

The smoke lingers on

A grateful grandson recollects the special skills of a grand old fish processor in Ghana

The mid-1960s and early 1970s seem to be fading away fast, especially if one recollects experiences and the oral history of that period. It is against this background that this article is being written to highlight memories of fish processing in my childhood. Much reference will be made to my grandmother as she was the one I stayed with and from whom I learnt much of the processing techniques.

The period under consideration (1963-1973) saw the beginning of the destruction of the Keta township in Ghana, as a result of the construction of the Tema harbour. Keta used to be the hub of all fishing and fishing-related activities in the south-eastern part of Ghana. Its market was so popular that traders from Togo, Benin and Nigeria patronized it constantly until the sea flooded the road leading to it. One can not talk about fishing in Ghana without mentioning this town.

What is left of it today is a thin stretch of land between the sea and the lagoon, believed to be the largest in West Africa. Behind this lagoon is situated Agbozume, where my grandmother was born and had practiced her vocation. It will be misleading to say that Agbozume was a fishing village. The lagoon, the sea, the coconut plantations and nature's woodlands provided a rich economic diversity to this village.

Fish processing was a major economic activity of the women of the village at the time. During lean seasons, oil and cake processed from coconut (for animal feed), and mat weaving were the vocations of the women. Most of the fishmongers of this village carried fuel wood to the beaches to smoke the fish. Others with low capitals exchanged wood for fish that they

normally sent back for processing. Logoshie, my grandma, as her peers called her, rose up as a vendor of her mother's fish products to become a processor/wholesaler. A mother of seven, she managed to combine her household and social obligations to run this business until she died at the age of 78.

Fish smoking and fermentation were her specialty. These two traditional processing technologies were very important as involve only minor economic losses and maximizes the use of the resource. Very fresh fish was smoked and those that could not be smoked quickly were either dried or fermented. Smoked-fish buyers will first taste the product before purchasing, so it was in the interest of processors to use quality fresh fish.

Grandma had several fish-smoking points in almost all the fish-landing villages in the Keta district. She hired people to help when there was a bumper harvest; otherwise, the main tasks were performed by my mother and her sister. The fresh fish was purchased from fishermen who had family links with her. This relationship was important, as sometimes their fishing trips were sponsored by her. She also collected the fish and made payment after sales, especially during major seasons. The main species she processed were sardinella and anchovy.

Great skills

The fish was first washed in fresh water and laid out on coconut palms to remove some of its liquid content, after which it was smoked. Great skill was needed in smoking, since the liquid level in the fish before smoking, could determine the taste, while the different types of wood used for smoking imparted different tastes. For instance, the use of sugar cane



for smoking led to a very well finished end product.

The round traditional oven was the order of the day. Grandma smoked between 100 and 400 basins a week, depending on the season. Unless there was a glut, Grandma never sold her products on the beach, but would send them home for a second smoking. If the product could not be sold, periodic smoking was done to keep insects away.

Fermentation was done with bigger fishes, vava being the first choice, as it was an important flavouring ingredient for the Ewes in Ghana, Togo and Benin. Grandma had a unique way of fermenting her product. The fish was kept in a salt solution for three days and then sun-dried for two or three days. She then wrapped the fish in brown paper and buried it in the sand. The top of the sand was covered with thatch to prevent rain water from seeping down. This product was kept this way until the market recovered.

The chunk of Gandma's products were sold by her daughters—my mum sold the smoked fish, while my aunt handled the fermented product. My mum traveled from Dakpa, a village close to the Ghana-Togo border, where she lived and sold the wares. Denu and Dzodze markets were important for my aunt, as these places were patronized by traders from Togo and Benin. During lean seasons,

Grandma also sold some of the products to customers who came directly to the village to buy.

I found myself in this village at the early age of eight, as a result of the loss of my father. My mother could not cope with the economic consequences, as she was then weaning her third boy. So I was posted to join two other cousins living with Grandma at the village.

Social and economic responsibilities were organized along gender and age lines in all households. By the rules, as a growing boy, I was not expected to take part in many home chores, including fish smoking. Fortunately or unfortunately, my two cousins were much younger than I, so I virtually became solely responsible for all chores. One of them was to take care of the processed fish in Grandma's storage room. This involved stacking the fish into the smokers and heating them up from time to time. It was a painful task at the time, as I had little time to play with my peers.

Displeasure

Additionally, I had to vend some of the fish, if grandma needed money or realized that a portion was going bad. The sale was done in the village, to my displeasure, as my peers gave me all kinds of names and laughed at me — vending was, and remains, a female's job, irrespective of age. However, I got a satisfying thrill by

stealing some fish and sharing it with friends at school. This was done to spite those who called me to order during vending.

Although Grandma was illiterate and therefore organized her business empirically, she was very successful in making the venture grow. She had plenty of financial management skills and generally earned a lot to cover her fixed and variable costs. I never saw her broke. The walls of her storage room were the basis of her bookkeeping. A particular symbol stood for a customer and she could tell how much each one owed her by counting the strokes on the wall.

Before her death, Grandma managed to change her traditional mud house into a structure of sandcrete blocks. With that, the seasonal renovation of our thatch roof became a thing of the past. Unfortunately, it was a piece of the iron sheet used in the roofing that saw her untimely death. The piece was left in the sand by the artisans and she got pricked by it. The village fetish priest tried out certain sacrifices to save her, but the tetanus got her in the end.

Today, I have realized that Grandma's success story was a result of the fish species she utilized, the quality of processing, her perfect control of fresh-fish supplies, her access to markets and the technologies she applied.

In those days, entertainment was a family affair, with the impartation of knowledge through oral history topping the list. After the evening meals, we, the grandchildren, would gather around Grandma for her stories. That was how I learnt a lot about the fishery. Unfortunately, she is not alive or I would have loved to pose her some questions now. Among them would have been how she got her capital and the seasonal variations of her activities.

Although Grandma is gone, the 'smoke' lingers on as, in my work with TESCO, I try to improve the oven she used and introduced me to.

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First person

