The State of Indigenous Foods[1] in Africa: The case of Mankon Community in the Northwest Region of Cameroon

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Abstract

Food is an indispensable item for all human beings, and a means of survival. Through food, people create their own identities, which influence how they view themselves in relation to others. Food carries meanings that are associated with various occasions. Food also fosters communication among people and provides access to coded messages as well as forms of interaction that are not obvious to the external observer. There is however a paucity of qualitative studies on food and its symbolic and communicative function, especially on indigenous foods in the formerly colonised communities. This is even more glaringly so in Africa, despite the continent's long precolonial history of dependence on indigenous foods. It is for this reason, and especially in view of the recent experiences with the covid-19 pandemic and its aggravation of food insecurity, that this article examines the state of indigenous foods in Africa through the case of the Mankon community in the Northwest region of Cameroon. A qualitative research approach was adopted, using in-depth interviews to collect data from 25 participants within the Mankon community. The findings revealed that the Mankon people continue to hold indigenous foods in high regard, not only for their nutritious and medicinal or health value but also for their socio-cultural significance. A lack of knowledge of the socio-cultural significance of these foods however became evident amongst the youth, calling for promotional educational interventions. Notwithstanding the limitations of this study, it contributes to closing the gap of a lack in qualitative research on indigenous foods, especially in Africa.

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Biographical notes

Dr MANKA N Sheila was a senior lecturer at the University of Mpumalanga in South Africa. Her research interests include education, gender, health, food, social policies and particular interest in food consumption patterns in Africa. She is a past, and current member of the International Sociological Association affiliated to the working group (RC 40 Sociology of Agriculture and Food).

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The authors and editors want to recognize the work of Sheila Manka, who passed suddenly after a short illness in 2024. She participated in the Liepzig Conference and was very active in the RC40 community. Dr. Mapadimeng took on the responsibility to finalize the revision of their joint paper, which has been published posthumously.

[1] In this article, the term 'indigenous foods' will mostly be used by the authors, although in a few instances, and consistent with the literature reviewed on the same subject, it will be used interchangeably with the term 'traditional foods'.

Introduction

The fact that people eat food to satisfy their daily needs tends to create ignorance, as food is simply viewed as a means to meet those daily needs without any further significance. This view is echoed in the definitions of food such as those offered by Brian and Allan (1995:2-3), according to whom food is 'any substance absorbed by the body, and which produces energy and promotes the growth and repair of tissues to regulate these processes'. Dorland (2003) concurs with Brian and Allan in defining food as 'anything which, when taken into the body, serves to nourish or build up the tissues or supply body heat'. These definitions are however restrictive. When one begins to ask questions concerning, for example, the ingredients needed for the preparation of this kind of food, or the reasons for it being prepared and eaten in a particular way and called by a particular name, the answers begin to transcend the bounds of culinary studies and the view of food simply as a necessity to meet our daily bodily needs. They tell us so much about the social and cultural significance of food. Our cultures, rituals, traditions, and practices can moreover best be understood through food and the way it is handled and consumed. As Sidiq et al. (2022:1) have argued, 'traditional foods meet cultural needs in preserving traditional cuisine and ways of life and maintain local communities' cultural heritage'. This understanding of food justifies Barthes (1979)'s sociological definition of foods which transcends the above, and in terms of which food is considered as a system of communication, a constellation of images, and a protocol of usages and behaviours. Thus, people use food to communicate with one another, to establish rules of behaviour (protocols) and to affirm as much as to negotiate their identity. Food can indeed be used to exchange intricate messages; it is a powerful assemblage as it speaks in relation to particular social events. Our view, which is consistent with that of Sidiq et al. (2022), is therefore that the socio-cultural significance of food is even more pronounced in indigenous foods.

As a point of departure, we find it imperative to clarify what we mean by indigenous foods as used in this article, in contrast to modern Western processed foods. Our starting point on this is the rather instructive definition of indigenous people provided by the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) (2000). The Forum thus defines indigenous people as:

> *those that have historically belonged to a particular region or country, before its colonization or transformation into a nation state, and may have different – often unique – cultural, linguistic, traditional, and other characteristics to those of the dominant culture of that region or state.*

Proceeding from this definition, indigenous foods can equally be understood as those foods that were produced and consumed by people who lived in a particular region or country before the onset of colonisation and are therefore unique to that place and its cultural traditions. This understanding is in line with those articulated by other scholars who assert that indigenous food is any food commonly consumed and associated with specific celebrations and whose preparation protocols are passed from one generation to another. Cayot (2007), for instance, posits that indigenous foods are unique in their recipe, ingredients and mode of preparation as defined by a particular group of people for a very long time.

