

Transnationalised Memories among Migrants: How 'Indigenous' Food can Bring Home Closer

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ABSTRACT Memories, as emotional artefacts of what has transpired, are vital as they allow migrants to connect to their past. Anthropological perspectives on memory explain memory through constructionist and interpretivist lenses, and point out that there is an inextricable link between 'memory' and 'place'. In this context, 'place' is the home space of the migrant. This paper argues that memories of 'home' are evoked through 'indigenous' or 'home food'. Even though the act of eating does not, literally bring 'home' to migrants, as artefacts and (social) events associated with 'home', they however, evoke powerful memories of home. This paper adopts an ethnographic approach and qualitatively investigates the different food-related memories that Sierra Leone migrants have, which assists them to stay connected to their home and cultural identity while in South Africa. It discusses issues pertaining to sensory memories and emotions around food. The paper reveals through individual interviews and focus group responses, that preparing and eating 'home food' acts as a form of re-territorialising, and show that the migrants are able to re-experience their memories and feel, the warmth of their sending country through 'home food'. The responses reveal that 'home food' is one of the main artefacts by which migrants are able to be emotionally transported back home.

INTRODUCTION

American scholars and anthropologists Hoelscher and Alderman (2004: 349) refer to particular understandings of memory, and refer to "the continually unfolding nature of memory", and of memory as being, often both, particular and universal. Perhaps most critically, they speak of the *inextricable link between memory and place* and see memory as being 'performed'. In the context of this paper, this performance is understood as occurring through the act of preparing and eating of 'home food'¹. The paper argues that the act of eating and sharing food is a powerful means of creating memories (see McGindiss 2005). Such memories are in turn evoked whenever people see and taste certain foods. These experiences serve as reminders of the important events that people were part of and even of (other) people with whom the food was shared. Definitive aspects such as the distinctive taste, smell, and texture of food are in this sense evocative, bringing back memories, not just of eating the food itself, but also of 'place' and people (see MacDonald 2008). Scholars such as Fieldhouse (1995) and Holtzman (2006) view food as a powerful means of connecting with memories of place and the emotions associated with that space. Holtzman (2006) argues that memories can be the means of re-experiencing meaningful events with loved ones.

The Sierra Leoneans in this study have profound memories of their families and of the years they have spent in their home country. While memories of civil war and strife are understandably unpleasant, from what they shared, many of their other memories are deeply entangled with their sense of self and strong cultural identity. Such memories led to migrants choosing retaining or desiring to retain strong ties with their homeland. Sutton (2000) cited in Holtzman (2006:367) emphasises that "longing for home is evoked in diasporic individuals by the smells and tastes of a lost homeland."²

Memories are created through lived experiences. For migrants, memories are treasured possessions. When migrants relocate, regardless of the situational push and pull factors, they take with them memories of their home countries, childhoods, friends and families. Memories are closely related to learning as they involve storing of information over time (see Baron and Kalsher 2002). Having learned to behave in a certain way, having being socialised to certain cultural beliefs and having eaten certain foods in Sierra Leone, participants of this study have vivid memories relating to social gatherings and food. In reliving their memories in the host country (through hosting social gatherings and being part of migrant associations), migrants attempt to re-perform and enact powerful memories of home as they engage in activities that are

similar to those which formed part of their daily lives in Sierra Leone. Through consuming 'home food' in their new homes, they are able to re-experience the emotions that they experienced in their home countries. It is through these memories (as findings of this study suggest) that participants are able to cope with some of the challenges of being far from home.

Maintaining home identity is not easy when one relocates to a country that is characterized by a number of different so called 'ethnic' groups, each with its own rich and complex cultural traits. When people are far from those they can relate to, they tend to long for home and all that they consider familiar. In their attempt to satisfy their longing for home, migrants attempt to 'bring home' to the receiving countries. They do this through re-territorialising their space and 'bringing home' to their current living spaces. Emotions are linked to memories, and often favorable memories are expressed through joyful emotions. Thomson (2003:63) argues that, "memories 'story' themselves, becoming increasingly valued when they most affirming life experiences are in the past". Data gathered during this study indicates that in recreating their home atmosphere through preparing and sharing 'home food', migrants are able to emotionally connect to their families and friends whom they have not seen for a number of years.

