

ATTITUDES AND PREJUDICES IN FOOD CONSUMPTION

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Introduction

Economic and cultural factors and taboos are usually the causes of poor dietary habits. There are, however, other restrictions which are outcomes of personal beliefs, attitudes or prejudices which often escape considerations as equally strong obstacles to the choice and consumption of food.

These factors seem not to be regarded as serious threats to good nutrition but they can, in fact, contribute to poor dietary intakes.

This paper reports a study of some of the Ghanaian traditional opinions about diet (quite apart from taboos) which can lead to restrictions on food consumption, particularly during critical moments such as childhood, pregnancy, lactation and illness. The objective is to assess the opinions for possible explanations that may help to dispell the fears, superstitions and fallacies about any food.

Method of study

The administrative regions of the country were used. In each region, the regional capitals and towns which are regarded as typical cultural areas were selected. The selection was based on different ethnic groups in each region. In the Eastern Region, for instance, four ethnic groups were identified: the Krobos, the Akwapims, Akims and Kwahus. Each group was represented by a town or two. Somanya represented the Krobos. Mampong and Akropong represented the Akims and Nkwakwa the Kwahus.

Questionnaires were used and the respondents were selected on a random basis. On the whole, 1,600 people were interviewed. Questions were asked about foods that are forbidden to young children, pregnant and lactating mothers and the reasons for avoiding them.

In addition, similar questions were asked

about foods that are recommended for use during these same periods. There were questions about foods that are avoided during illness and those that are specially recommended for use during a particular illness and reasons for avoiding or using them were obtained.

Results

Opinion about food are found to be widespread throughout the country, however, a few are peculiar to particular groups of people. The reasons given for avoiding certain foods indicate in most cases that the choice of food is very much governed by personal and psychological factors and not necessarily by taboos. While in some cases people observe taboos on certain foods—most of the restrictions concern animal foods—the limitation on diet is very much aggravated by prejudices and superstitions which further limit the free choice of other alternatives.

Opinions about food in infant feeding

Animal foods. Young children are generally restricted from eating animal foods for various reasons.

Meat is said to cause offensive stools and worms when fed to young children. It is also thought to cause a sore in the child's stomach. This is based on the belief that meat produces heat and when not properly digested by the child, results in convulsion.

Eggs are suspected to cause constipation, molted teeth and boils. Like meat, eggs are also thought to cause offensive stools and worms. A very common opinion is that a child who is used to eating eggs, may mistake his own faeces for a yolk of an egg. Among the Akans, eggs are supposed to be responsible for delay in a child's walking and also for too early teething which is regarded as a bad omen.

Milk. It is a common belief that milk causes running stomach or frequent stools in young children.

Fish: Like meat, fish is supposed to cause offensive stools and running stomach. One other reason for upholding fish from young children is the fear that the bone may choke the child. It is also a common opinion that a child who is brought up on meat, fish and eggs may become a spoiled child and a thief.

Snails and lobsters. Snails are suspected to cause slimy mouth, slow growth and boils on the child's head. Lobsters are said to cause fever and frequent stools.

Vegetables and fruits. Leafy vegetables are not commonly fed to young children. The reason for this is that vegetables, particularly leafy vegetables and pepper, cause fever and frequent stools. Okro, by its slimy nature, is associated with salivation in children. So also are fruits such as oranges, mangoes, pawpaw and coconut which are labelled as causes for frequent stools and fever. Mangoes are particularly thought to produce convulsion in children. In teething, it is regarded as bad omen for a child to have his upper teeth appear first. In many cases, this is attributed to feeding the child with pawpaw.

Starchy foods. There are restrictions on the feeding of starchy foods to children, particularly the root crops which are supposed to cause a number of ailments. Cocoyam, kokonte, gari and plantains are mentioned as causing stomach pains and the development of a large stomach. Constipation and feebleness are attributed to the eating of fufu. The starchy foods are also thought to cause retarded growth, resulting in a delay in walking. One interesting opinion about rice is that a child who is fed with rice may have misplaced teeth.