Indigenous foods are also referred to as traditional foods, that Kouebou et al. (2013:486) describe as food that is:

> *frequently consumed or associated with specific seasons, usually passed on from one generation to another, carefully prepared in a specific way according to the gastronomic heritage, with little or no processing/ manipulation, that is distinguished and known because of its sensory properties and associated to a certain local area, region or country.*

Raschke et al.'s (2007) review study found several empirical investigations that associate traditional food items with health benefits. These foods include, amongst others, millet, green leafy vegetables, roots and tubers, fruits, legumes, palm oil, wild 'bush' meat, and maize (Raschke et al., 2007: 10).

It is worth stressing that indigenous foods or traditional foods are distinct from modern processed foods

that originated largely with western European industrialisation and spread throughout the world through historical processes of colonial conquest. This spread was in recent decades intensified by the globalisation of the western capitalist economic system that is said to have negatively impacted indigenous food systems. In North America, for instance, colonial intrusion and its imposition of western food systems resulted in what was recorded as a disconnection of indigenous peoples from their traditional food systems. This is attributed to factors associated with colonialism, climate change, capitalism, legal change, and socio-cultural change (Malli et al., 2023). Namrata (2014) likewise argues that westernisation has seriously undermined indigenous cultural practices as it has interfered with traditions, which in turn has led to the abandonment of some cultural practices, including indigenous food consumption habits.

As we well know, globalisation processes, through which western cultural practices – including food consumption habits – spread, have not always proceeded smoothly and unchallenged. They have been countered by localisation forces that impose constraints on them, thus preventing total elimination of local cultural practices. In some cases, local practices have merged with non-local ones, creating hybrid forms. This also applies to foods and consumption patterns, as evidenced in the systematic literature review by Malli et al. (2023:5) on the impact of European colonisation on indigenous communities of North America. Their review found that as the indigenous food systems in these communities underwent significant changes, some of the indigenous peoples moved towards non-traditional, store-bought diets, while others continued to rely on traditional food systems, and yet others on a combination of the two (i.e., traditional and non-traditional).
Against this backdrop, this article explores the following key questions, among others: What are indigenous foods in the Mankon community of Cameroon? Do the people of Mankon have a sound knowledge of indigenous foods and their value? Have there been any changes in the consumption patterns of indigenous foods? What impact, if any, has the introduction of the western colonial and industrial economic system had on indigenous foods and their consumption? Closely related to these questions is that of food security, especially against the background of the recent covid-19 outbreak and the attendant national government's lockdowns. What implications can covid-19 have for indigenous food systems and their role in food security? This article starts off with a discussion of the method used for data collection and analysis, followed by the presentation of findings and their analysis, and the examination of lessons learned from the recent experiences with the covid-19 pandemic and its implications for indigenous foods. This then leads to some concluding remarks.

Methodology

This study was carried out in Mankon Community in the Northwest of Cameroon over a four-month period from February 2017 to May 2017. At the time of this field research, the Makon population stood at 180,000 residents. The study was part of a doctoral degree thesis at the Northwest University in South Africa[1]. Prior to conducting the field study, the research proposal was submitted to the Northwest University Ethics Committee for ethical approval. The ethical clearance was granted in October 2016. The main researcher, Dr Sheila Manka, who is the co-author of this article, was a citizen of Cameroon and a member of the Mankon community. She moved to South Africa to pursue further studies and was therefore based in South Africa when this research was conducted. Once ethical clearance was granted, she travelled back to Cameroon during the December 2016 year-end holidays to prepare and undertake field research. On 10 February 2017, she visited the Royal House of the Mankon community to make a formal request for access to do the study. The researcher was directed to the receptionist at the Royal House where she submitted the ethical clearance letter and a letter requesting permission to conduct the study in the community for the attention of the Royal Council. On 16 February 2017, she was called back to the Royal House where the receptionist presented her with the Royal Council's approval letter, granting permission to do the study in the community. On the same day, she met with a senior member of the Royal Council known as Nchinda, who provided her

[1] Manka, Sheila Ngoh (2022) Food and consumption patterns of selected communities in South Africa and Cameroon. North-West University (South Africa). Available at https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5007-9816; http://hdl.handle.net/10394/38857

with a list of possible and relevant participants, in line with the criteria stipulated in the letter submitted to request permission to do the study. The list proved very helpful in tracing and accessing the participants.

The research methodology used was qualitative. A non-probability sampling technique was used in the form of a purposeful sampling technique to select participants, as guided by the list received from the Royal Council. In doing so, care was taken to include only relevant individuals, thus ensuring a breakdown of the participants into appropriate age categories, and the selection of participants who were indeed keen to share their views and their experiences with indigenous foods. A total of 25 participants were selected for in-depth interviews. The sample was arranged into three different age categories: young (aged between 20 and 35); adult (aged between 36 and 50); and elderly (aged 51 and above). The collection of data was done using an interview guide. Participants were interviewed on the following key issues: 1) their knowledge of the indigenous foods of their community; 2) changes in food consumption patterns; 3) their staple food preferences; and 4) their understanding of the social and cultural meanings and significance of indigenous foods. Over and above the recorded replies, some participants were kind enough to allow the researcher to take pictures of the foods, as evidenced by the photographs included in this article. Pictures of foods served at funerals and weddings were taken during these events when the researcher was still in Cameroon. The duration of the interviews ranged from forty-five (45) to ninety (90) minutes.

