

Research Article

Living Conditions of Sub-Saharan Immigrants in Belgium: A Socio-Economic Approach of Eating Habits

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Abstract: The objective of this study is to understand the socio-economic relationships in habits among sub-Saharan immigrants in Belgium. The interactions between the new living environment and pre-immigration habits were also a focus of the study. The quantitative survey was carried out in seven Belgian cities on a sample of 180 persons. The qualitative part consisted of interviews with twelve sub-Saharan immigrants. The results showed that the main factors explaining the consumption of African food are: the presence of a spouse in the household, children's interest in African products, household size and the availability (supply) of products from the country of origin. Moreover, it appears that the length of stay on Belgian territory does not significantly affect the consumption of African products. Relationships to African food are variously perceived and expressed by sub-Saharan Africans. Basically, their consumption seems to respond to a need to reinvent the socio-emotional microcosm necessary to preserve sacred links with the land of origin. However, in this new and constraining environment, the economic and financial condition of these immigrants does not represent a major factor in the decision-making process for purchasing exotic products.

Key words: Sub-Saharan immigrants, eating habits, African products, consumption, Belgium.

Introduction

Consumption, in general, is an essential function of regulating market balances. It can take several forms depending on the needs expressed by consumers. Among them, immigrants stand out from other food applicants by the particularity of their consumption. Indeed, according to **Trémolières (1984)**, eating is not a logical act determined on the basis of food rules, but a complex social act that is determined on the basis of satisfaction within a possible defined by an income. This satisfaction stems from the alleviation of hunger, but also from the consumption of symbols, social signs, communication with the Mother earth and human tradition. Therefore, food has a triple meaning: nutritional, social and cultural.

Moreover, according to **Baguette (1992)**, Belgium is no exception to this observation since he argues that the demographic characteristics of its population are undergoing profound changes, particularly in terms of immigration, and these have a direct impact on food consumption. As Belgian society becomes more and more multicultural, tastes and shopping behaviour can be different. These populations, while adapting to a new way of life, nevertheless take with them a part of their eating habits during their migration, which obviously leads to a diversification of demand. According to **Malassis and Gherzi (2003)**, this diversification reflects the consumption patterns found in developing countries.

The analysis of the living conditions of sub-Saharan immigrants in Belgium as discussed in this work is a contribution to the knowledge of the lifestyles of an integral part of populations living in Belgium. For reasons of convenience, it is the specific case of immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa that has been addressed. It highlights the

factors that may explain the consumption of African food and the diversity of representations that it evokes among consumers.

The interest in this topic follows several observations. First, there has been a significant increase in the number of "tropical grocery stores" in Belgium over the past 15 years (**Tabuna, 2002; Crenn, Hassoun and Medina, 2010**). Indeed, with an estimated annual growth rate, according to the London-based Data Monitor, of between 6 to 7%, the international market for exotic food products generates a turnover of US\$52 billion, which should reach US\$80 billion in 2015 (**Tabuna, 2002**). Secondly, there is an increasing demand for food products from Africa, mainly from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Cameroon and the Maghreb. The development of this market segment offers interesting prospects for increasing income and creating employment for (rural) populations in Africa. In addition, the main consumers of African food products are African nationals residing in Belgium. These consumers can be described as "atypical" insofar as they are presumed low-income households, but who are looking for exotic products that are deemed too expensive and do not comply with European standards. Finally, **Auzeneau (1988)** observed that the diet of immigrants in France, for example, is no longer that of their compatriots living in their country of origin, but neither is it that of the French. This observation, probably valid for Belgium, may have changed with the emergence of an increasingly large and structured market for African food products. To this must also be added the relatively high immigration rate over the past twenty years (**Manço, 2005**).

