:2; den Hartog, 1972: 24; Dikson, 1969; and Hopkins, 1973.

- (ii) The Western foods, or European foods, are tinned meat, tinned fish, tinned milk, biscuits, sugar, margarine, coffee, tea, milk drinks (Ovaltine, Milo, Bournvita), soft drinks (Coca-Cola, Fanta, etc.) and bread, which is regarded as one of the most typical Western foods, if not the Western food *par excellence*.

At the village level the dynamics of dietary changes, i.e. acceptance and refusal of Western foods, are determined by the social values and attitudes of a largely traditional society. I shall illustrate this process with an example drawn from the Nzema.

Traditionally Nzema diet consisted of *akwonde* - dough made from boiled and pounded plantain and cassava - and *sube* - a soup whose basic ingredients are pepper, tomatoes, and onions - and resembled that of other groups of the forest area. Today Nzema diet is increasingly supplemented by Western foods; the consumption of which varies by items. Tinned fish (sardines, mackerel) is one of the preferred ones particularly when fresh or smoked fish is scarce. But its price restricts its intake to the higher income groups. Meat, too, is expensive, and its consumption appears to be limited to lorry-drivers. The "best-seller", however, is milk; either evaporated, condensed, sweetened or vitaminized. It is given to infants and young children to supplement breast-feeding; it is also added to tea, Ovaltine, Milo, etc, and is used in making bread and cakes.

To a large extent selection and buying of these food items is influenced by mass-media, whose slogans are acritically repeated. Schools, too, contribute to spreading the consumption of Western foods by advising the pupils to eat them because they "keep you healthy", "supply you with some of the needs of your body" and "are kept under hygienic conditions and keep you safe from diseases"⁶. Another factor affecting the consumption of these foods is the sojourn in town: i.e. Accra, Takoradi, Kumasi, and sometimes Abidjan, for the Nzema. While in town, the migrant from the rural areas cannot avoid to be confronted with a Western way of life. Returning home into his village, either temporarily or definitively, the migrant carries back not only cash money, but also new ideas, attitudes, needs, and habits including new food habits. Therefore he will continue, or at least he will try, to eat in the same way as in town. He will go to the village store to buy tinned food, biscuits, Ovaltine, and soft drinks⁷. And in the morning he will have tea and bread for breakfast, typical of those who have stayed in town and have accepted Western way of life and of those who have gone to school, where they have been taught to "take some beverages like tea, Milo, milk together with bread for your breakfast"⁸. In short, it is the breakfast of those who are called '*literate*', while the other prefer "cassava and soup left over from the evening, or *mgbokpole*⁹, because '*illiterate*' people don't get satisfied by it (i.e. tea and bread)" - as it was explained to me - "they think to get satisfied by eating *akposi*¹⁰ or soup". And in Nzema Western foods are plainly defined '*aboloba ale*' i.e. literate food.

Year by year, by means of compulsory education as well as by means of the sojourns in town the number of '*illiterates*' is decreasing. The only '*illiterates*' left are the elders. And if there is some diffidence, and sometimes even rejection of a Western food, it comes from them. For example, the elders indulge in spreading the rumour that the Europeans produce tinned meat from frog's meat. It results that only few, i.e. the lorry-drivers buy corned beef.

6 Quotations from a note written on my request by a Nzema schoolteacher on the advices given by him to his pupils concerning food habits.

7 Usually women sell and buy food items, being only few exceptions, i.g. Hausa butchers, etc. Village stores, newly introduced, do not fit the traditional pattern, thus men may sell and buy foods in stores.

8 See note 6.

9 *Mgbokpole* is a steamed spongy cake of conical form made from cassava.

10 *Akposi* is, by using a Nzema definition, every kind of food that is not *akwonde* (see above) and soup, and that is eaten during the day.

The reasons of the success of this rumour can be explained by the Nzema attitude concerning some particular animals. Frogs are not eaten because "you don't feel happy when you look at them; they aren't looking nice, and so we don't feel to eat them". Nzema have the same aversion for snakes, and consequently for snakelike fishes which, like frogs, are not considered 'food', even if their commestibility is not ignored¹¹.

For our present concern there are a number of points to be made which I shall first enumerate in a schematic way, then discuss in more details trying to demonstrate how the Nzema case fits the Ghanaian pattern:

- (i) Elders spread rumours affecting consumption of Western foods.
- (ii) Lorry-drivers appear free from constraint.
- (iii) Income, education, mass-media and sojourn in town are determining factors in changing traditional dietary patterns.
- (iv) Milk is the "best-seller" among tinned foods.

(i) As it can be observed, some Western foods, i. e. tinned meat in our case, are object of a negative advertising campaign originating from the elders.

The pursuit of the cash-crop market, the introduction of a new technology and of specialized institutions for education¹² have undermined traditional structures thus seriously affecting authority and power of the elders who struggle to keep their influential position and whose aim – in spite of everything – is to maintain their role of advising the young¹³.

The rumours they spread against tinned meat are a reflection of their unconscious resentment against Western way of life that has changed their society and their culture even in the dietary field¹⁴.