A tape recorder was used, with the permission of the participants, to record the interviews for later transcription and analysis. The analysis was done thematically, whereby sub-themes were grouped in line with the study's objectives and were reported on narratively. The results were interpreted and analysed using the secondary evidence from the literature review, the theoretical frameworks, and the participants' empirical responses.

Figure 1 below shows the distribution of participants according to sex, where the majority of participants, 56% of the sample, are males, with females making up 44% of the sample.

Figure 1: Sex Distribution

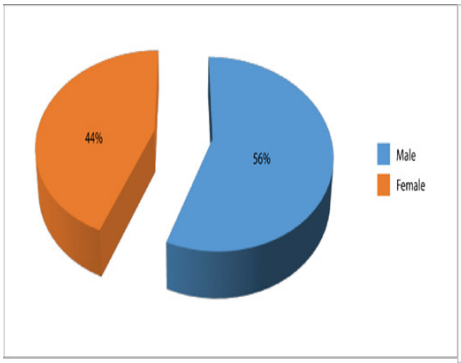

Figure 2: Level of education

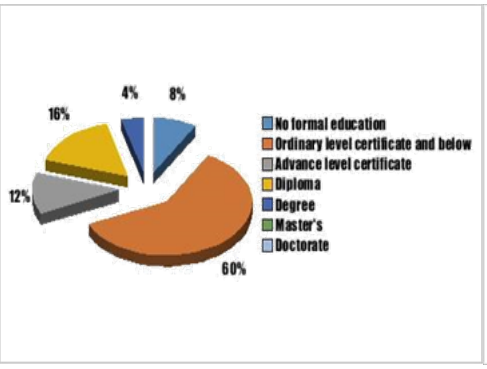

Figure 3: Level of income

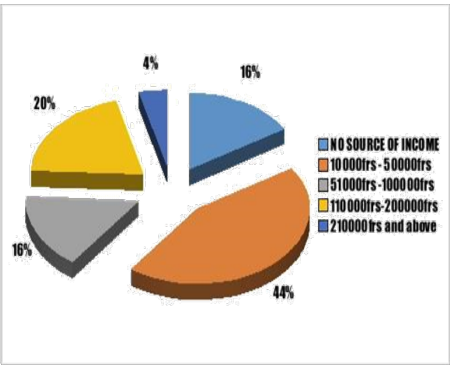

Figure 2 above presents the level of education of participants from the Mankon community. The figure shows that sixty percent (60%) of participants had obtained a General Certificate of Education (Ordinary Level certificate), sixteen percent (16%) had a diploma certificate, twelve percent (12%) had a GCE Advanced Level certificate, eight percent (8%) of participants had no formal education, while four percent (4%) had a university degree.

Figure 3 above shows different income levels of participants within the Mankon Community. Sixteen percent (16%) of participants had no source of income, while forty-four percent (44%) earned between FCFA 10,000 and FCFA 50,000, and sixteen percent (16%) earned between FCFA 51,000 and FCFA100,000. Twenty percent (20%) and four percent (4%) earned incomes of between FCFA 110,000 and FAFA 200,000, and FCFA 210,000, respectively.

Discussion and analysis of findings

The discussion of findings below focuses on various sub-themes as derived from participants' responses to various questions explored during the interviews. Three major subthemes emerged on participants' knowledge of indigenous foods, their understanding of the socio-cultural significance of these foods, and their food preferences.

Participants' knowledge of indigenous foods in the community

One of the questions explored was meant to establish participants' knowledge of indigenous foods. In their responses, the foods listed in Table 1 below were mentioned, as well as how they were prepared and consumed. As the table shows, these foods fall into two main categories: foods that are derived from vegetables/herbs/crops, and those that are meat-based.

Table 1: Indigenous Food Dishes in the Mankon Community

Food type	Food name
Vegetables/herbs/crops-based dishes	Achu with yellow or black soup (*ambarga*)
	Akaka madus (a mixture of fried groundnut/peanut and corn)
	Akwa (pounded macabo cocoyams or cassava) with soup (okra, *egusi* soup or vegetable soup)
	Boiled cassava and vegetables
	Cassava *koki* (like *koki* beans)
	Cassava grind with some salt and palm oil added and tied in plantain leaves.
	Fufu corn and vegetables.
	Nkon (small cocoyam porridge with some cocoyam leaves).
	Yams (different varieties such as hairy, yellow and sweet) eaten with vegetables, soup or plain without any relish.
	Roasted plantain and fried groundnuts eaten without any relish.
	Corn chaff without beans (corn porridge).
	Yellow yam roasted and eaten plain (without any relish) accompanied by a cup of *raffia* wine (traditionally brewed drink).
	Nzea Anery (garden eggs soup)
	Cocoyams, cassava or yams.
	Adong (similar to sweet potatoes, boiled and eaten with vegetables or soup)
	Boiled plantain eaten with vegetables or soup (*egusi*, bitter leaf soup etc).
	Cocoyam porridge with palm oil and vegetables.
Meat based dishes	Cooked egusi (prepared and wrapped in small bundles and dried, called 'nuttie' used as Maggi or beef cubes in the past).
	Plantain porridge with a lot of palm oil and cow meat.

