

## Food and Maintaining Identity for Migrants: Sierra Leone Migrants in Durban

Maheshvari Naidu<sup>1</sup> and Nokwanda Nzuza<sup>2</sup>

*School of Social Sciences, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa*

*E-mail: <sup>1</sup><naiduu@ukzn.ac.za>, <sup>2</sup><yoliswanzuza@gmail.com>*

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**ABSTRACT** Food can be considered a vital and dynamic part of people's 'culture' and identity, as people often identify and associate themselves with the particular foods they eat. This paper explores the importance of traditional or 'home food' in maintaining a sense of 'self', and an articulation of a particular identity for Sierra Leoneans. Away from a nutritionist paradigm and the subsistence discourse (around food) the study probes the role of 'home food' as a vital resource and an identity marker. Findings reveal that for migrants, 'home food' is able to emotionally transport migrants back to the sending country. It also shows that, in an attempt to maintain their identity, migrants sometimes form (im)permeable boundaries that appear to aid in preserving and further enacting their 'cultures'.

### INTRODUCTION

Writing over a decade ago Yannis Hamilakis (1999) acknowledged that "food is culturally defined" and "acquires immense significance in all societies because it involves the human body". Yet, in as much as it involves, on a physical level, the corporeal body, one adds that on multiple and critical levels, food transcends the corporeal, and involves one's sense of 'self' and 'identity'. This is perhaps, especially so for those who find themselves in a new space, surrounded by new kinds of 'food' and routines and rituals of eating. For me, one's identity and sense of self is *enacted*, as Hamilakis (1999: 38) asserted, through consumption, which he rightly describes as "an act of incorporation involving senses, feelings and emotions".

Moving from one country to another has a cluster of implications for migrants, which often includes adjusting to the new host environment while having to preserve their identity and sense of belonging. Early anthropological work by classical anthropologists like George Herbert Mead (1943), working within the theoretical frame of symbolic interactionism, view *self* and *identity* as central to an understanding of interaction between and amongst individuals and groups of individuals. Stets and Cast (2007:522) and their relatively recent work on 'resources and identity verification' claim that "self-verification provides an emotional anchor that leaves one less vulnerable when encountering life's events". The narratives in this study reveal that 'traditional' or 'home food', becomes

one powerful emotional anchor that the Sierra Leone migrants use to assert and feel a sense of self and familiarity, when encountering the vulnerabilities and uncertainties of a foreign host society. Stets and Cast (2007:522) go on to say that *knowing who one is* and having that 'verified' in interaction with others affords one some sense of ease because "one's beliefs about oneself have been proven to be reliable and trustworthy". Such reliability and trustworthiness, this study seeks to show, is facilitated by 'home food'.

According to identity theory, an identity is the set of meanings that persons accrete and attach to themselves as a member of a group (see Burke 2004). It is through this (collective) identity that people can be categorised and '*labeled*' as belonging to a group. Deaux (2001) argued that social identities assume some commonality with others; as a result, our social identities are grounded in our perceptions of social group membership. To the participants in the study, home food is a vehicle for solidarity and social cohesion within the transnational community they had constructed.

While it is assumed that migrants from different African countries will have a strong attachment to what is traditional or 'home food' to them, this study limits its focus to a sample community of Sierra Leonean migrants. This is simply because the premised assumption (for the study) is that Sierra Leoneans are attached to certain food types and kinds of food preparation. Also, unlike countries such as Zimbabwe and Botswana, Sierra Leone is relatively far from

South Africa, which makes visiting home more difficult for this category of migrants and this study's participants. Considering that many in this category of migrants belong to the informal sector of so called unskilled labour, travel home is prohibitive because of the exorbitantly high costs involved.

