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COMMENTARY

FOOD AND NUTRIENT LOSSES IN TRADITIONAL FOODS CONSUMED IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA CAN BE REDUCED BY EMBRACING APPROPRIATE HOME PROCESSING TECHNOLOGIES

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Achieving Sustainable Development Goal 2 - Zero Hunger by 2030 has elicited several responses locally and globally. Production and utilization of traditional foods is one strategy that is in use to alleviate food insecurity, hunger, and malnutrition. Many traditional foods had been neglected by researchers, thus leading to the loss of agro-biodiversity. There is a generational gap in knowledge and consumption of traditional foods, with the current young generation of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) having little or no knowledge of some traditional foods. Today, researchers are working to restore these foods and "re-introduce" some of them to consumers. The missing link in most of these research studies is preparation, cooking, preservation, and value addition (processing techniques). Whereas one may find it easier to access seeds or methods of production for traditional foods, the processing techniques are unavailable. This begs the question, "What do I do with the traditional food that I have procured?". Most of the knowledge on traditional foods processing is passed by word of mouth from one generation to another, that is Indigenous Technical Knowledge (ITK). Secondly, a majority of consumers are not accustomed to the use of published processing techniques. Thirdly, access to published techniques is still a challenge to many consumers.

Methods used for food processing can enhance or destroy the nutritive value of food. Investigations in food processing using ITK have shown that these methods have been modified over time. An example is the processing of African Leafy Vegetables (ALVs) whose agronomic, nutritional, and health benefits have been promoted since the 1990s. In the former years, ALVs would be steamed in a pot over low heat for hours. Value addition would then be done using milk, ghee, cream, groundnut, or simsim sauce. Preservation would be done by the addition of sour milk (fermentation). Such vegetables would be eaten for even up to 7 days. Today, the species of ALVs consumed has changed, and hence the processing methods. The bottom line should be the enhancement of the nutritive value and health benefits of the ALVs served on the plate. Another example of food processing that I have observed is cassava. As a traditional food, cassava was consumed largely during lean times in western Kenya and the coastal regions of Kenya. After peeling, cassava would be slightly dried, covered tightly and put in a warm dry place for fermentation. Scientific knowledge affirms the benefit of fermentation in cassava as to help break down the abundant cellulose and to release nutrients trapped in the cells. Today, the fermentation process of cassava is uncommon.

The changes in species of traditional foods in SSA, including cereals, nuts, roots, and tubers, may affect the methods of processing. Scientific studies, particularly

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empirical studies, need to focus not only on increased production but also on the home processing of these foods. Scientific knowledge and information regarding preparation, cooking, preservation, and value addition need to be readily available. This would enable us to gain more nutritionally and health-wise and help us to raise a generation that will not neglect traditional African foods.