Based on these observations, the basic problem is that food consumption is not neutral in terms of its level and structure (Calvo, 1982; Déliens and Lefèvre, 1988). Indeed, it reveals specific socio-economic characteristics. In other words, it transcends traditional economic theories based on supply, demand, price and income and therefore deserves to be seen from a different angle that can provide us with additional information. By equating eating behaviours with attitudes of adopting or not adopting new food products compared to pre-immigration consumption, it is possible to determine the profile of the immigrant consumer. Indeed, the interest of such an investigation is to detect, through a series of endogenous and exogenous parameters, the possible determinants of the immigrant's food consumption. Otherwise, a better knowledge of the incentives to consume African food products would make it possible to highlight the coherence in immigrants' attitudes and to adapt, as far as possible, the structure of supply to their demand.

Overall, this study is a contribution to the explanation of the eating habits of immigrant populations in Belgium. Specifically, it is interested, on the one hand, in determining the socio-economic factors that motivate the feeding of immigrant populations. On the other hand, it tries to explain alternative (adoption) or conservation (non-adoption) behaviours in the target population's eating habits.

1. Materials and methods

In order to achieve the objectives pursued and in accordance with the complementarity sought in the information, both a quantitative and a qualitative approach were used.

1.1. Data collection

Field data collection was carried out through a survey questionnaire. It was developed on the basis of information obtained from observations of African consumers, literature data or proposals made during pre-survey interviews. After a test carried out on 6 persons, a final format of the questionnaire and interview guide with 4 main sections was agreed. These headings are as follows:

- consumption habits;
- shopping behaviour;
- representations and motivations;
- the material safety data sheet.

It is this questionnaire that was submitted to the respondents in several cities in French-speaking Belgium.

1.2. Sampling, selection of respondents and question of representativeness

It consisted of interviewing persons of sub-Saharan origin. Most of the respondents are heads of households or individuals living alone. Out of 220 questionnaires submitted, 180 materials that could be analysed were validated. The survey was conducted in 7 cities which are: Brussels (capital), Namur, Ottignie, Louvain-la-Neuve, Liège, Mons and Gembloux. The method chosen is nonprobability convenience sampling. This is recommended when looking at a small population for which

there is no specific sampling frame (Ghiglione and Matalon, 1998). Indeed, the inaccessibility of a sample frame of African immigrants led to approach respondents when they were in the city and according to their availability. In addition to this spatial approach to sampling, surveys were conducted over 5 days in each of the cities of Brussels, Namur, Gembloux and Louvain-la-Neuve. This spreading thus makes it possible to take into account the time dimension of the sampling. The questionnaires were completed either on site for those who were willing to participate or at home. For each person, a concise presentation of the objectives and method of completing the questionnaire is made. Some cards were then sent later to a specified mailing address.

According to Ghiglione and Matalon (1998), spatial and temporal sampling eliminates a number of biases, but does not necessarily ensure a representative sample. This sample should in principle be selected in such a way that all members of the population have the same probability of being included. However, in most convenience sampling, this condition is not met. Not all members of the population necessarily pass between these points with the same frequency, so distortions are introduced since the probability of being part of the sample is proportional to the frequency of passage.

On the other hand, to raise the problem of representativeness in itself and want a perfectly representative sample at all costs, is to impose a constraint that is difficult to satisfy and often unnecessary. In the present case, the overall notion of representativeness must be replaced by a broader notion, that of the adequacy of the sample for the purposes pursued. A sample may therefore be unrepresentative but adequate depending on the type of analysis planned. Some compromises are necessary as long as the conclusions take into account differences in representativeness.

1.3. Data processing and analysis

For the quantitative analysis, this phase began with the configuration of the response entry forms. The completed questionnaires were then encoded and analyzed using SPAD 6.0 software. The analysis itself consisted of flat sorting for the isolated variables and cross sorting for the parameters likely to show correlations between them. The results were interpreted according to the relevance of the figures obtained or by comparing them with observations or work on the issue.