This list suggests that indigenous foods are still known to the Mankon people and continue to be visible and available to this community. A question of interest though, beyond this, is whether the people of Mankon community command a good knowledge and understanding of what these foods mean, that is, their socio-cultural significance and value to health. What does the literature say about the state of these foods and their significance in the modern-day world? Is there a disjuncture and/or connection between the views of the participants in Mankon community about the significance of indigenous foods, and those articulated in the published literature? What implications does this have for indigenous foods and their role, both today and in the future of indigenous communities such as the Mankon? This section attempts to answer these questions based on the responses received from the Mankon people who participated in this study, and the evidence from existing published literature.

Meanings and significance of indigenous foods for the Mankon community

During the field research, participants were asked a question designed to establish their knowledge and understanding of indigenous foods and the socio-cultural significance and meanings of those foods. This is a crucial question within the discourse of food and consumption studies. As Mary Douglas (1984) pointed out, food is a code through which messages are conveyed about social events, social identity and social relationships. Similarly, Roland Barthes (1979) argued that an item of food constitutes an item of information with cultural significance to those from the same cultural background. This, he argues, is especially so with respect to types of food prepared for specific social and cultural events.

This study's findings support these theoretical views as the Mankon community too has specific types of foods which are prepared differently on and for different social events. Such events maybe funerals, births, weddings, and naming ceremonies of children, where food prepared and served has to be in line with the mood and the cultural significance of the event.

Image 1. Mixed boiled corn and peanuts/groundnuts as a symbol of pain and grief

Participants stated that groundnuts/peanuts mixed with corn (as depicted in Image 1 above) symbolise pain, grief and mourning the loss of a loved one. It is therefore commonly prepared and served during funerals for the mourners. That this is indeed so, was revealed in participants' responses.

An elderly female participant with no formal education, and employed, gave the following response:

> *Boiled corn and groundnuts are found only at funerals. You cannot cook it in your house. It was believed that if you cook it in your house, you were inviting the spirit of death to your house. You will not find a funeral without boiled corn and groundnuts. Boiled corn and groundnuts are always present during funerals, and it was used as an appetizer to spice up the food.*

Similarly, a middle-aged male participant with a primary school education, and employed, explained:

> *It is rare to attend a funeral and not find boiled corn and groundnuts. You cannot go to the funeral and not find boiled corn and groundnut. It symbolises mourning.*

A middle-aged female participant with an ordinary level of education, and employed, also said:

> *The presence of boiled corn and groundnut at a funeral is tradition and culture. It also signifies mourning and grieving. It is not common to see people prepare and eat it in their homes.*

Another food type prepared and served at funerals in the Mankon community is ngonedic, which is a porridge consisting of long plantains cooked with palm oil and meat. It is served to all the mourners on warm plantain leaves outside of the house as it symbolises grief. When this meal is served, men and women are not allowed to sit and eat together, in line with traditional customs that emphasise respect, especially for men of titles. This is evidenced in the responses of elderly female and male participants, cited below:

> *If a woman passes beside a male titleholder and she happens to be on her menstrual period, it is believed that the woman might bleed for a longer period than expected. To avoid such complications, which might arise if both sexes have to sit together, it is considered safe to separate them.*

We have the outside porridge plantain, which is served on leaves. It is called chop for outside or chop for Sangabing. This food is prepared outside and consumed outside. The food is only consumed after the burial and symbolises that the funeral is over.

For occasions of joy and happiness such as weddings and family reunions, the Mankon people prepare and consume red cola nuts (see Image 2 below) which symbolise hospitality, peace, and joy. As the adage goes, 'He that brings cola nuts, brings peace'. The sharing and eating of cola nuts between families symbolises unity and mutual peaceful existence. Cola nuts are usually served with traditional beer known as raffia wine (see Images 3 and 4 below).

Image 2: Red cola nuts.

Image 3: Raffia wine in modern glass.

Image 4: Raffia wine (traditional beer) in a traditional cup.

Raffia wine is derived from the raffia tree. This alcoholic drink is usually consumed during or before meals. It is often served at traditional wedding ceremonies for handing over the woman to the man as a sign of unity between the two families. During such ceremonies, a bride is required to identify her husband by first taking a sip and then leaving the rest for her husband as a symbol of their bond.