Scholars such as Philip and Ho (2010), through their work with migrant women in New Zealand, have shown that, in satisfying their longing for home, migrants generally attempt to 'bring home' artefacts that remind them of their home and culture. Their own studies reveal that migrants often gathered together on culturally significant days, eating 'home food', and through such enactments, attempt to re-territorialise their space. Even though such acts do not, literally bring 'home' to the migrants, the work of Phillip and Ho (2012), as well as the narratives presented here reveal that *such* food artefacts and enactments *and* the social events around food and food sharing, work to evoke powerful memories of home. Through re-territorializing their space in this fashion, the migrants can be seen as attempting to re-create and strengthen their assertion of identities (*who they feel they are*) within the host society. 'Home' is thus evoked through 'indigenous' or 'home food'. It reminds the migrants 'of whom they are' (Counihan and Van Esterik 1997). As the paper shows, the Sierra Leone migrants, are in turn, using food, then, as a way of reaffirming their 'home cultures' and identity.

#### **A Note on Methodological and Theoretical Framework**

All interviews were conducted in an informal setting using fluid unstructured and semi-structured interview questions. Interview questions were designed to be open-ended for the purpose of allowing informants to express themselves fully and not to be restricted in any way. In-depth interviews yielded '*thick*' descriptive narratives, which was further enhanced by participant observation.

The study worked from a qualitative perspective (see Denzin and Lincoln 2000) and employed two non-probability sampling strategies, snowball and purposive sampling. This sample population consisted of two women<sup>1</sup> and twenty-four men. They were aged between twenty five and fifty. Purposive sampling was utilised to

identity the first key informant. Further potential participants were identified through the use of snowball sampling technique and the initial participants were from the Sierra Leone Association.

Analysis of data was done using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is an approach that is useful in ethnographic work and is usually adopted when researchers deal with coding data (see Weston et al. 2001). Using this approach made it possible to thematically conceptualise the primary data that was collected. These were then coded to extract themes such as 'home food as an identity marker', 'collective identity' and 'identity (food) shock'. Social identity is the individual's self-concept derived from perceived membership of social groups (Hogg and Vaughan 2002). This study probed how the Sierra Leone migrants' identity was maintained and strengthened through accessing 'home food' by working through the theoretical prism of social identity theory. Social identity theory asserts that group membership creates self-categorisation and homogenization in ways that favor the in-group at the expense of the out-group (see Stets and Burke 2000). Social identity theory encompasses all necessary groups that a person may be part of. This may involve constructed 'ethnicity', religion, political affiliations and other kinds of vital shared relationships as demonstrated by many of the migrants in this study and the manner in which they referred to each other in strong kinship terms.

#### **'Home Food' as an Identity Marker (and possible) Boundary Marker**

The social identity theory reveals that identity is derived through group membership. This is because social identity is shared with others and provides a basis and platform for shared social action. Social identification also provides a lens through which people are seen as a group that shares the same characteristics. During interviews, informants said that 'home food' is part of who they are. In as much as it 'marks' *who they are*, this also suggests that it 'marks' *who they are not*, that is, the local South Africans.

Schopflin (2001:1) states that, "identities are anchored around a set of moral propositions that regulate values and behaviour". This suggests that people's identities are sustained by certain

values, which need to be normatively upheld. Such values are considered important for social cohesion as it forms part of what outsiders use to categorise people who are perceived as 'different' from themselves. Mintz and Du Bois (2002:109), argue that, "food serves both to solidify group membership and set groups apart". Food can thus be used to separate people, in as much as it can be used to solidify group membership. Societies thus strive for social cohesion through their normative values and beliefs. To maintain this, there are boundaries which are used 'to keep' identities distinct. Food habits differ from society to society, and certain foods and food preferences may well act as 'walls' or borders or taboos that can potentially segregate people. Schopflin (2001:2) argues that identity both *includes* and *excludes*. This process of *including* certain people and having particular expectations, suggests that each collective or society attempts to have 'exclusive' members. Such members are recognised by the manner in which they conduct themselves, which is acceptable to their societies. Consider the following narratives which reveal issues of experienced solidarity or unity.