The qualitative analysis phase consisted of guided interviews, the main purpose of which was to repeat the outline of the quantitative analysis. The sections of the questionnaire were therefore reformulated into an open-ended question to allow the respondent the latitude to express himself and to express his logic of consumption of African food. For this phase, 12 persons were interviewed. The selection criterion is the length of stay. Of these respondents, 7 have an immigration duration of between 4 and 5 years, and 5 interviewees have already spent 30 years living in

Belgium. The 4 to 5 year age range was considered important in assessing the adoption or non-adoption of local food practices. It can therefore be considered as an intermediary

between sub-Saharan people who have been present for a short time (less than 3 years) and those who are supposed to have more roots in the host territory.

On the basis of the information gathered, we developed an analysis grid divided into several sub-themes for each of the initial sections. Data processing led to aggregations or reductions in the responses provided to the various interviews. The motivations for the respondents' choice of African dishes made it possible to highlight the differences in points of view and the factors that underlie each other's attitudes. Moreover, the results are interpreted by establishing plausible relationships between the economic and social conditions of immigrants and their practices in order to reveal the logic in their diversity.

2. Results and discussion

This part of the study presents the results and interprets the data obtained as a result of the count.

2.1. Respondent Profile

The sample consists of 66.7% men and 33.3% women. The average age of the respondents is 39.16 years. The minimum age is 25 and the maximum is 64.

Table I shows the number of respondents by origin. We have 142 respondents from Central Africa, 38 from West Africa. The sample is dominated by people from Congo (DRC), who represent about 35% of the total. From the point of view of nationality, 34% of our sample is Belgian, the others still having the nationality of the country of origin.

Table I : Origin of respondents

Country of origin	Number	Percentage (%)
Benin	2	1,1
Burkina Faso	6	3,3
Burundi	10	5,6
Cameroon	28	15,6
Central African Republic	2	1,1
Congo Brazza	8	4,4
Côte d'Ivoire	18	10
Gabon	2	1,1
Niger	4	2,2
RDC	62	34,4
Rwanda	28	15,6
Senegal	2	1,1
Chad	2	1,1
Togo	6	3,3
Total respondents	180	100

Nearly 60% of respondents have a spouse, or 6 out of 10 persons. Non-couples represent 40%. The average per household is 3 ± 2 individuals. The maximum size of the households surveyed is 8 persons. The persons most frequently interviewed in the sample were those with a length of stay of between 1-5 years, followed by respondents with more than 10

years of stay (Table II). The latter group represents nearly 36% of the total workforce. The level of education reveals that 71.9% have completed higher education. In terms of occupation, there is a high representation of students (30%), followed by employees (28%) and finally job seekers (26%). Those in the liberal profession are the least represented (16%).

Table II : Sample distribution by residence time

Length of stay	Number	Percentage (%)
Less than one year	26	14,6
From 1 to 5 years	52	28,1
6 to 10 years	38	21,4
More than 10 years	64	36
Total respondents	180	100

The interviews revealed that the lifetime or stay in Belgium does not prevent nostalgia for African values that cannot be found in Western societies. It is a strong commitment to human values that translate into spontaneous mutual aid, courtesy and mutual assistance. This observation compromises the social integration of African immigrants regardless of their length of stay or status. Indeed, some immigrants who have resided

permanently in Belgium for 30 years and who are naturalized Belgians do not feel inhabited by a desire for integration. They remain convinced that they are passing through.

2.2. Consumption habits

It is the frequency of consumption of African food that was used to categorize the respondents into "individuals adopting

new eating practices" and "individuals maintaining original habits". The question asked is whether the respondent still consumes the food of their country of origin after immigration. Depending on the answer given, the adopter is called the one who answers "rarely" or "almost never", and the conservative or non-adopter is called the one who answers "very often" or "often". According to the results of the count, 81% of the sample maintained, in one way or another, African eating habits. On the other hand, 19% are considered to have completely changed their diet.