Ripe plantain is supposed to produce worms and cause frequent stools and weakness in the child and is believed to cause delay in walking.

Oily seeds and nuts. Roasted groundnuts are said to cause coughing in children.

Opinion about food during pregnancy

A pregnant woman is usually an object of great anxiety by reason of which she is often subjected to numerous restrictions both on her

diet and general behaviour. It is believed that if a pregnant woman exchanges any food item with a neighbour, she has exchanged her child for another. She is not to eat any food left over from previous day; this is believed to cause frequent stools and to make her weak and drowsy during labour.

A pregnant woman is not to eat in public for fear that if she is seen by a sorcerer the baby may die at birth or when born may have greenish stool, known as 'asram.' There are numerous opinions about what to eat and what to avoid during pregnancy. It is feared that a pregnant woman who drinks ice water will have much bleeding after delivery and the baby may be bald. She is not to eat certain foods and animals whose ugly characteristics are feared to be transmitted to the child or which are suspected to have some ill effects on the mother herself. On the other hand, animals whose physical characteristics are desired, are recommended to her for consumption.

Presented below are some of the opinions which were collected during the survey.

Eggs. Eggs in general are said to cause the child's head to be tender. Chicken eggs, in particular, are forbidden to the expectant mother because chickens are said to run around a number of times before laying their eggs. Therefore, to eat chicken eggs during pregnancy is feared to result in prolonged labour. Instead, an expectant mother is advised to eat duck eggs for ducks are known to lay their eggs with ease.

Snails are forbidden to an expectant mother because it is said to cause patches on the baby's body, and produce slimy mouth and black lips. It is also feared that a woman who eats snails during pregnancy will have a baby that will grow to be dull. Other animals are avoided for similar reasons. A kind of squirrel known as 'Bush Baby' is believed to make a baby cry too much.

Cat. To eat the flesh of a cat during pregnancy is suspected to be responsible for the child becoming a thief. It is also believed to cause dimness of sight in the child and inability to sleep at night. One characteristic of a cat by which it stretches itself constantly is feared to be transferred to the child.

Bats and monkeys. In certain areas, it is not advisable for a pregnant woman to eat the

flesh of a bat or monkey as it is feared that the baby will have the physical characteristics of these animals. Also, to eat a bat is supposed to make the child refuse to drink water and his bowels will not move easily.

On the other hand, the Kwahus believe that a woman who eats the flesh of a monkey during pregnancy will have an intelligent baby with fine fingers and beautiful silky hair, and small whitish teeth. There are other animals which are supposed to produce desirable results when eaten during pregnancy. To eat an antelope, guinea fowl and squirrel is believed by some people to make the baby grow to be smart and clever. Some other animals are believed to make delivery easy or spontaneous. Among these are rats, shrimps and lobsters. A baby girl who has a ringed neck is very much admired as beautiful and it is believed that a woman who eats shrimps and lobsters during pregnancy, will have a baby with ringed neck.

Fish. Particularly its head, is regarded as a brain food and is specially recommended to an expectant mother so as to have an intelligent child. However, there is a special type of fish known locally as Minnow — mpatowamon (Akan) which is believed by the Akwapims to cause abortion.

Mudfish is supposed to make the child dump and to refuse to drink water. In some areas, the eating of mudfish during pregnancy is not advisable for fear that the baby may have a flat head.

In other areas, for example, in Ashanti and among the Kwahus, this shape of head is very much admired and so mudfish is recommended to the pregnant woman so that she may have a baby with such a head.

Crabs. To eat crabs during pregnancy is supposed to affect the baby in one of the following ways: The baby may be born with crooked legs and fingers and may walk like a crab and foam constantly. It is also feared that the baby in the womb may scratch the mother's stomach causing consistent stomachache for the mother.

Duck. A pregnant woman is not to eat duck otherwise the baby will have frequent stools.