This is attested by the following response by a middle-aged male participant with a primary school education, married with four children:

> *Raffia wine is very important in every traditional marriage as it is used to hand the bride over to the groom's family and to indicate that the bride has officially been given out for marriage.*

Another food that is served at traditional weddings is acape mengue. This is a boiled plantain cooked separately, and a relish prepared with cocoyam leaves accompanied with a lot of palm oil and big pieces of meat. Excessive palm oil in the food gets drained into a container and stored for almost a week for re-use. Palm oil in the Mankon community dishes symbolises joy and happiness, and when served during weddings, it also symbolises unity and a bond between the families of the bride and the groom. Acape mengue is given to the bride's aunts while the bride's uncles are given money and whisky. This is captured in the response below by an elderly female participant with no formal education, married with five children and employed:

> *A special indigenous dish is prepared by the groom's family and taken to the bride's family. The food is prepared with a lot of palm oil and red meat, with long plantains uncut. It is symbolic as it is the first sign expressing the groom's intention of marriage to the bride's family.*

A middle-aged male participant with a class-five educational level, who was employed, said:

> *Acape mengue is eaten during the celebration of a traditional wedding. Plantain is boiled separately and the ambarga soup is cooked separately with a lot of meat. Its presence symbolises joy and happiness.*

Achu with yellow or black soup (as depicted in Image 5 below) is another socially and culturally symbolic food of the Mankon people. Achu consists of pounded Ibo cocoyams with yellow soup (palm oil, limestone, meat, cow skin and some spices) or black soup (dry or fresh cocoyam leaf grind, some spices, crayfish, smoked fish and meat).

Image 5: Achu with yellow or black soup consumed on leaves (in the past).

It is prepared and served at all cultural and social events in the Mankon community. Its symbolic significance is captured in responses such as those cited below.

A young male participant with a bachelor's degree, employed, said:

> *Achu can be eaten with either black or yellow soup and it gives a cultural identity to the Mankon people. It is the main traditional dish of the people and is found in most social and cultural events.*

An elderly male participant with a primary school education, married and employed, said:

> *The presence of Achu signifies the tradition of the Mankon people in any social or cultural gathering. They usually say the mother's food is the best for the baby, so, whatever food a person eats during an event within the Mankon community, can never be as significant as the consumption of Achu.*

According to these responses, the Achu meal represents the cultural identity of the Mankon community. It is considered as a dignifying meal. Its consumption with yellow or black soup serves to distinguish the real indigenous members of the Mankon community from strangers. In the past, it was consumed on leaves, as seen in Image 5 above, but today it is served on a plate (see image 6 below).

Image 6: Achu with yellow or black soup consumed on a plate (in modern society).

The responses from participants in the Mankon community support the assertion by Amy (2008) that food represents affiliation with a culture. Participants' responses are also consistent with Kniazeva (2003)'s view that foods are cultural expressions through which people establish, maintain and reinforce national ethnic and individual identities.

Egusi pudding (depicted by Image 7 below) is another example of indigenous foods in the Mankon community. Egusi are pumpkin seeds which are dried and peeled. These seeds are later ground and prepared as egusi pudding or egusi soup. Egusi pudding is served with Calabar yam, boiled plantains, bobolo or miyondo (made of cassava), boiled ripe plantains, or even with cassava or cocoyam. It symbolises respect and honour and is therefore referred to as 'dignity food'. It conveys honour and respect on anyone served with this food. It is often presented to people who are regarded as very important in the community, or to the elderly, and is seldom prepared in households.

In the words of this middle-aged male participant with higher education(i.e. post-secondary school education), and employed:

> *Egusi pudding is food which carries meaning of respect and honour. It is usually given to the elderly and not the youths.*

An elderly male participant with an advanced educational level (in Cameroon, this level of educational attainment ranges in terms of grades A, B, C, D, E to F where F is a fail while all other grades a pass) , and employed said:

> *Egusi pudding is also cooked and given to the girl's family as a sign of respect by the in-laws.*

Similarly, an elderly female participant with an advanced level of education, and employed, explained:

> *When a person is given egusi pudding it sends a message of respect and honour.This is because it is not usually prepared on ordinary days and consumed by all. It is often given to the elderly and consumed by them.*

> *Despite differences in income-level, all the middle-aged and elderly participants attested that serving the indigenous food egusi pudding conveys honour and respect.*

It is only prepared when there is an important event such as a wedding, and on important public holidays such as Easter Sunday, Christmas day, and New Year's day. It is also sometimes prepared for an important visitor. Egusi pudding is mostly consumed in small portions.When served, it is given to adults to share with the youth. It is not a daily staple food.