In order to test the consistency of the information provided by respondents, the category of consumer and the frequency of consumption were cross-referenced. The likelihood would have been that the person who said he consumed "very often"

would not have done so "two or three times" a month (2.7%). Similarly, those who say they consume "often" do not check "every day (or almost every day)" (0%). The option of "once to four times a week" can be at the respondent's discretion as "often" or "very often" (54.8%). In short, the results of this crossover suggest that the categories formed on the basis of consumption frequencies are generally consistent.

Among consumers of African food, 29% say they consume entirely the same products as in the country of origin, while 8% admit to having changed radically their food products. Table III shows that the vast majority of consumers do this once to four times a week, or about 55%. It is also observed that those who buy African food on a daily basis represent about 20% of all consumers.

Table III : Frequency of consumption

Frequency	Number	Percentage (%)
Almost every day	28	19,2
1 to 4 times per week	80	54,2
2 to 3 times per month	36	24,7
Sometimes per year	2	1,4
Almost never	0	0
Total	146	100

The study shows that 18 of the 34 respondents who do not consume African food are from Rwanda or Burundi. This trend suggests that either respondents of this origin do not find their local products on the Belgian market or that they have a strong preference for European products. This preference may be based on prices or the accessibility of products from their country of origin. The most advanced reason is the high cost of the products. Some also say that they are not very demanding when it comes to food. This finding is supported by the thesis of **Bettman and al. (1998)**. According to him, "*an increasingly developed vision is that preferences are constructed and do not rest on perfectly defined and fixed bases. On the other hand, it goes against the ideas that individuals simply refer to a list of central preferences stored in memory and to choice logics that would necessarily always be generated by the same algorithm. For him, preferences depend on the context, implying that consumers change their treatment logic during the decision-making process when the level of knowledge of the problem increases*". **Régnier (2004) and Tuomainen (2009)** gives, to this end, a very important weight to the seduction of difference as a fundamental mechanism of exoticism and decision-making.

In practice, in the preparation of food, the most consumed vegetables are in order of importance: cassava leaves (*Manihot esculenta*) cited in 72% of cases, followed by spinach (*Spinacia oleracea*) cited in 42% of cases. Next comes okra (*Abelmoschus esculentus*), which is mentioned by 36% of consumers.

Thus, leafy vegetables are the most commonly used condiments in African meals. The species requested differ

according to the country of origin, but cassava leaves remain

the most consumed vegetables. This observation is consistent with **Tabuna (2002)** observation. This is due to the fact that a large proportion of respondents, and even African immigrants in Belgium, are of Congolese origin¹. Indeed, cassava leaves are the basic accompaniment for the people who live there. Moreover, these respondents did not abandon pre-immigration habits and preferences due to a large supply of cassava leaf in Belgium.

In terms of side dishes, starchy foods clearly dominate hearty dishes. Indeed, plantain bananas (*Musa sp.*) are mentioned in 84% of cases, followed by manioc and its derivatives (71%) and finally cereals (maize, millet, sorghum, fonio) in only 29% of cases. In addition, 20% of respondents cited wheat semolina and rice as other products consumed, although not typical African products.

As for the fish consumed, fresh tilapia is the most purchased, appearing in 65% of the responses, compared to 61% for the smoked or dried form of fish and 52% for thomson fish. The other varieties are mentioned a few times but still represent a significant part of the fish preferred by sub-Saharan Africans.

2.3. Shopping behaviour

African grocery stores are the preferred places to buy African products (Table IV). The best second choice is the exotic Indo-Pakistani grocery store. The option of home delivery is almost non-existent in consumer behaviour. It is also noted that out of 57 respondents, 92% obtain their supplies at least once a month in Brussels, while living in another city.

¹ Congolese accounted for 47% of sub-Saharan Africans in Belgium in 2006 and nearly 40% of our sample.