*"When we are here [Association meetings] it is like we are at home, we eat our 'home food' and speak our language. At times we even sing and dance just like we do at home and no one calls us makwerekwere which is a nasty way of saying outsiders. This is our home for the four, five hours we spend together"* (Informant Toni).

*"When we are together we forget that we are in a foreign country because it is always just us Sierra Leoneans as you can see. Before you came to interview us, we only spoke Krio and we ate our food. Not that your presence has changed anything, but we are more considerate now and we try to speak English so you can hear us"* (Informant David).

*"I never used to be able to ask my Zulu friends to leave when I am about to eat, because I'm a kind person, but one day I offered my friends -two South Africans and one Sierra Leonean jollof rice and bitter leaf ... Haaa!!... Both my Zulu friends left before the soccer match that we were watching was over. I was offended at first, but not [if] it helps chase people away because I know they don't like my food"* (Informant Jack).

*"South Africans don't like our food, I don't know why, but even if they try to eat it they never*

*eat more than two spoons. But I understand they are not from my home country. They have their own food that they like. But it is nice to know that there's something that we can do alone [as Sierra Leoneans]. Most of our South African friends don't like our food and we always try to find a person from home to eat it with. In fact, whenever we [Sierra Leoneans] want to be alone at work, we eat 'home food' [smiles] we bring 'home food' for lunch and we [Sierra Leoneans] sit together and eat"* (Informant Ben).

Scholars such as Fieldhouse (1995), Lupton (1996) and Warde (1997) all writing over a decade ago, have argued that food consumption habits are not simply tied to biological needs, but serve to mark boundaries between social classes, geographical regions, nations and cultures. This is significant in the case of Sierra Leoneans. When they learned that some of their South African friends were not fond of their 'home food', and thought their food somewhat "repulsive", they used it to distance themselves from their friends. For Ben and Jack, eating such food created a wall between them and some of their non-Sierra Leonean acquaintances. Through time spent with them, it became clear that the Sierra Leonean community, upon arriving in South Africa, realized that their food habits were very different from those of South Africans. And even though they attempted to consume the host country food, they were 'shocked' by the type of foods that South Africans consider a delicacy. From what they shared, this feeling was reciprocated by the local South Africans regarding the migrants' home foods. From the above narratives one can begin to see that food can be used as a boundary that separates groups of people, and in this case it appears to, on some levels, separate South Africans from Sierra Leoneans. These narratives also speak to the migrants' unwillingness to compromise their food choice (and identity); rather, they chose to maintain their identity by continuing to prepare and eat their 'home food' despite the negative reactions they received from their local friends and acquaintances.

While there is evidence of using 'home food' as a boundary between migrants and the local people living in Durban, observations revealed that the boundary was not completely impermeable, but more porous in certain contexts. During fieldwork it emerged that participants of this study, as alluded to earlier, do have friends

outside the Sierra Leone Association, who are not from Sierra Leone. Even though some of these migrants were open about having South African friends, they confessed however, that they felt closer to people from other African countries, especially those from West Africa. This was also shared when informants were asked *who* they preferred eating and sharing their 'home food' with. Responses to this question ranged from *"no I only prefer eating with people from Sierra Leone"*, to *"I don't mind eating with other migrants, but I just can't eat with South Africans- especially those who do not like our food"*. Billy said that he has tried to eat with his South African friends, but because the food is different from what his friends are used to eating, they had negative comments about the food. He also stated that he prefers eating with fellow West African friends, since they are familiar with some of the food.

