

Social Status, Traditional Food Taboos and Food Security: A Study of Igbo Women in Imo State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to examine adherence to traditional food taboos by women in Imo State, and relate that to social status and food security. Data was collected from 72 women across the three agricultural zones of the State. It was found that age, income and education are some factors affecting adherence to these taboos. This is further evidence of the need to raise women education and income levels as well as providing them employment opportunities. About twenty-five (25) such taboos were identified. These include non-consumption of some crop and livestock products. It was found that these are important sources of calorie, protein, vitamins and minerals. They were also found to be commonly available and within the purchasing power of the women. Prohibiting women from consuming those products denied the potential contribution of those items to women food security denied, apparently for no nutritional reasons. However, enforcement of these taboos is by the women themselves. It is suggested that extension, Nutritionists and dieticians embark on subtle campaigns to reverse these.

INTRODUCTION

Food insecurity is a problem in many households in the developing world including Nigeria (Idachaba, 1991). Many poor households lack access to food in the right quantities and qualities at all times and therefore are described as food insecure (Ajero *et al*, 2002; FAO, 1999; 2001; Ekumankama 2000, World Bank, 1986;).

Women may be particularly affected due to social and cultural factors. Some of these social factors include family size, knowledge, time and assets (ACC/SCN, 1991). Cultural factors include customs, superstitious beliefs and taboos, which may lead to inadequate nutrition (Griesel and Richter, 1987). Households with income earning and educated women are more likely to be food secure (Kennedy and Haddad, 1992). Although females are mostly responsible for preparing the family and household menu, preference may be giving to males at consumption. Among the Igbo, including those of Imo State, as for other ethnic groups in the developing world, some taboos may restrict the consumption of some food items (Nwajiuba, 2002).

In several cases, these food taboos are targeted at women. Various reasons may be culturally held for these taboos. However where food insecurity is a problem generally, there is further risk of worsening the situation if some items are tabooed (Pinstup-Anderson and Pandy – Corch, 1998).

However, it is accepted that culture is dynamic and the evolution of social status may affect the adherence to these traditional food taboos. Specifically, increased female education, formal

employment and income levels are some parameters indicative of rising social status (Haralambos and Heald, 1980; Nwajiuba 2004). However, how these affect adherence to traditional food taboos among women, as well as consequences for food security is unclarified. This paper seeks to do that.

Methodology

The study was conducted in Imo State. Imo State has 27 Local Government Areas and also comprises of three agricultural zones. These zones are Owerri, Okigwe and Orlu. There are also three urban areas – Owerri, Okigwe and Orlu.

The three urban areas were purposely selected. Another three rural areas – Ideato-North, Ikeduru and Onuimo L.G.A. were randomly selected. In each of these six L.G.A. a list of communities were drawn-up. For each L.G.A., one community was selected. Thus the study was conducted in three Urban Communities – Nekede (Owerri-West LGA), Ubahu (Okigwe L.G.A.), and Amaifeke (Orlu L.G.A.), and for the rural communities - Akokwa (Ideato-North L.G.A.), Avuvu (Ikeduru L.G.A.), and Umuduru (Onuimo L.G.A.) (Figure 1).