Image 7: Egusi in its uncooked and prepared forms (Egusi pudding)

The Mankon people have a customary event called 'born house' (a term used to describe a welcoming ceremony of a newborn baby or a new mother into the family by mainly elderly women). During the 'born house', members prepare an indigenous roast plantain mashed in palm oil and seasoned with salt. Palm oil in the Mankon tradition is highly symbolic as palm is considered a tree of peace and providence. This explains why in every cultural event, food is usually prepared with palm oil. This is shared with all those present at the 'born house'. The meal signifies a newborn baby's house, and one should eat the meal as a sign of welcoming the baby.

This is explained in the response from an elderly male participant with a school-leaving certificate and employed:

> *Roast plantain mashed with some palm oil and a pinch of salt is one of the foods which is significant during born houses. Roasted plantain with oil while adding a pinch of salt. Simple like that, it's very nice.*

In addition, an elderly female participant with no formal level of education and employed also explained:

> *During the celebration of the birth of a newborn baby, plantain is usually roasted and pounded while adding some salt and palm oil. It is eaten by the guest. It is symbolic as it carries a message of joy and happiness and the event is the celebration of a newborn baby in the household.*

Furthermore, another middle-aged male participant with a class five educational level and employed stated that:

> *During the celebration ceremony of the birth of a newborn baby, a special meal is prepared which is pounded roast plantain with a pinch of salt and palm oil. Everyone is given the food as a sign that they have been to the house of a newborn baby, which symbolises joy and happiness.*

In line with the above responses, an elderly female participant, who has a diploma and is employed, also explained:

> *We also have the roasted plantain with palm oil and salt. It is always present during the celebration ceremony of the birth of a newborn baby in the house. This food speaks for itself, symbolising the presence of a newborn baby in the house. It carries a message of joy.*

A striking feature of the responses on the social and cultural meanings and significance of indigenous foods within the Mankon community, which reveal a good knowledge and understanding of these foods, is that they were mostly given by the elderly and middle-aged participants. There was limited input from the young

participants. While some youth recognise that these foods are commonly served at cultural and social events, they do not display a thorough understanding of their underlying social and cultural meanings. The youth's limited knowledge of indigenous foods could be revealing of the phenomenon known in food studies as 'nutrition transition'. This refers to dietary changes marked by a shift away from consumption of traditional diets towards more consumption of westernised diets. This shift has been identified in earlier studies. For instance, a systematic review of the literature published between 2000 and 2020, found that notwithstanding the evident awareness on the part of indigenous peoples about the importance of traditional food resources, the consumption of indigenous foods was in reality low (Sidig et al., 2022). This is supported by the research done by Raschke et al. (2007:10) whose survey found that the 'majority of the interviewees (78%) believed that knowledge of traditional African food habits was being lost'. This was seen as signalling an urgent need for interventions to promote indigenous peoples' awareness of these foods, as well as to safeguard and maintain traditional food-based knowledge. This, it is argued, could be achieved through targeted education of youth about the importance of traditional food systems (Sidig et al., 2022). This finding supports Kuhnlein and Receveur (1996: 434)'s argument that '… factors that cause decreased use of traditional food systems will lead to declining transfer of traditional knowledge to young people on how to recognize, harvest, process, and prepare their food.'

Participants' food preference - indigenous or modern western processed foods?

In seeking to understand the status of indigenous foods (i.e. whether or not these foods continue to consumed and appreciated, or have been abandoned), it was necessary to find out from participants what their preferences were for staple foods, between indigenous foods and modern western processed foods. The question on food preferences elicited the following responses.

An employed male youth participant with a secondary school education responded as follows:

> *We still consume the indigenous food because modern food comes with health-related diseases. Thus, it later affects our hormones and causes us to grow obese and look older than our age.*

An employed, elderly male participant with a diploma said:

> *I still consume indigenous food because it is fresh and very nutritious. These modern foods are not usually fresh and easily lose their nutrients.*

An employed, middle-aged male participant with an advanced level of education responded as follows:

> *I still consume indigenous food because it contains all the nutrients my body needs for its proper functioning.*

Another middle-aged male participant with the same characteristics as above declared:

> *We still consume indigenous food because I grew up eating it, and more so because it is naturally grown and does not lead to health-related diseases.*

An unemployed middle-aged female participant with a diploma, responded as follows:

> *I consume indigenous food more because it is natural. It will not cause any diseases. I live on it, otherwise you would not have seen me here today, strong enough. I can stay for a month without eating rice. I will eat roasted plantain/cocoyam for long with vegetables.*

We see that these responses represent the views of diverse participants who differ in terms of sex, age, and educational level, but who are mostly employed and therefore have some regular earned income. Despite evidence that they can afford processed foods, their responses indicate that these are not high on their lists of food preferences. These participants' responses point to a preference for indigenous African foods rather than modern western-type processed foods as they consider them to be healthier and more nutritious.