Narratives from interviews with Benson also revealed this;

*"I have many friends ... since I came here [South Africa] I have met so many different people. Some I have known for more than three years. I also have a lot of 'brothers' that I met here. They are very supportive and I always try to spend time with them because I gain a lot from spending time with them, they are all from West Africa. The other day we spent hours just talking about how we, West African men are so different from South African men ... people from home are like family, so they are my brothers and sisters and whoever is not from home is just a friend"*

*... "all makwerekweres or foreigners are my brothers, especially those from West Africa. I prefer being close to them than to South Africans... with them we are just the same, all makwerekweres."*

There are some Sierra Leonean men who are married to South African women. However, Moses shared that his wife does not enjoy eating his 'home food'. He also claimed that for him, this is not a *"big problem"* as he is able to prepare his 'home food' and enjoy it on his own. His responses suggested that, while he (Moses) preferred to eat with other migrants rather than with South Africans, he was able to maintain a good relationship with his South African wife even though she did not eat the food with him. Moses' wife's preference for South African food could be one of the reasons she was never present

in any of the Association meetings that the researchers attended. 'Home food' was served at all the meetings, which in itself was a massive draw card.

### Collective Identity

Belonging to a particular society shapes people's understanding of the world around them, and in a sense, shapes their understanding of their personal circumstances. This is the case for Sierra Leoneans, who because of their *distance from* and *longing for* home, collectively meet once a month (at their Association Meetings) to share both their experiences *and to share their 'home food'*. Their position as migrants gives them a collective identity which has shaped their worldview and encouraged them to use the limited resources they have in South Africa to re-enact their home lifestyle and so maintain their home identity. Through a kind of constructed collective 'awareness' of what they felt was lacking in the host country, these migrants are able to bring the 'spirit of home' to their host spaces. Despite being a minority in South Africa and more especially in Durban, the Sierra Leone community, through eating and sharing their 'home food' and speaking their native language during the Association meetings, are able to relive their memories of home and in some manner, to maintain their home identity.

Schopflin (2001:2) tells us that collective identity provides a sense of security for its members. This is done by making the world meaningful and a socially rewarding place. For Sierra Leoneans, this is made possible through their participation in the voluntary Sierra Leone Association which serves as a kind of home space (offering 'home food') and haven while in foreign land. The narratives and the observations during attendance at the meetings reveal that the Sierra Leone Association acts as a 'shield' which 'protects' (prevents?) the migrants from completely adapting to the South African way of doing things. It is during these meetings that these migrants are encouraged and given the platform to 'be who they are' and connect with their home identity and with each other

### Maintaining Home Identity through 'Home Food'

Like 'culture', which is learned and passed from generation to generation, food habits are

acquired from childhood. Early psychological research in socialisation, by scholars such as Fieldhouse (1995) and Warde (1997) pointed out that once food habits are acquired and established, they are likely to be long-lasting and resistant to change. Fieldhouse (1995) describes socialisation as the process by which culturally valued norms of behaviour are passed from generation to generation. Fieldhouse further asserted that because socialisation is a lifelong process, so called 'natural' functions such as eating, become socialised as the growing child is conditioned by customs and traditions. Food thus plays a key role in human socialisation, in developing an awareness of body and self, language acquisition, and personality development (Koc and Welsh 2002). During socialisation, individuals, especially children, internalise their culture's social controls, along with values and norms. This continues through adulthood and ones articulation of who they are as adults; in other words, their articulation of aspects of their identity. It is through the process of socialisation that people's identities are shaped and they begin to identify themselves through the lenses of their societies.

Deaux (2006) defines culture as the shared patterns of behaviours and interactions, cognitive constructs, and effective understanding that are learned through a process of socialisation. It is such behaviour that people adopt as they lead lives that are recognizable and acceptable by their cultures, and to an extent, their behaviours are guided by their community's norms and expectations. In some cases, as with Sierra Leoneans, when people migrate they wish to continue to live a lifestyle similar to that of their home countries. Having grown up in Sierra Leone and having lived there for many years, the participants of this study were confronted by circumstances that forced them to leave their familiar home environments, and move to the unfamiliar. This appears to have resulted in the migrants attempting re-establishing themselves in the receiving country. Even though this was to an extent possible (many migrants had found some form of employment and had relatively stable living arrangements, and some had even found partners) their narratives reveal that maintaining their home identity was challenging. For the majority of the migrants, 'home food' was and still is the main 'tool' with which they have been able to main-

tain and articulate their sense of self and identity.