Fruits. Pregnant women have fears about eating fruits during pregnancy. Most of the common fruits are suspected to have adverse effects on pregnancy.

Pineapple is said to cause abortion and is believed to make the placenta too big. On the other hand, some women believe that pineapple will cleanse the baby's skin and free it from slime.

Pawpaw seeds when incidentally swallowed are feared to collect in the child's cord causing stomach pains. It is also said to be responsible for a delay in the healing of the cord.

Mangoes are forbidden to the pregnant woman because mangoes are supposed to cause miscarriage, stomach pains and frequent stools. It is also feared to cause convulsion in the child.

Tomatoes are suspected to cause the baby to be born with a tender head which can result in death. It is also feared to cause greenish stools in children.

Avocado pear is supposed to produce dirty patches on baby's skin, while some people like it because it promotes free bowels.

Banana is said to cause vomiting, stomach pain and makes delivery difficult. The more acid fruits such as cashew fruits, oranges and lime, on the other hand, are favoured during pregnancy, as they are said to control vomiting and spitting.

Coconut. Coconut water is supposed to cause abortion, and it is believed that when a fertile priest sees a pregnant woman eating coconut she will have a child whose head will be as big as the coconut.

Vegetables

Garden eggs and okro. Among the vegetables that are suspected of producing ill-effects are garden eggs and okro. Garden eggs are supposed to cause rashes and make baby's skin very delicate. In some areas, it is suspected of causing miscarriage in the first four months of pregnancy. Some people also think that garden eggs are responsible for a development of an enlarged naval. There is, however, a small type of garden egg which is preferred and is eaten to prevent vomiting.

Okro is thought to cause pains in the waist and to weaken a pregnant woman during delivery. It is also suspected to cause slimy mouth in the child and produce lumps in the cord. Some people, however, think eating okro

makes delivery easy. Leafy vegetables and mushrooms are known to give blood to the pregnant woman.

Starchy foods

Gari is suspected to make the baby swell in the womb and also cause stomach pains and frequent stools.

Cocoyam. Eating cocoyam is said to cause pains in the waist, stomach, constipation and piles. It is also feared to make baby's skin dirty.

Plantain. It is feared that when an expectant woman eats roasted unripe plantain, she will have painful and difficult delivery and the baby will be small and stiff. To eat an over-ripe plantain, on the other hand, is associated with waist pains and prolonged labour. It is also said to affect the health of the child, making him look sickly. The delivery of Siamese twins is associated with the eating of twin fingered plantain during pregnancy. In the forest areas, however, boiled unripe plantain mashed with red palm oil is commonly served to a pregnant woman and is believed to give her sufficient blood.

Fats and oils

Oily or fatty foods are suspected to cause frequent vomiting during pregnancy. It is also feared to cause the baby to be too big resulting in difficult birth. But palm oil is supposed to make a baby fair coloured.

Groundnut paste. The consumption of groundnut paste is feared to result in frequent stools and abortion.

Opinions about food during lactation

The nursing period also has its "dos and donts". There is a general belief that after birth a woman has a sore in the womb and precautions are taken to serve foods that will not aggravate the sore but which will heal it early. While some foods are avoided, others are recommended to the lactating mother for this and other reasons.

Animal foods

In general, meat, as well as liver and eggs, are accepted as foods that give blood and strength after delivery and are believed to

promote sufficient breast milk. The exceptions are snails which are supposed to stop the flow of breast milk and cause diarrhoea. The Krobos do not eat snails because it is a taboo in the area, the breach of which is said to cause skin rashes or patches on the body.

Fruits and vegetables

Among the vegetables, okro is considered to worsen stomach sore and cause diarrhoea in the lactating mother. For this reason, okro soup is not fed to a nursing mother during the first weeks after birth. Instead, in some areas, she is given light soup to which mashed garden eggs is added. This is believed to heal the stomach sore and also to promote sufficient breast milk. In other areas, silk cotton leaves and other local leaves such as Nyimo (Ewe) are boiled and taken as beverage to heal the womb.