Relocating and adapting to a new country has a number of implications for migrants. Migrants are confronted with financial, as well as psychological challenges as they have to reconstruct their lives in the receiving countries. They are also faced with the challenge of recreating their homes and even trying to acclimatise to the food that is eaten in the new countries. These examples are amongst many challenges that may 'distance' migrants even further from their home countries, making the process of adapting to the new environment even more difficult. Memories carry a large part of a migrant's history and identity. According to Thomson (2003:63) "memories... serve to sustain a positive identity". Thomson (2003), suggests that through memories, people can maintain *who they are*.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research paradigm and utilised an ethnographic approach.

Ethnography is widely accepted as the hallmark of qualitative inquiry in anthropology. This approach pays special attention to spending time with the participants in the study in an attempt to broker relationships. It is the rapport and relationship with the participants that is critical to the research process, allowing the distance between researcher and participant to be narrowed. Qualitative research methods are essential in social science studies in general, and arguably even more imperative within anthropological research, as they provide an in-depth analysis of the chosen social phenomenon with a focus on rich description and complex (subjective) meanings (see Sarantakos 2005).

Methodological tools such as semi-structured and unstructured interviews, focus groups and participant observation were used. Fieldwork took the form of house visits, attending communal meal sharing meetings and social events and visits to some of the restaurants that serve West African food.

The sampling methods that were used were purposive sampling (used to identify the first key informant/s) and snowball sampling (used to identify further participants). The Sierra Leoneans that formed part of this study were between the ages of twenty five and fifty. The sample size was twenty five. Data was analysed using the thematic analysis approach. As qualitative studies are interested in analysing the lived experiences of informants, the first step in analysing data was to identify patterns of experiences as they were transcribed in the fieldwork book. These patterns were coded which allowed for emergent themes to be identified. These themes are discussed through the narratives shared by the informants. Narrative analysis in turn views narratives as interpretive devices through which people represent themselves and their worlds, to themselves and to others.

Sensory Memories of 'Home Food'

Certain evocative food smells and appearances tend to transport people back to their childhood and to memories of families and family meals. Even when people do not remember the actual events, *they tend to remember the people* with whom the experience was shared. Food often steers the direction of emotions which often have deeply embedded social meanings. For Ben, (one of the participants in the study) 'home food'

evokes joyful emotions associated with memories of his family and the people he has not seen in two years. He admitted that 'home food' is one of the artefacts which connect him to his home country. Lupton (1996:49) argued that, "the smell and taste or even thoughts of certain foods, if connected to happy or idealised childhood memories may elicit nostalgia to the extent that they shape preferences for food in adult life". More recent studies working in anthropology of food (see Mintz and Du Bois 2002) focus on food and identity. Traditional food items such as ginger beer, plantain and rice were quoted as 'favoured' food items by many informants, more especially for their link with their sense of self and identity. They declared that these foods evoked childhood memories and memories of the life that they had lived in Sierra Leone.

Warde (1997) asserts that there is a strong relationship between people's memories and the social and emotional aspects of food. For Paul³, the smell of 'ginger beer' (or 'ginger' as it is called in Sierra Leone) takes him back to when he was twelve, and when he used to 'choke' each time he drank it.

"Drinking this [pointing to his glass of ginger on the table] reminds me of the time when I was young and my friends would make fun of me because I coughed every time I drank ginger. Thing is, I could not avoid it. I had to drink it because it is what we drink at home. I sneezed until I was fifteen or something, but I just could not stop drinking it. What's worse is that even when I thought of ginger I would sneeze [he coincidentally sneezes and laughs then continues]...see I just sneezed".

Cyril shared that for many people, drinking ginger was not easy; they never finished a glass without sneezing and coughing at least three times. He recalls this by saying,

"Drinking ginger was such a mission [difficult] for some people especially for girls. I can't remember where we were, but it was a party for one of my childhood friends and there was a lot of ginger...you should have seen how some of the girls were drinking it. It was girls who took long to get used to drinking ginger. But by the time we reached the age of fifteen we all could easily drink it".