The first few days in foreign land are the "loneliest, darkest, worst" (comment offered by participants Edward and Jack) days for many migrants. During these days, migrants may not have made friends or found fellow migrants from their home countries. In cases such as this, migrants look for artefacts that can help them connect and remind them of home. These artefacts play an important role in helping migrants to maintain their identity as they form part of 'who they are'. Ben is one of the informants who echoed this; he 'found' Moses a week after arriving in Durban. Ben told us that on the second day of his arrival he visited a Nigerian restaurant, which he recognized as being owned by a West African by 'the table cloth that were used on tables'.

*"...at that restaurant they used real fabric as their tablecloths, not the cheap kind that you have here, pity it is closed and I can't take you there so you can see it. I trusted their food because of the tablecloth ... it sounds silly I know, but I had been missing home so much that I needed something that was going to help me remember what home looked and felt like. A day in South Africa felt like a month since I did not know anyone. When I saw that place [restaurant] and I touched the tablecloth, it was like I was at home, like I was in the sitting room at home or something. When they served me cassava it was like I was in heaven. I still don't know why it felt like that because I had eaten cassava all my life, but I had never felt like that ... I just felt at peace like I was myself, again" (Informant Ben).*

*"I left everyone at home and I came here alone. It was hard at first. Being alone, not knowing anyone. I needed something that would connect me with home. I remember seeing a young boy selling home-made ginger beer. I wasn't thirsty, but bought it because it reminded me of home; it reminded me of my last meal at home where brother and I drank two litres of ginger beer in 30 minutes" (Informant Johan).*

Ben told me that on that day he ordered cassava and rice even though it did not taste like what he would usually have at home, he was happy to see something that he was familiar with, the food he ate and the material that was used as tablecloth. Ben and Johan are not the only migrants who found 'comfort' in 'home

food'. Moses said that a few days after he arrived in South Africa he came across a woman who was selling 'bitter leaf' or cassava on the streets. He bought a packet and cooked it the same day in his flat.

*"I remember a few days after arriving here, [South Africa] I decided to walk around and see some of the places around here and I walked past Grey Street. I did not see anything familiar; everything about South Africa was different from home. I started seeing people selling all sorts of things that ranged from leafy vegetables to bags and sweets. I heard one woman who kept shouting, 'cassava, bitter, cassava, bitter, and cassava, bitter' I went to her asked if it was cassava leaves and she nodded her head. And, without hesitation I bought bitter leaf. I can't remember how much it was, but I could only afford one pack. I could not wait to prepare it" (Informant Moses).*

Visiting restaurants and seeing 'home food' ingredients being sold on the streets, was in a sense, profoundly comforting for the migrants. For the first time in South Africa they had something that they could identify with that evoked wonderful memories and which was instrumental in maintaining who they felt they were, Sierra Leoneans.

Maintaining a particular identity in a foreign land is not without difficulty as often there may not be many people from the same country living in the host country. Identity is linked to family relationships and to home spaces. To maintain their identity, people often need to use elements that are associated with a certain group of people. Food, clothing, language and music are often seen as the 'transmitters' of culture and are the main artefacts that one is exposed to from an early age. Migrants attempt to maintain these *cultural transmitters* as they are a vital part of who they are. This is seen when some Sierra Leoneans prefer to wear their cultural clothes, speak their home language and eat their 'home food' while in South Africa. Billy said that he does this so as to maintain his Sierra Leonean identity and Max said "even though I'm in South Africa I still do things like I was, home because it is how I was raised". From Billy and Max's interviews, one can deduce that there is a strong need to maintain identity (for the Sierra Leoneans) through what one possesses and does.