Mangoes, pineapple, guava, oranges and sugar-cane are considered not particularly good for a nursing mother because they are supposed to cause diarrhoea and, therefore, delay the healing of the womb. They are also suspected to dilute the breast milk.

Oily seeds and nuts

Oils are said to cause vomiting. But groundnuts and palm soups are liberally served (particularly among the Kwahus) to the nursing mother to promote breast milk. Ironically, groundnuts in their fresh form are suspected to cause frequent stools, coughing and foam in the baby.

Starchy foods

Boiled pieces of starchy foods such as 'Ampesi' are considered not good for a nursing mother for fear that they cause pains in the stomach.

Porridge made from cereals especially maize and guinea corn and seasoned with spices, is preferred for a nursing mother as it is believed to promote breast milk. In the northern parts of the country, a special food known as *Fula*, which is prepared from guinea corn or millet and highly seasoned with spices is served to the nursing mother to promote breast milk and to heal the womb.

Other foods that are known to promote breast milk include boiled dry or fresh maize

served with dry coconut. In some areas, roasted corn meal porridge served either in the liquid form for breakfast or in the thick form with fresh pepper sauce for lunch, is a common meal for the nursing mother and is believed to increase breast milk.

Discussion

The study revealed that taboos which have long been regarded in Ghana as obstacles to good nutrition, are not actually serious threats as superstitions and prejudices against food.

Foods that were mentioned as taboos are few. The only case of a taboo is that of the Krobos who do not eat snails even though snails are abundant there.

The views expressed about the different food items can be classified as:

1. Those that are outcomes of superstitions and prejudices.
2. Those that are mainly due to ignorance of the causes of disease.
3. Those that are fallacies.
4. Those that result from personal experiences.

Superstitions and prejudices

Most of the views expressed about diet during pregnancy are due to irrational fear. The fact that the foods mentioned by some people as producing ill effects are eaten by others with relish present contradictions by reason of which the opinions can be dismissed as baseless.

Depending on the society's tradition and the values placed on a particular food item, the effect of eating any food can be considered good or bad. Thus the Kwahus admire a type of head which is thought to result from eating mudfish during pregnancy. They also eat the flesh of a monkey in order to have a baby with fine fingers and beautiful silky hair. On the other hand, the Ewe woman would not eat a monkey or a mudfish during pregnancy because of her belief that their ugly characteristics may be transferred to the baby.

Opinions about diet during pregnancy may,

therefore, be regarded as imaginary. Rejecting snails, because a child may be born with slimy mouth and black lips; crabs, because a baby may foam at the mouth constantly; a duck, because a baby may have frequent stools; associating salivation in children with the feeding of okro; and forbidding a pregnant woman to eat chicken eggs because she may have a prolonged labour are a few of the examples of ignorance.

Ignorance of the cause of disease

Many common diseases are associated with diet. In children, molted teeth, constipation, diarrhoea, offensive stools, etc., are associated with feeding such important food items as meat, fish, milk and eggs. It is obvious from this opinion that poor oral and personal hygiene are not associated with these conditions. Pieces of meat left between the teeth can indeed result in molted teeth. Milk prepared under unhygienic conditions using dirty water or container is a possible cause of diarrhoea which has been described by respondents as the passage of green liquid stools or a running stomach.

Convulsion and worm infections are associated with the consumption of meat.

Disorders in pregnancy such as haemorrhage, miscarriage and still births are all attributed to eating fruits like mangoes and pineapple, although the causes of these disorders are already known to medical science.

There is no doubt that some of the opinions about food may result from personal experiences. That milk and fruits may cause running stomach should be understood from the point of view of the sanitation during handling. Also the acid content in a fruit may be too high for the child's tender stomach if too much of it is eaten, and this may cause the frequent stools.

There is need, therefore, for intensified education on the causes of diseases and in personal hygiene and environmental sanitation in Ghana in order to eliminate from people's minds the taboos, superstitions and prejudices associated with food.