"Despite its acquired taste, I love ginger, but I prefer the one I make at home- not what you [pointing to me: 'South Africans'] buy in shops. The one I make is fresh and healthy be-

cause it doesn't have any preservatives in it, it is just ginger and a bit of sugar. I make it the way my late mother used to make it at home. I never liked ginger when I was young, but my mother would remind me how it is good for the human body so I got used to drinking it after my meals especially after eating greasy food. It is really good and affordable. Making and drinking it reminds me of my mother who believed that ginger was a cure for all sorts of illnesses." (Mary)

Cyril calls ginger beer the "all in one". It was both a beverage, as well as being medicinal as whenever a person was sick they would be told to drink at least a litre in a space of thirty minutes. Mary is also one of many informants who maintained that ginger and the ginger beer drink evoked powerful memories of home for her. For Cyril, ginger beer evokes more than strong family memories, even evoking memory of events that occurred when he was young and had hurt himself. He believes that it is medicinal and shared that whenever he had an upset stomach, he would make himself a strong ginger beer.

While ginger beer is considered an important part of the Sierra Leonean meals, it is not the only food item that evokes memories for these migrants. Scarce food items (in South Africa that is) such as *egusi* soup, also emotionally 'transports' migrants to their home countries. Wilson and Apollo confided that their most memorable childhood memories include those where they had *egusi* soup as part of their meals. Even though they both admitted that they did not know how to prepare it, they were able to recognise the smell and taste of *egusi* soup whenever they visited an 'ethnic' restaurant, or visiting friends.

"I cannot remember the last time I had some [egusi soup] at home [Sierra Leone] but I remember that I was home and my younger sister made it, she always made it for us [laughs and shakes his head]. That day she kept chasing me away as she was preparing it, but I did not want to leave the kitchen... I begged her to allow me to keep her company ... she prepared it, within an hour we were sitting down and eating it". (Wilson)

"I use to really like egusi back at home, my sister knew that she had to make a lot especially if it was Friday and I was going to be home the whole weekend. You know I never ate bread like all the others; I would have fu fu and egusi

the whole weekend. My sisters even called me egusi, she would be like 'Egusi we are having Edward today' instead of saying 'Edward we are having egusi today'. (Edward)

Moses is the only informant that declares that he cooks and eats *egusi* at least two times a month. He says that it evokes many 'comforting' memories of Sierra Leone and his late father who like, him, loved *egusi*. For Moses, 'egusi' is an extremely powerful link to his father. Moses was visibly emotional in sharing this.

Cyril shares that rice is one of the foods which mostly remind them of their home country. Toni said that food is one of the artefacts that constantly remind him of *both* home and of the fact that he is a migrant. He sees this as a reminder that he has to "work hard and save as much money as possible" so he can send remittances home on a monthly basis.

"I don't know if you have ever seen, or even smelt our rice, it is as white as the snow and when cooked well it is soft, thin and long. At home my cousins used to say I am a girl because I like the softness of the rice. I still prepare [prefer] it over fu fu and samp. Its softness is enough to make you feel like you are home ... the best part is that I use my hand to eat it [closes his eyes and opens them as he feels his hands] each time we have our rice during the Association meetings I go crazy and dish up as much as I can, I love plain white rice".

"I know some people prefer eating jollof rice because they don't need stew on the side, but I prefer plain rice. It reminds me of the worst times when all we had at home was rice. My sister would make rice and we would all use our hands to eat it, sharing a bowl. We were still young and my older brother had recently died. I remember it like it happened yesterday, I still feel sad when I think about it, but it brought us together as a family. We all gathered and shared the little that we had". (Toni)

The above narratives illustrate the memories that both Toni and Cyril have of rice. It is however, remembering much more than just rice. For them, the whiteness and long thin grains are enough to emotionally transport them back to Sierra Leone. Having spent an average of 22 years in Sierra Leone, both these informants had acquired special tastes for their home rice, a taste that could not be replaced by the South African parboiled rice. These migrants maintained that the memories they have of eating and sharing

food is what makes them long for home and for the people (left) back home. It also, paradoxically served to satisfy their longing for home.