### Identity (food) Shock

As mentioned, most food habits are acquired from an early age. Prior to arriving in South Africa, Sierra Leoneans identified with most of the foods that they ate in their homeland. While some of the Sierra Leonean food is accessible in South Africa<sup>2</sup>, South Africans prefer to eat their own food, and food that they are accustomed to, as Moses pointed out:

*"My wife sometimes eats our food [Sierra Leonean 'home food'] but she prefers her own [South African food]. I don't mind that because it is part of who she is, she's a South African and that's why she prefers her own food. But I love my 'home food' and I prefer it over hers, and she knows that and she is fine with it".*

'Culture shock' is one of the challenges that migrants face upon arriving in host countries (see AL-Ali and Koser 2000). Seeing people behaving and leading a different lifestyle from their own may lead to anxiety for some migrants. Seeing people eating and enjoying food that is different from that which migrants are used to may evoke 'shock', especially if it is the kind of food that migrants "*cannot bear eating*". 'Culture', (the notoriously elusive and difficult to define notion in anthropological discourse), is what people use to identify themselves in popular and personal terms. Koc and Welsh (2002) remind us that culture is not static; it preserves traditions, but also houses 'mechanisms' for dynamic fluidity and change. Food habits are part of this dynamic process, in as much as they are strongly re-articulated; they may also change from time and time. For migrants this change may not be 'voluntary', rather, it could be due to lack of access to certain 'home food' ingredients. Having being taught certain beliefs and norms, people end up fulfilling (their) society expectations. This becomes problematic when migrants move from one country to the next as some of the practices they witness in host countries may be foreign to them. Mary's account of her 'home food' eating in South Africa shows her eating preferences. Her narrative on chewing and swallowing meat bones reveal this.

*"You know I don't know why, but West Africans have this tendency of chewing and swallowing bones, especially chicken bones. I used to think it is a Sierra Leonean thing, but even people from Cameroon and Kenya do it. I think its part of who they are and we are. I know some*

*say they rather not have any meat just as long as they eat bones. [Laughs and continues] you know the other day I was told I'm not an African just because I don't chew bones. There is a lot that people associate with being an African and a Sierra Leonean for that matter. I still think it is awkward to do that especially when South Africans are around. But I do it when I am home just because I'm around my people and they also do it ... and besides even back at home [Sierra Leone] my family does it"* (Informant Mary).

Mary was not the only informant to talk about chewing and swallowing bones. Lovemore told us that South Africans are the only people, that he knows of that do not swallow bones. His South African friends think he is very strange as he swallows bones. He prefers eating alone and away from South Africans as this is the only way he is able to fully enjoy his food and not be judged for his eating habits.

*"You should have seen the look on my friends' faces when they first saw me chewing and swallowing bones. It was as if I had killed a cat with my bare hands. They looked at me like I was strange or I was mad or something. I really did not understand. So I decided to ask them and one of them asked if we had cattle at home. I seriously did not see the link. What does me eating and leaving my plate clean [with no food or bones] have to do with cattle? Why did whatever that was troubling them make me seem crazy to them? My friend later explained that he has never seen anyone chewing and swallowing bones. I still did not understand why they looked at me in that way and why they asked if we owned cattle. When I asked him he said he thought that maybe we never had any meat at home. He thought I only started eating meat here ... How stupid. But I understand, South Africans don't know how nutritious bones are ... to avoid being judged, I eat alone now"* (Informant Lovemore).

Food shock can be seen as a result of not being able to identify with some of the food (or eating of the food) in host countries. Fomunyan's (2011) study of the Cameroonians in Durban argues that the participants were in most cases ethnocentric in their understanding of the host countries' food preferences. Ethnocentrism describes that one's own patterns of behaviour are preferable to those of all other cultures. Different cultures have developed preferences

for certain kinds of food and negative attitudes toward others. Sierra Leoneans appeared ethnocentric when it came to food habits, when they could not relate or identify with the rice that is considered to be of good quality by South Africans and which they referred to it as the 'thing'. Even their facial expressions showed intense disapproval of simple foods such as the South African rice; to them it did not deserve to be considered as 'food'. They thought it the wrong texture and taste.