Participants' preferences for indigenous African foods over modern western foods suggest that indigenous foods continue to enjoy appreciation and recognition within the Mankon community, especially for their nutritional and health value. The nutritional value of indigenous food was established in previous studies. For instance, the study by Kouebou et al. (2013:490) on the nutritional composition of 117 staple traditional dishes in Cameroon that fall into four categories (i.e., sauces, complete meals, snacks, and starchy complements) found that the majority of 'these staple foods contain water between 60 and 80 g, energy between 100 and 200 kcal, proteins between 2 and 4 g, fats between 0 and 9 g, less than 6 g of available carbohydrates and less than 4 g of crude fibre'. These foods were also found to be highly rich in a wide variety of essential minerals such as potassium, iron, phosphorus, calcium, magnesium, and zinc. Kouebou et al. (2013) found that these dishes constitute frequently consumed staple foods in Cameroon and that they play an important role in nutrition.

This nutritional information on indigenous foods supports the assertion that they are vital to physical health as they provide nutrients that help to reduce incidences of non-communicable diseases such as diabetes (Malli et al., 2023: 2). This view is also supported by other previous studies on indigenous foods that argue that spices such as dichrostachys glomerata and tetrapleura treptatera used in the preparation of certain dishes, reportedly have preventive effects on obesity, type-2 diabetes, and metabolic syndrome. Other ingredients, and notably domngang and tchuinmogne, are said to have high contents of minerals including iron, calcium, magnesium and phosphorus. These minerals are considered essential to reduce the risk of anaemia and hypertension in diabetic patients (Nyangono et al, 2021:62). Foods such as fufu corn and palm oil were found to be, respectively, rich in methionine (an essential amino acid), and vitamins which serve as antioxidants protecting the body from cancer and infections. Most other foods are reported to be rich in fibre, which helps protect people from colon cancer, diabetes, and cholesterol, while simultaneously helping to improve insulin sensitivity (Nyangono et al, 2021:62).

That indigenous foods are both nutritious and medicinal is further eloquently articulated by Zulumathabo Zulu. According to Zulu (2022), in African indigenous medicine there is always a close connection between food and medicine. These, he argues, are available in the form of both water-based plants as food sources (such as seaweeds, kelp, sea moss, tlhatlha, mohaladitwe, and sehe, also known as spirulina which are all rich in slime and proteins), and animal species (such as whales, sharks, and other kinds of fish) that are used both as nutritional sources and as medication. They are also available through terrestrial plants such mokopu (okra), sun-dried herbs known as morogo wa mokhusa and madumbe (Zulu, 2022:87). The slime in these water-based plants, he argues, is both nutritionally and medicinally potent as it has glycoproteins, which are found in the lining of the stomach, mouth and lungs. These food sources help to heal diseases such as inflammations due to torn muscles and physical injuries, arthritis in joints (as they are rich in calcium), and poor metabolism, blood sugar level dysregulation and hormonal imbalance (as they are rich in iodine). These foods are also sources of antioxidants which help to remove free radicals in the body (Zulu, 2022: 88-90). These findings are supported by Kuhnlein and Receveur (1996: 421) who argue that 'many indigenous peoples do not separate plant species into those that are food and those that are medicine because the same item can be one, the other, or both at the same time'.

Lessons for indigenous foods in view of the covid-19 pandemic

The findings in the foregoing present a case for the preservation and promotion of indigenous foods due to their nutritional and health value. This is especially so in view of the historical impact of Western colonialism and its economic systems that introduced modern processed foods, presenting a threat to indigenous foods systems. The need for promotion and presentation of indigenous foods is even greater, in light of the recent covid-19 pandemic which plunged the entire globe into a health crisis, further aggravating food insecurity for the most vulnerable groups. Covid-19's impact exposed vulnerabilities of economies to unexpected shocks.

As Foka-Nkwenti et al. (2020) pointed out, food prices proved to be highly sensitive to shocks such as those experienced during the 2008 economic crisis marked by a steep rise in fuel prices, financial instability, climate crisis as well as human rights crises, all of which combined, disrupted the global food system. The recent outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic no doubt had a similar disruptive impact. As the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD, 2020:2) report shows, the pandemic undermined food security and livelihoods in the poorest parts of the world where agricultural activities are labour intensive. In Africa, this impact was aggravated by yet another shock in a form of the outbreak of the war between Russia and Ukraine, which saw grain and cooking oil prices skyrocketing. Cameroon was particularly hard hit as the pandemic occurred amidst high levels of unemployment that saw a rise from 3.36% in 2018 to 3.43% in 2020. This aggravated the pre-existing conditions of hunger and malnutrition, resulting in increased food insecurity (Foka-Nkwenti et al., 2020:112).

Food insecurity is a phenomenon that occurs where there is either poor access to food to meet basic nutritional needs and/or disruption of food intake or eating patterns due to lack of money and other resources (Foka-Nkwenti et al., 2020:112). The opposite of food insecurity is food security, defined by the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) as 'a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life' (cited in Aziz and Kum, 2020: 3).