Memories of Mother and (Home) Food

'Mother memories' or memories of mother, are associated with love and care. Mary recalls that *cooking like her mother* reminds her of the wonderful moments that they spent together in Sierra Leone, and "in moments like that" she "can feel her (late) mother's presence" in her kitchen when she "cooks her home food".

"At times I forget to put in some ingredients or I forget to rinse meat with vinegar and I can literally hear my mother reminding me how it should always be done. [Pauses for a few seconds, looks up to the sky and wipes her eyes] I know she's not there, but cooking 'home food' somehow brings us together. It reminds me of our precious moments at home ... mum is here with me, she helps me cook the best meals every day".

Mary shares that she had a strong relationship with her mother, even though "she has ceased to be", but Mary says she still feels her presence when preparing meals. Mary claims that, at times she prepares food in memory of her mother. It is meals such as *egusi* soup that most reminds her of the beautiful times she shared with her mother. Meals such as *okra* and *egusi* are mostly associated with 'motherly' memories as the majority of informants claimed that their "mothers cooked these meals the best".

According to Lupton (1996: 37), "one major emotion that is constantly linked with food is that of love, particularly maternal love." People learn tastes and tend to like what they are used to, often expressing strong preferences for their own mothers' cooking (Warde 1997). Even though the works of Lupton (1996) and Warde (1997) are relatively old, the material and arguments they presented are still very relevant, especially as data collected in this study shows. Motherly love is often associated with the comforting feeling of home, and migrants tend to prefer their mothers cooking. This is true for the majority of informants as they feel that their mothers are the people who cooked their 'home food', the best.

"I've tasted okra here, but it was not as good as my mother's. I think she had a secret ingredient. She always chased us out when she was cooking so I had never learned to cook it. Even

my sister is not as good as her. Pity she is now late. When I see okra I see her. I have not yet eaten egusi here in fact most of us [Sierra Leoneans] have not eaten it, but when I go home I will ask my sister to cook it for me, like my mother used to" (Enock)

"I am still to find a person who cooks egusi as good as my mother. My sisters cook it nicely, but of course it is never going to be as good as my mother's ... she cooked so well that even if I came home full I would still want her food. That's how good she was" (Leon)

"I cannot wait till next year so I can go home and be with my mother. I miss her, her smile and how she always knows when I am sad and I miss her cooking ... it is one of the reasons I always miss home". (Goodman)

These narratives express the important relationship that informants have with their mothers (who are at home, in the sending country). While some informants have lost their parents, particular foods 'keep the loved ones alive'. In this way, their families are still very much 'alive' in the host country, most especially in the reiterative act of cooking and eating their 'home food'.

Memories of Routine (Ritual) Activities

Eating food can be considered both a necessity and a routine. Routines are activities that are done in a repetitive or reiterative manner. Catherine Bell, in the context of religion (1992) defines a ritual as a condition or sets of activities that are characterized by the presence of rituals and worship. Spagnola and Fiese (2007) argue that rituals are distinct and unique to particular families, reflecting family identity, culture, and shared values as shared by individuals in that particular religious community or 'congregation'. But much of this is true in non-religious (so called secular) contexts as well.

The migrants in the sample community of the study all belonged to a migrant association known as the Sierra Leone Association (referred to simply as the Association by the migrants). Eating 'home food' during the monthly Migrant Association's meetings is seen as a form of 'routine' and is in a sense, a ritualised activity. Migrants are accustomed to the routine of eating particular foods, prepared in a particular way, and eaten, sometimes, *in a particular manner*. They continued to perform this even in the receiving country as they believe "*it is the right way of*

doing things". While David has never asked his father (back home) why Sierra Leoneans follow certain routines (in the context of food), he recalls his father and uncles sharing stories of how things were done when they (father and uncles) were young. David believes that they were taught these routines "*to keep the spirit of their forefathers alive"*.