All research informants shared that they experienced some level of 'culture shock' when they first arrived in South Africa. The shock manifested in different ways and at different stages of their (attempted) adaptation to the South African lifestyle. The majority of participants indicated that it was through South African food that they mostly felt at distance from their homes, as South African food was experienced as 'very different'. The South African parboiled rice was and still is the main food that Sierra Leoneans are not able to relate to in South Africa, and for the majority of these migrants it is still not part of their grocery shopping list. The following was recorded during interviews:

*"I was lucky to find that restaurant just after I arrived in Durban. I had seen some of the food stuff and rice that was sold in some shops. It did not look inviting. In fact, I did not understand how some people could be eating that big rice and tinned fish curry"* (Informant Ben).

*"I love rice and I prefer it over everything else, but not your (South African) rice. How do you South Africans eat Aunt Caroline Rice? I tried eating that thing but it was so big I choked while eating it. I even tried over chewing it, but I still could not swallow it. And, that thing takes long to cook"* (Informant Johan).

*"I rather not eat if I'm served South African rice. It is not filling and it is big and tasteless. I prefer our Sierra Leonean rice; it is more nutritious than Aunt Caroline Rice brand. There's no way I can eat that thing, I'm a Sierra Leonean man, and at home men eat real food"* (Informant Goodman).

Rice is one of the staple foods for Sierra Leoneans. Most informants stated that in Sierra Leone 'you haven't eaten if you haven't had rice'. From this one can infer that migrants long for (their) rice, and that eating and thinking about rice evokes strong memories of home. However, the above narratives indicate that this

fondness for rice does not apply *to any kind of rice*, but the *kind of rice that is considered Sierra Leonean*. The difference between the rice that is widely available in South Africa and that which Sierra Leoneans grew up eating, challenges these migrants' food preferences. For these migrants, rice is not just part of their main food; it is part of their culture and identity. Because it is their staple food, they cannot easily replace it as they feel they would be "*doing away with their home identity*". Responses from interviews show that participants such as Goodman, like the majority of other Sierra Leoneans, do not identify with the "'big', 'tasteless', 'not filling thing' [parboiled rice] that South Africans enjoy".

### CONCLUSION

Even when they relocate, migrants prefer to maintain their home identities, as it is part of 'who they are'. The home identity 'carries' and holds the memories of experiences from their home countries even as they inhabit the spaces of the host country. Since (re)socialisation is an on-going process, which forms part of people's cultures and identities, it also influences their articulation of the world at large. As a result, when people migrate to different countries, they are confronted with the challenge of maintaining their sense of 'self', who they believe and feel they are, *their identities*. Eating 'home food' is one of the means by which the Sierra Leone migrants maintain and articulate their identities. Even though accessing 'home food' is not without difficulty, the narratives in this article have shown that migrants long for 'home food'. 'Home food' plays a highly significant role in connecting migrants with their home countries and in psychologically narrowing and contracting the distance between home and host countries, and allows the migrants to maintain and sustain their identity in receiving countries.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> By 'home food' one means that type of food or food prepared in a particular way that the Sierra Leoneans would normally consume in their homeland.

<sup>2</sup> Migration in many instances is a gendered phenomenon. In the instance of the Sierra Leone community, there was a greater density of males, as opposed to females who had migrated to Durban, South Africa. This in turn is reflected in the sample community of participants the study was able to gain entry to. Additionally, due to the

limited number of Sierra Leoneans living in Durban, the study did not specify or limit the ideal informants' gender or occupation.

<sup>3</sup> Vegetables such as cassava, bitter and potato leaves are amongst some of the vegetables that are available South Africa

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