Rowena Lawson's statement about Battor, a village situated in the Volta Region¹⁵ that the traditional fisherman-farmer must conform to an established consumption pattern and that he is not allowed to deviate from the norm, can as well be applied to Nzema society. There is only one remark to add, if the Battor villager must conform to the established patterns of consumption on treat of public sanction – that can take the form of gossip, slander, backbiting, character assassination, witchcraft or the threat of witchcraft, sometimes actual physical aggression, following Foster's list¹⁶ – the Nzema is not directly personally affected by these sanctions which influence economic choice.

Public opinion represented and manipulated by the elders is directed towards the consumption item and hence indirectly towards the consumer. The aim and the effects of the rumours are similar to those of gossip¹⁷; i.e. the elders draw on traditional beliefs and attitudes - frogs

11 Fanti as well as Ewe – stationed along the coast in the Nzema area because of their fishing activities – eat snakelike fishes, and Northerners – mainly wage labourers in the coconut and palm plantations – eat snakes. Therefore Northerners are called "snakeeaters" by the Nzema who are called "snail-eaters" by them: another evidence of the well-known contrast between the North and the South of Ghana. See on this subject Gindal, 1973.

12 Hurd, 1967.

13 Peil writes that "many people look forward to an old age of supporting themselves with small farming and maintaining their sense of importance by being elders who can give advice to the young on the ways of living in a city" (1972: 182). I.e. the area of influence of the elders has shifted from the traditional to the urban-industrial.

14 Old people are more attached to traditional dietary pattern than the young. The Ghanaian Governmental campaign for changing dietary habits of people – part of the adult education program – has been therefore for some years purposely planned to reach the older women who cling resolutely to the old ways. See *Area Handbook for Ghana*, 1971: 144.

15 Lawson, 1972.

16 Foster, 1965, quoted in Lawson 1972: 101.

17 See Gluckmann, 1963, for boundary maintenance and conformity enforcement.

are not considered 'food' - in order to prevent the purchase and in order to stress, only implicitly, the fact of having the lorry-drivers already moved outside the traditional sphere and therefore being Nzema only by birth but not by habits.

(ii) Lorry-drivers indeed represent a particular category of individuals within the odiern Ghanaian scenery. Their occupation permits them to free themselves from traditional farming or fishing activities which are cause of boast and anxiety, as it can be realized from the painted slogans on the lorries¹⁸ and which makes them travel to shrines, as Margaret J. Field has recorded in her ethno-psychiatric study on rural Ghana (1960) supplicating for protection. The anxiety of the lorry-drivers who fear their enemies' envy because of the potential economic gain and because of having achieved one of the most widespread ambitions among young men, particularly if illiterates¹⁹ can also be considered referring to Foster's model of Limited Goods²⁰. Thus economic opportunities and achievement of widespread ambitions in a climate of "mutual distrust's"²¹ are threats to the group whose sanctions could take the form of bad magic wrecking the lorry and causing financial disaster²².

Lorry-drivers, who seem to be either unaware of or indifferent to the rumours, can easily buy tinned meat, even if expensive, along with other tinned foods and luxuries because of their cash income. They fit the statement made by Rowena Lawson (1972: 103) that earners of income from non-traditional sources are exempted from traditional consumption patterns. Furthermore, lorry-drivers are not only earners of income from non-traditional sources, but are, because of their occupation, also individuals regularly exposed to Western influences.

(iii) As has been concluded by other authors, income can be considered as one of the determining factors modifying traditional dietary pattern²³. And since high and regular income is mainly an urban phenomenon, I shall discuss it together with the last factor quoted, i.e. the sojourn in town.

Another determining factor in changing traditional food habits, closely related to income, is education. There are obviously some exceptions from this interdependence, as for example the above mentioned lorry-drivers.

In 1835 (p. 26) Cruickshank wrote that almost every person, especially along the coast, who could read and write, preferred trading to farming. The introduction of a formal educational system contributed to changing traditional culture. In Ghana, according to Hurd²⁴, this happened in a fourfold way: by alienating the educated from the traditional society, furthering a process already set in motion by economic factors, by fostering nationalism and hastening independence, by changing the existent but hidden rural underemployment into the more easily visible urban unemployment, and, lastly, by creating a channel of social mobility.

Then education orients the individual, directly or indirectly, towards a way of life different from the traditional even in the dietary field.

Sooner or later, Western foods are regarded as "necessities for the usual diet"²⁵ but their consumption may at the beginning lead to some conflicts, as we can see, for example, from a

18 E.g. "People will talk of you", "Beware of friends", etc.

19 Field, 1960: 134.

20 Foster, 1965.

21 Friedmann, 1958: 24 quoted by Foster, 1965.

22 See Foster, 1965: 305 and Field, 1960: 123 and 134. See also Brown and Hutt (1935: 182) remarking that the Hehe were made suspicious of "development" by their witchcraft beliefs.