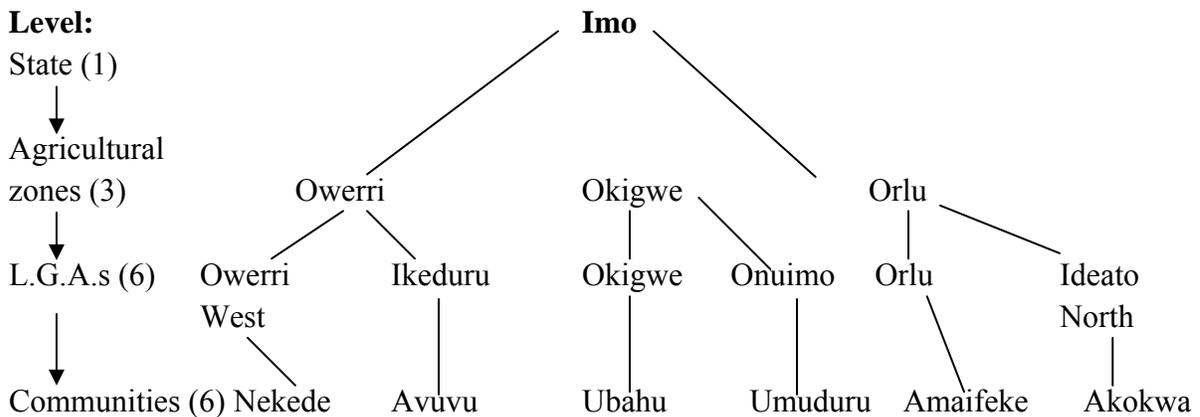


Fig 1: Selection of study locations

In each of the six (6) communities, three (3) educated and married; three (3) educated but single; three non-educated but single; three (3) non-educated but married women were purposely selected (Table 1). This gave twelve (12) women per community. This therefore gave a total sample size of 72 respondents.

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents, 2004 (n = 72)

	Married	Single	Total
Educated	18	18	36
Not-educated	18	18	36
Total	36	36	72

Interview schedules were prepared and used to solicit information on the subject matter. Data was subjected to descriptive statistics as well as regression analysis. The regression model sought to establish the socio-economic determinants of women's observance of food taboos. The regression model is implicitly stated as follows:

$$Y = f(X_1, X_2, X_3, X_4, X_5)$$

Where;

Y = Number of taboos observed by a women

X₁ = Age (years)

X₂ = Income level (naira)

X₃ = Marital status (dummy)

X₄ = Educational level (years)

X₅ = Husbands education level (years)

Results and Discussions

Forms and Locations of Food Taboos

About twenty-five (25) food taboos of women were identified. These comprise of crops and livestock food items. There are seven (7) crop taboos. These taboos are not common to all communities. That is, their existences vary from one community to the other (Table 2).

Table 2: Crop Taboos and their Location in Imo State, 2003

	Food taboos	Owerri Zone	Orlu Zone	Okigwe Zone	LGA	Communities
1	1 st and last fruits of every fruiting season	√	-	-	Ikeduru	Avuvu
2	Mushroom	√	-	-	Owerri Nekede West	
3	“Ukazi” (<i>Gnetum Africaum</i>)	√	√	-	Owerri West, Ideato-North	Nekede, Akokwa
4	“Una” (<i>Dioscorea dumentorum</i>)	√	-	√	Owerri West, Okigwe	Nekede, Okigwe
5	Every 1 st corn	√	-	-	Owerri Nekede West	
6	“Ugiri ” (<i>Irvirngia gabonensis</i>)	-	√	√	Okigwe, Ideato North	Okigwe, Akokwa
7	Avocado pear (<i>Persa Americana</i>)	-	-	√	Onuimo	Umuduru

Source: Field Survey, 2003

About 18 livestock taboos were identified. Some of the taboos are common to all the communities while others are specific to communities (Table 3).

Table 3: Livestock taboos by location in Imo State, 2003

	Food taboos	Owerri Zone	Orlu Zone	Okigwe Zone	LGA	Communities
1	Bat	√	–	–	Ikeduru, Owerri West	Avuvu, Nekede
2	Pork Meat	√	–	–		
3	Snakes (python)	√	√	√	Ikeduru, Owerri West, Okigwe, Onuimo, Ideato North	Avuvu, Nekede Ubahu, Umuduru, Akokwa
4	Gizzard	√	√	√	Owerri West, Okigwe	Nekede, Okigwe
5	Heart of every meat	√	–	–	Owerri West,	Nekede
6	Monkey	√	–	√	Okigwe, Ideato-North	Okigwe, Akokwa
7	Eagle meat	√	–	√	Ikeduru, Onuimo	Avuvu, Ubahu
8	Tortoise	√	√	√	Ikeduru, Ow. West, Okigwe, Onuimo, Ideato-North	Avuvu, Nekede Ubahu, Umuduru Akokwa
9	Grass cutter	√	–	–	Ikeduru	Avuvu
10	Fowl Anus	√	–	√	Ikeduru, Okigwe, Ideato North	Avuvu, Onuimo, Akokwa.
11	Snail	√	–	–	Ikeduru, Owerri West, Ideato	Avuvu, Nekede, Akokwa
12	Penis	√	–	√	Ikeduru, Okigwe	Avuvu, Ubahu
13	Kite	√	–	√	Owerri West, Okigwe	
14	Antelope	√	–	–	Owerri-West	Nekede
15	Female dog	√	–	–	Owerri-West	Nekede
16	Rabbit	√	–	√	Owerri - West/Okigwe	Nekede, Ubahu
17	Squirrel (“Uze”)	√	–	–	Owerri-West	Nekede
18	Egg	–	√	√	Okigwe and Ideato North	Ubahu, Akokwa

Source: Field Survey, 2003

We can however examine each of the explanatory factors although they explain only 10.33% of the changes in Y.