Table IV: Places of shopping by order of preference

	Respondents*	1 st choice		2 nd choice	
	Number	Number	Percentage (%)	Number	Percentage (%)
African grocery store	138	102	73,9	24	17,4
Exotic grocery	106	26	24,5	60	56,6
Clemenceau (Brussels)	108	18	16,7	52	48,2

According to Table V, proximity is the first choice criterion (62%), followed by the cheapest location (57%). The business offering "the most choice" comes in third place. The "most friendly" and "most accessible" places represent very little in the shopping decision process.

From the interviews, it appears that two types of shopping are made by immigrants. Large shopping, which are those relating to basic household menus (vegetables, starchy foods, fish,

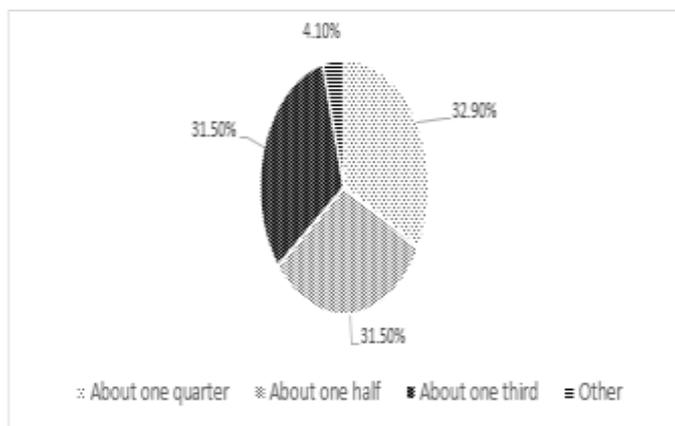
etc.); and small shopping, which relate to supplies of kitchen additives (soup broth, onions, spices, etc.). A general procurement strategy for the design of African dishes by immigrants has thus been identified. In practice, the supply is planned to be carried out by the consumer himself. The geographical dimension is an essential component in the shopping decision process. Consumers plan a long journey, usually once a month, to buy relatively large quantities at lower cost, particularly in Brussels or Maastricht.

Table V: Criteria for choosing a place of shopping in order of preference

	Respondents	1 st criterion		2 nd criterion	
	Number	Number	Percentage (%)	Number	Percentage (%)
Nearest	82	52	61,9	32	38,1
Cheapest	106	60	56,6	46	43,4
The most friendly	20	8	40	12	60
Most accessible	12	4	33,3	8	66,7
Most diversified	64	30	46,9	34	53,1

In Figure 1, the budget allocation is more an approximate view of specific expenditures on African products than a precise measure of the portfolio. Overall, it shows the adequacy between consumption behaviour and the proportion of expenditure dedicated to the products in question. Graph 1 shows the relative proportions of expenditure on African products in the total food consumption budget.

Figure 1: Shares allocated to African food production in the food budget



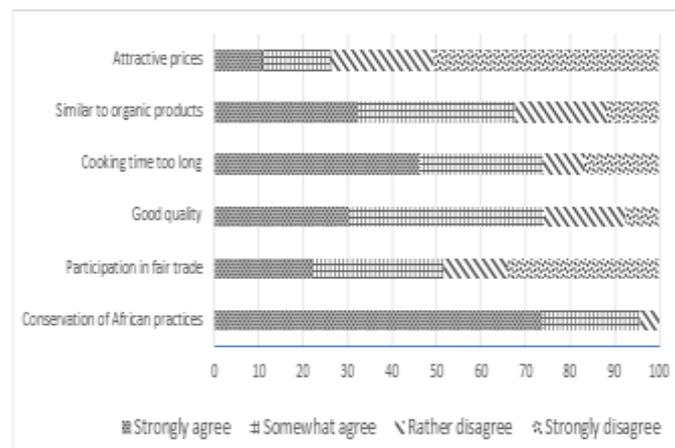
The relative shares allocated to African products are almost balanced. They rarely deviate by a quarter, a third or a half. The specification of these shares in monetary terms was not possible because of the effort required of respondents. As a result, the question was withdrawn after the pre-

investigation. With regard to out-of-home consumption, more than half of the respondents (52%) say they do not go in African restaurants.