23 See e.g. Kaneda and Johnston, 1961; Dema and den Hartog, 1969.

24 Hurd, 1967. To Hurd's statement about rural underemployment and urban unemployment one can add M.J. Field's observation on the apparent relation between schizophrenia and education (1960): 318-319).

25 Hailey, 1952. Revised edition 1957: 1282.

letter published in the *African Morning Post*, quoted by Busia (1950: 40). The letter runs as follows.:

“One fact that should not be lost sight of is that education has made hybrids of our women: in the social life they are Africans and Europeans at one and the same time. They go in African or European dress at one time or another as it may suit their purpose, they enjoy both European and African foods. This puts them in a special class and makes them expensive so that only well-to-do men may succeed in any marital attachment with them. If education of women will serve its purpose in this country, it is absolutely necessary that girls are educated along African lines. Verity. Accra.”

The consequence of education is literacy, the consequence of literacy is reading of magazine's and newspapers' advertisements, of wall posters, of labels on tins, boxes and bottles; and the consequence of all this reading, in some extreme cases, as for example baby foods, can be “commerciogenic malnutrition”²⁶.

Whereas labels and press adverts are directed only towards the literates, radio and TV advertisements reach the illiterate; i.e. every population strata is included in the range of the mass-media and may be influenced by them.

Since urbanization affects traditional way of life also at the village level, we should attempt to distinguish the rural counterpart to typical urban dietary behaviour²⁷.

Dietary patterns of urban Ghanaian closely resemble those of other Tropical African urban dwellers²⁸. Rising income enables the Ghanaian consumer to improve his diet, even if he feels no compulsion to alter the general composition. It follows from Poleman's study on the food economy of urban Ghana (1961: 154) that most of the dietary changes which accompany rises in income are the replacement of cheaper and less preferred products by more highly regarded ones in the same commodity grouping. The only product whose expenditure rises significantly with rising income is bread, which in Ghana is produced in two varieties, i.e. unsweetened (*tea-bread*) and sweetened (*sugarbread*) and which is used mainly and preferentially at breakfast together with tea or hot beverages in urban as well as in rural areas. Poleman explains this preference by stating that it certainly reflects the convenience it offers to urban consumers and that considerable prestige is attached to its consumption²⁹.

(iv) Another Western food item whose consumption is increasing in town and in the village is tinned milk³⁰.

In the Nzema area cow's milk - sheep and goats produce only a small amount barely sufficient for their offsprings - is left to the Fulani who look after the cattle, and Nzema consume the tinned product. There are various motives for the increased use of tinned milk in its different processed forms ranging from governmental campaigns - e.g. milk programs in schools by the Nutrition Unit of the Ministry of Health³¹ - to individual interests. Women, particularly if engaged in earning a wage, welcome the use of tinned milk and other baby foods which relieve them from the burden of the traditionally prolonged breast-feeding. The adoption of these products - obviously

26 I.e. malnutrition caused by the ill-considered promotion of infant foods. Jelliffe, 1971.

27 Urbanization affects village life e.g. by means of the so-called town farm relationship created by urban workers on homevisits or by their rural relatives who make for the cities to have some idea of the “great wealth” and the “many-storied buildings” (Grindal, 1973: 337) or to solicit aid and contribute to the exchange of information and gifts (Peil, 1972: 203).

28 Polemann, 1961: 147.

29 Poleman, 1961: 158. This despite the fact of the early introduction of wheat flour and bread in Ghana, in the 16th century, by means of the Portuguese who provided the persons staying in Elmina with a daily quantity of four loaves. See Youngs, 1973: 236.

30 See e.g. Lawson; 1967.

31 *Area Handbook of Ghana*, 1971: 144.

more widespread at urban level – is connected with serious problems³²: i.e. poverty leads to over-dilution of the products which determines undernutrition and malnutrition having as its consequences death as well as mental damage; the majority of mothers cannot fulfil the hygienic requirements, and bad bottle hygiene leads to gastroenteritis; lastly, breast-feeding is relevant to population size: child spacing was achieved without Family Planning Agencies by the traditional interdict of sexual intercourse during lactation.

As it results from surveys the use of tinned milk in infant feeding must be ascribed to a great extent to advices given by midwives and nurses. As to the consumption of tinned milk by children and adults, it is used almost exclusively for hot beverages and tea at breakfast. Baker-women use it as ingredient for bread and cakes.

3. Conclusion

An attempt was made to show that data on dietary changes, collected from Nzema villages in Western Ghana, are indicators of a process which is going on throughout the country. It is apparent that small communities are not excluded from economic, social and political developments which can be observed at regional or national level. Dietary changes observed at the village level are only a reflection – although with minor intensity – of changes taking place in urban areas. It should be pointed out, however, that the trends observed in the consumption of Western foods, i.e. the increasing intake of bread and tinned milk, may cause problems which require solutions at the national level: wheat flour is not produced locally and also most of the milk is being imported.

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32 Cazanove had already pointed out in 1936 the dangers of bottlefeeding. See also the War on Want investigation into the promotion and sale of powdered baby milks in the Third World (Muller, 1974). For the demographic implications see also Nerlove; 1974 and Caldwell, 1967.

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