From observations of the Association's meetings, it was noted that food was served at more or less the same time. Even though the food was eaten from different plates and in different venues for each meeting (meetings were hosted by different Association members and each member had different plates and eating utensils), there was a pattern in the way that it was eaten. All migrants used their hands to eat the food. The majority of the migrants preferred to drink ginger beer while eating, and only the language of Krio (native Sierra Leone language) was spoken during this time. Also, in all meetings, food was placed on a central communal table for each migrant to serve themselves or herself.

Sierra Leoneans revealed that in their home country they participated in different food-related routines and rituals. Spagnola and Fiese (2007:289) state that "repeated family gatherings offer the opportunity to create strong emotional bonds and an investment in maintaining connections into the future". The respondents Lince and Lovemore reported that in their home country, they were taught to eat in a particular fashion. Even though the Association has members who come from different parts of Sierra Leone, Lince said that he was happy to see that they all preferred to eat in "*the traditional Sierra Leonean way*". It can thus be said that these migrants have unconsciously ritualized their eating patterns. It is these (repeated) Association gatherings that have fostered strong emotional bonds amongst these migrants as well.

As with most rituals, the act of eating unites those who partake in it. When migrants participate in their 'home food' rituals, they expect a certain fulfilment. Such fulfilment ranges from *evoking* memories of home, to *fulfilling* their longing for home, as well as remembering their family member and friends⁴. Rituals themselves most often include food. 'Ritual food' usually consists of food that is not eaten in the everyday context or that is not widely available. Such food may be considered traditional and 'authentic'. Like ritual food, which is normally prepared in a specific

manner, Sierra Leonean 'home food' is not easily accessible. Sierra Leonean 'home food' is prepared in a manner that they, as a collective group (can) appreciate. With Zulu ritual food (such as tripe and dumplings which can be prepared in many different ways), the Zulus use a recipe that differentiates them (and their food) from the other South African groups, who eat the same type of food as they do. The same applies to the Sierra Leoneans who share some food ingredients with other nationalities from Africa, especially West Africa. Sierra Leoneans as the informant Johan pointed out, "*have their own way of preparing their meals*", a way that further differentiates them from other West Africans.

Issues relating to 'home' are thus inextricably linked with people's memories and sense of belonging. 'Home' of course is a complex term as it can no longer be merely spatially associated with a certain place or country due to the multiple processes of globalisation. Scholars such as Gupta and Ferguson (2002) argue that understanding and defining the term 'home' is difficult as one has to consider issues relating to place, space, feelings and practices. Although there are of course complexities around conceptualising and writing about the notion of 'home' and the layered meanings it has accrued, in the context of this study, *home* and '*home food*' evoked palpable memories (for the participants) of spatial location that can be traced to the geographical place of home and Sierra Leone, and the families and memories there.

While some migrants were open about their first 'home food' experiences in South Africa, the informant Apollo was initially very reluctant to participate in focus group and individual interviews. After much probing he confessed that other researchers had interviewed him and that the last person who interviewed him questioned if he was a legal migrant. Despite his strong feelings against being interviewed, when he heard Moses talking about 'bitter leaf' (a traditional Sierra Leone food) he could not contain himself as 'home food' is a subject that proved to be important to him and it reminded him of his home country. The subject of 'home food' led to him 'softening' and become more trusting. He shared his experience by saying:

"The first time I ate 'home food' here in South Africa ... I was with a friend who has since returned to Sierra Leone. This person told me about the 'Corner' [Nigerian owned restaurant] and we went there. I think I had been here

[South Africa] for two or three weeks at that time. When we entered I saw a couple eating, they were sharing something that looked like jollof rice and I started drooling ... it reminded me of me and my friends at home, how we use to share our meals. I acted like a child seeing candy in a shop nagging its father. I was so excited that I kept asking the waitress when our order was coming. When our food finally came it, just like I use to back home with my family and friends".

Apollo kept emphasizing that 'home food' made him feel as though he was *really at home*. He also added that, at the 'Corner Restaurant'⁵ he was served by a Nigerian woman who was tall like his sister'. The waitress evoked memories and feelings of his family and communal eating in his homeland, feelings that he had been longing for since he was missing his family. Being around people who sat together, shared their meal from the same plate and bowl, and seeing and smelling 'home food' reminded him of home-momentarily fulfilling his longing for home.