Determination of Adherence to food Taboo

It was hypothesized that a number of socio-economic factors, which are indicators of social status, may explain adherence to food taboo by women. Hence we have the regression model.

$$Y = f(X_1, X_2, X_3, X_4, X_5), \text{ as specified earlier.}$$

This was subjected to analysis by the ordinary least squares, using the **Statistical Package for Social Science (S.P.S.S)**. The estimated equation shows that:

$$Y = 1.3 + 0.64 X_1 + 2.9 X_2 - 1.20X_3 - 0.05 X_4 + 0.01 X_5$$

(23.71) (4.78) (1.54) (15.02) (3.63)

$$R^2 = 10.53\%$$

Note: t-ratios are in parentheses.

This result indicates that the coefficient of multiple determination (R^2) is only 10.55% implying that the explanatory variables (X_5) jointly explain only 10.53% of Y . This is rather low, and suggests that these chosen parameters of social status (age, income and education) are minor factors in relation to adherence by women to food taboos. In effect, women adhere to food taboo irrespective of social status, and are therefore influenced by other factors. The key other factor here is socio-cultural, whereby irrespective of social status, women adhere to these taboos because it is the norm or they have grown to accept them.

Age (X_1): This has a positive coefficient (plus or (+) sign) with a value of 0.64. This means that women adhere to more food taboos the older they are. That is, older women adhere to more food taboos. A unit in increase in age (X_1) will increase adherence to food taboo by 0.64. This variable (Age X_1) is also statistically significant at 5% with a T-value of 23.71.

Income (X_2): This has a negative (-) coefficient, implying that higher income women adhere to less number of taboos. This has a coefficient of 2.9, implying that a unit increase in income will decrease number of food taboo adhered to by 2.9. However with a T-value of 4.78, this is not statistically significant at 5%.

Marital Status (X_3): This is a negative (-) coefficient, and is also a dummy, where presence of husband is assigned (2) and no husband is assigned (1). The negative value therefore implies that women with husbands are inclined to observing less of these taboos than those without husbands, including single and unmarried women. However, this is a weak variable with a coefficient of just 1.20 and is statistically insignificant at 5% with a T-value of 15.02.

Educational level (X_4): This has a negative (-) coefficient implying that the higher the level of education of a women the less the number of taboo adhered to. This however has a coefficient of only 0.05, which is also statistically insignificant at 5% with a T-value of 15.02.

Husband's Educational Level (X₅): This is positively related to Y, suggesting that wives of more educated men adhere to more food taboos. However this has a coefficient of just 0.01, suggesting a near zero effect, which is also statistically insignificant at 5% with a T-value of 3.63.

Food Taboos and Food Security

About 37 (61%) of the women stated that have food at all times in adequate quality and quantity. That is, that they are food secured households. However 27 (45%) of the women observe these food taboos. This shows that the number of women who are food insecure (39%) is close to the number that observes food taboos (45%). The women were asked to state reasons why food insecurity exists. Their responses did not include food taboos. Their reasons include general food scarcity, poverty, high cost, seasonal factors, lack of processing and storage facilities etc (Table 4). We can therefore deduce that food taboos are not related to food insecurity. The women were further asked their reasons for adhering to food taboos. The reasons were predominately cultural and local beliefs.

Table 4: Reasons for Food Insecurity in Imo State, 2004 (n = 72)

Zone	Food Security	Poverty	High Cost	Seasonality of food	Lack of Processing & storage facilities	Land scarcity	Food taboos	Illiteracy	Yield
Owerri		5	1		2	4	1	1	1
Orlu	2	4	4	4					
Okigwe		6	3	3	1	1			2
Total	13	8	7	7	5	1	1	1	2/45

Source: Field survey, 2003.

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