2.4. Images and representations of African food

Immigrants believe that the consumption of African food is in line with a concern to preserve African practices. They admit that the cooking time is too long, and that the prices charged are not attractive (Figure 2). On the other hand, they have a fairly good opinion of the quality of IPs, which some go so far as to consider as "organic products".

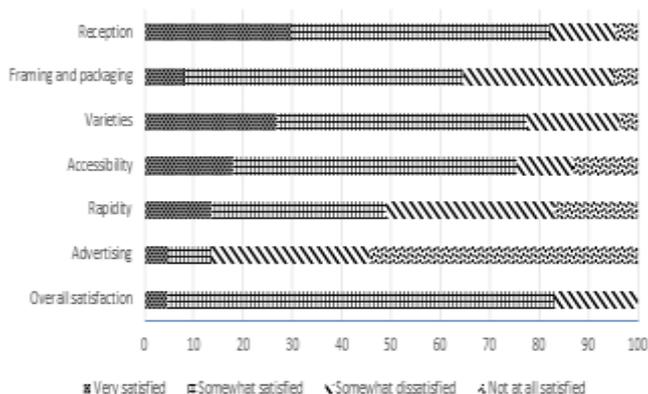
Figure 2 : Representation of opinions on possible images



With regard to the service and environment of African food, overall satisfaction is reported in more than 80% of cases

(Figure 3). This graph summarizes the assessment of all other criteria. The factors that benefit from a favourable opinion are accessibility (74%), diversity of choice (77%) and the reception of African food in the sales areas of basic products (81%). On the other hand, the lack of publicity (86%) and speed (57%) was sufficiently mentioned by the respondents. In addition, there are environmental quality (hygiene), product packaging and price levels that do not seem to have the approval of the respondents.

Figure 3: Views on IPs' service and sales environment



2.5. Analysis of cross-sorting results

Cross-sorting between the frequency of consumption and the presence or absence of a spouse in the household shows that 63.3% of households with a spouse consume African food at least "once to four times a week". The presence of a spouse could therefore be a determining factor in maintaining the eating habits of the country of origin.

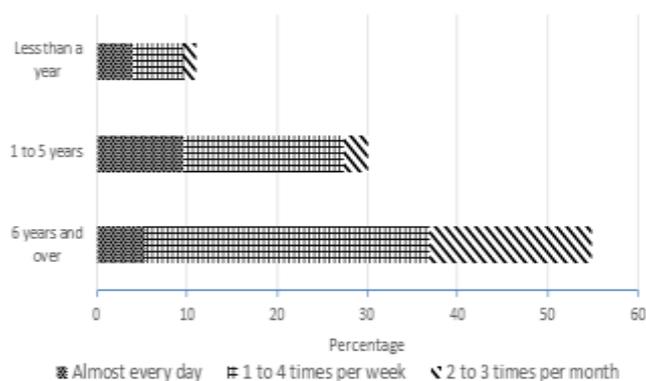
Current and pre-immigration consumption in terms of the composition of the basket were compared. Thus, it appears that those who consume "entirely" (or almost) pre-immigration products do so "very often" (22% versus 7% "often"). On the other hand, those who "no longer really" find the original products eat only "often" IPs (7% against 1.4% "very often"). In addition, respondents who return "half" of the products from their homeland consume "African" "often" (38.8%) rather than "very often" (24.7%).