As the above narratives show, 'home food' is one of the artefacts used by these migrants to satisfy their longing for home. Through their memories and imaginations they are able to minimize their distance from home. Gupta and Ferguson (2002) argue that remembered places have served as symbolic anchors of community for dispersed people. They further state that immigrants use 'memory of place' to construct their new lived world more imaginatively. In this case, places and memory play a major role in the manner that people perceive themselves. Through being socialized from an early age to eat certain foods and having eaten these specific 'home foods', in their home countries, migrants are able to relive their experiences and feel the presence of their families even though they are (spatially) far apart.

Paul illustrates this by saying:

"I eat my food ... each time I eat it I am reminded of my childhood. How we drank ginger beer and ate cassava. Eating 'home food' reminds me of all the good times we had, the parties, weddings and even funerals".

Memories of Learning to Prepare (Home) Food

Food preparation is an important part of people's cultures and identity. 'Proper eating' includes the kind of ingredient used, the manner of preparing it, the manner of serving it, and the

way of eating it (Fox 2005). Informants said that making ginger beer is the easiest thing they can do to remind them of their childhood memories and home. While all informants had a similar recipe of how to make this beverage, Paul's was especially interesting as he had been taught by his father. This was interesting as all other informants had been taught by their mothers and sisters. Below is Paul's story of how he learnt how to make ginger beer.

"Learning to make ginger beer was very difficult. Not because I kept getting it wrong, but father used to be a very serious person and he would tell you things just once. I had to learn to make ginger three times for me to master it. My father brought home a lot of ginger and asked me to make ginger beer and I had never made it before all I knew was that I needed sugar, water and ginger to make it as I had seen my mother and sisters making it. My father just said 'wash the ginger and beat it' so that's what I did. My father told me to add water and a bit of water and that's what I did. I poured him some and he had to spit it because it was too sweet. He did not tell me how much sugar to add, he just said add sugar".

Paul told us that after trying for the third time, his father approved of what he made. He feels that his father was not the best teacher, but this experience brought them closer. Even though his father is no longer alive, ginger beer reminds him of the moments he spent with him. He recalled that his father was *"very busy and hardly spent time at home"*. He treasures the days they spent together. Paul can no longer clearly remember other times that they spent together and the ginger beer story is one of the few he still poignantly remembers.

CONCLUSION

Through the rich narratives presented here we see that 'home food' is one of the main (traditional) 'artefacts' that migrants use to evoke memories of their home space and re-territorialise their host space. Through preparing and eating 'home food', migrants are able to re-experience the emotions associated with their sending country and family members. This paper has shown that 'home food' plays an important role in evoking powerful memories and in doing so 'transporting' the migrants to their home, and loved ones back home. The paper has also shown

that motherly love is associated with not only emotional fulfilment, with foods such as *okra*, but is capable of evoking memories of the wonderful times migrants spent with their mothers in their home country. Foods such as ginger beer, rice and *egusi* soup evoke tangible memories of their lives in their home country. Thus 'home food', triggers lived memories, and plays a significant role in connecting migrants to their country of origin as well articulating a sense of self and their cultural identity.

NOTES

1. By 'home food' it is meant that particular food (and food preparation) that the migrant would (traditionally) have eaten back home.
2. This study limits its focus to a sample community of Sierra Leonean migrants. This is simply because the premise 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 study's participants.
3. All names used are fictitious.
4. The same applies in the context of many Zulu homes in South Africa where there is a 'cleansing' or 'thanksgiving' ritual. The purpose for the Zulu, is to connect with family members who have passed on. This is done through sacrificing not only a goat or a cow, but time as well as all the members of the extended family gather together to do the ritual. Ancestor worship is common amongst the Zulu people and pan African people. Through the routine and ritual activities mentioned, it can be suggested that both the Zulus and the Sierra Leonean migrants used 'home food' to connect with their ancestors and to acknowledge their presence in their lives. Because ancestors are believed to be spirits; hence, not confined to a certain place, it can be suggested that these migrants are able to connect with them even in a foreign land.
5. This is the name of a restaurant in Point Road, Durban.

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