During the lockdowns in Cameroon, agricultural and other economic activities came to a standstill due to restrictions on the movement of people and goods as governments sought to mitigate the pandemic and its rapid spread. Government measures to manage the covid-19 virus spread, such as social distancing and restrictions on movements, meant that those working in the value chain of food production, processing and distribution could not carry out their duties as usual (see OECD, 2020:3-4; and Foka-Nkwenti et al., 2020:114). While food obtained from commercial retail stores is sourced largely from commercial farms and involves substantial financial costs, the opposite is true of indigenous foods as they are mainly grown through subsistence farming by households. This makes them highly accessible and affordable for the poor and the vulnerable. It is therefore important to support and promote subsistence farming in indigenous food crops as it will help to reduce dependence on commercially grown and often processed food products. It will also help to improve self-sufficiency and food security for the poor and the vulnerable. As the findings in the preceding section show, the people of the Mankon community who participated in this study hold positive views and attitudes towards indigenous foods, which they know to be highly nutritious and healthy. Together with their sound knowledge of the indigenous foods – especially amongst the elderly and middle-aged members of the community, and despite a lack in similar knowledge amongst the youth – this serves as a good foundation to promote the production of these foods for self-reliance and self-sufficiency, which could prove essential during times of unexpected shocks.

We therefore concur with the recommendations based on studies such as Bin, Ofeh and Che (2020:37), that advocate for education of households on how to develop new sources of income and food strategies, with particular emphasis on agricultural activities. In the context of post-colonial Africa, such strategies would affirm the argument articulated by Mogomme Masoga with his theoretical concept of Afro-sensed, meaning Africans' innate awareness of their own identity and their 'sense' of identity, that is, of being African (Masoga, 2017:17). This concept, Masoga (2017) argues, invokes the African proverb which in indigenous African languages of Sesotho/Setswana, says 'Thai e e itseng metsi a yona' (translated into English, it reads as 'the fish that understands its waters', meaning that the fish's potency lies in the water). The concept has direct relevance to the need for Africans to achieve food security, self-reliance, and self-sufficiency. This begins with Africans' appreciation and understanding of the critical importance of their own precolonial modes of production and systems of livelihood, central to which is the subsistence farming of indigenous food products.

Concluding remarks

This article examined the state of indigenous foods in the Mankon community of Cameroon. Specifically, it explored the community's knowledge of their indigenous foods and their significance, and whether these foods continue to be part of their staples or whether there have been changes in their consumption, especially due to historical encounters with Western colonial and economic systems. The article also considered the issue of the covid-19 pandemic, its impact on food systems, and its implications for indigenous foods, food security, and self-reliance.

Our findings show that the people of Mankon community have sound knowledge of their indigenous foods, evidenced in their ability to list a wide range of such foods. The study's participants also expressed a preference for indigenous foods as they recognised their nutritional and health(medicinal) value over western modern processed foods. Notwithstanding this, we found that only the middle-aged and the elderly participants demonstrated knowledge of the foods' socio-cultural significance and meanings, while the youth evidently lacked the same knowledge. This, we argue, supports calls for the promotion of indigenous foods through educational campaigns targeted specifically at the youth for the purpose of knowledge transfer on these foods and their systems. The need for such promotional campaigns is further heightened against the backdrop of the recent covid-19 pandemic which had a disruptive impact on commercial food value chains, constricting food supplies and resulting in food insecurity. The situation has been particularly severe for vulnerable communities such as the Mankon, which tend to rely heavily on processed foods sold through retail stores. Subsistence farming in indigenous food crops would enhance food security for such vulnerable groups both during normal periods of stability and in difficult times of shocks created by outbreaks of pandemics such as covid-19.

As with any other study, the present one has its limitations. Specifically, its main limitation lies in the fact that it is qualitative in nature and therefore, over and above evidence from published secondary literature, its empirical findings are based on evidence from a sample of few members of the community. Thus, while the findings are revealing on the state of indigenous foods in the community, it is difficult to generalise them as adequately representative of the entire community or even the majority of the Makon people's views and knowledge. That being said, the qualitative nature of the study warrants special consideration in terms of its contribution to the body of knowledge and research on indigenous foods. This is especially so as most of the research on indigenous foods is largely quantitative, using evidence reviews and/or scoping reviews and statistical surveys that lack depth and probing of the reasons for the expressed attitudes and perceptions on indigenous foods.

Another limitation of this study is that, beyond the participants' expressed preferences and recognition of their indigenous foods' nutritional and health value, we did not probe further on the issue of the actual daily consumption of indigenous foods as compared to that of western processed foods. This should be pursued in future research on the same question for a thorough examination and analysis of Cameroonians' daily staples, not only in the Mankon community. Such future studies would benefit through comparative analysis of the state of indigenous foods in other parts of the African continent.

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