A correlation between the availability of products from the country of origin and the frequency of consumption could therefore be established. Indeed, the availability of products from the country of origin influences the immigrant's level of consumption. We note that the frequency of consumption increases because the individual eats entirely what he/she consumed before immigration. Similarly, the lowest frequencies (one to three times a month) correspond to those that "no longer really" consume local products. We can deduce that the diversification of African products on the Belgian market can increase their consumption. As the quantities were not investigated, we cannot comment on its trends. Bettman and al. (1998) argue that consumers are more likely to use well-established preferences when they are familiar and experienced with a product. On the other hand, Rook (1987) believes that the consumer is not immune from impulsive

buying because he or she is confronted with a sudden, often powerful stimulation and persistence to buy something immediately. The ultimate objective remains satisfaction through the manifestation of the emotional nature of the relationship between the product and the buyer (Day, 1982; Westbrook, 1987; Evrard, 1993).

The cross-sorting also concerned the frequency of consumption and the length of stay of the respondent. Graph 4 shows that those with a length of stay of between 1 and 5 years and those with more than 6 years of stay have a frequency of consumption of at least 1 to 4 times per week (27.4% and 37% respectively). It should be mentioned that almost all consumers with more than "6 years of stay and more" are concentrated in the frequency "once to four times a week". These groups of respondents dominate all consumption patterns. It appears, therefore, that time does not alter their enthusiasm for African food. On the contrary, it seems to be strengthening it. Respondents with less than one year of residence are almost equally represented.

Figure 4: Frequency of consumption by length of stay

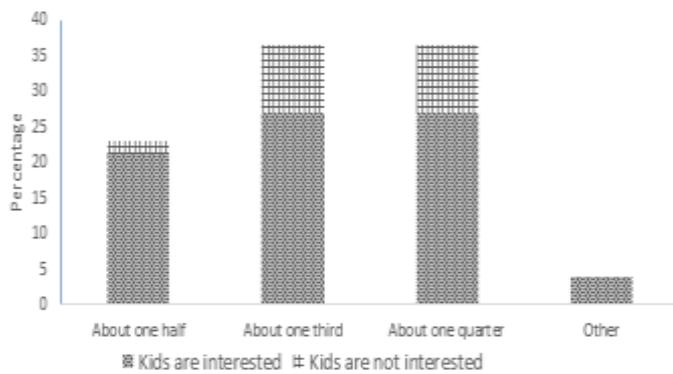


According to the respondents' reactions, African food is an ordinary menu for about 90% of respondents. The festive representation is exceptional in their perception. However, the frequency of consumption "two to three times a month" has a 4% festive perception of this food, compared to 19% of ordinary perception. Consumption of these foods is therefore not an event for the vast majority of immigrants.

The analysis of the cross-referenced data also revealed that almost all permanent consumers of African food have children who are interested in it (15.4% if yes compared to 1.9% if no). The other modalities also include a significant proportion of children interested in these dishes, 42.3% if interested compared to 13.5% if not interested, regarding the intermediate frequency. For the fringe that consumes "two to three times a month", 21.2% of the consumption rate was recorded when children are interested and only 5.8% if not. Looking at all consumption patterns, it appears that children are attracted to African food in 80% of households. Children's interest in the food of the country of origin therefore seems to be an explanatory factor for the sustained consumption of these foods.

Figure 5 results from a comparison between the share of spending on African food and children's interest in it. It shows that almost all households, which spend about half of their food budget on these meals, have children who are interested (21.2% if yes compared to 2% if no). This also applies to the other terms and conditions.

Figure 5 : Distribution of the budget allocated to African food according to the interests of children



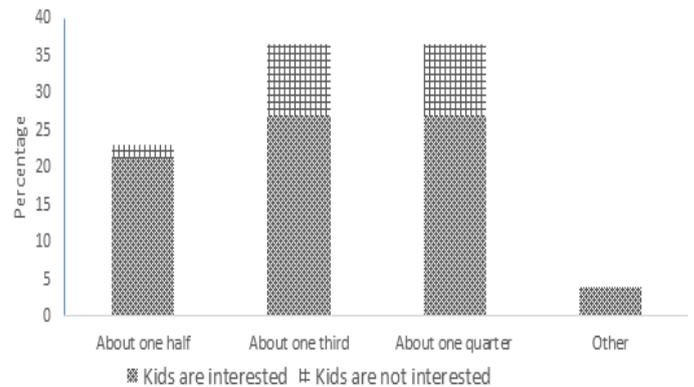
The situation of households with children interested in African food differs from that of others. Having a consuming child increases the frequency of consumption of African food and therefore the budget. This observation can be justified by the pleasure shared by all family members, which leads to more frequent preparation of these meals. The choice of African dishes in this context saves both financial resources by pooling the satisfaction of individual desires and also saves time. Thus, all the family's energy is concentrated on a main culinary preparation for the pleasure of all. On the other hand, uninterested children impose more tasks on menu design and therefore disperse resources and energies.

This corroborates the writings of **Brée (1990), Diasio and al. (2009) and Tichit (2012)**, who stipulate that the child consumer is an important decision-making centre in the family. For him, the family is the main agent of socialization in addition to his peers and the media. The child's interest in African dishes is therefore taken into account in the weekly menu since he or she is a consumer, and his or her influence is all the stronger as the product interests him or her directly. In the same vein, **Moschis (1985)** points out that it is interactions with parents that first influence the socialization of the child consumer. Indeed, consumption affects knowledge, values, attitudes and behaviours. Unconsciously, consuming African food then becomes a kind of heritage (**Barou and Verhoeven, 1997**).

In addition, through the crossover variables, the link between household size and consumption frequency was established. The "a few times a year" modality indicates those who do not consume African food and who, according to the study, adopt European eating habits. Through Graph 6, we observe that the frequency of consumption is more sustained when the household size is between 2 and 4 persons. They then have a frequency of consumption of at least 1 to 4 times a week. These households represent 32.2% of the people surveyed

(Figure 6). There seems to be a critical household size that facilitates the sustained consumption of African food (2 to 4 persons). This could be explained by the financial implications of menus designed for more than 4 persons.

Figure 6: Distribution of consumption frequency by household size



Conclusion

Following the socio-economic analysis of the eating habits of sub-Saharan immigrants in Belgium, several lessons can be drawn. Although they are limited to the number of employees studied, the fact remains that the attitudes observed could to some extent reflect the practices and opinions of sub-Saharan Africans in Belgium. To this end, it was pointed out that there is no wide range of opinions and representations of African menus. On the other hand, consumption habits, which are reflected in the frequency of culinary practices of the households studied, are diverse.

In addition, the initial hypotheses find an answer following the analysis and interpretation of the information collected. The main factors motivating the consumption of African meals are: the presence of a spouse in the household, the interest of children in African dishes, the size of the household and the availability (offer) of products from the country of origin. It also appears that the length of stay does not have a significant altering effect on the frequency of consumption. On the contrary, it seems to strengthen consumption. Hypothesis 1 of this study is therefore confirmed. In addition, after a qualitative interpretation of consumer behaviour, the conclusion of the quantitative study should be put into perspective. The process of integration of the immigrant over time does not involve abandoning his or her eating habits. Basically, the length of stay would not have a negative influence on the consumption of African food.

Among other complaints, this study revealed the many reservations of consumers about the quality of what they eat, despite the significant supply effort and the sacrifices they make through high prices. Like the majority of studies targeting minorities in a population, this one has limitations that we can place in the small sample size. This weakness is related to the difficulties encountered during the survey in convincing respondents to participate in the study and the unavailability of a draw list of respondents. Aware of this

shortcoming, the conclusions drawn can be refined by more elaborate investigations that take into account immigrants of all origins. The sampling basis will then be an official list and adequate means of investigation. Moreover, it remains clear that knowledge of Belgian society in all its diversity and cultural richness necessarily accommodates such initiatives.

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