

Eating Habits among the People of Abora Traditional Area

Peter Alexander Hope

Department Of Ghanaian Languages, University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast

Abstract

This paper discusses eating habits among the people of Abora Traditional Area in the Abura Asebu Kwamankese, Central Region of Ghana. The discussion focuses on Cultural etiquettes or values and examines how the people of the Abora Traditional Area consider eating as a social phenomenon; norms associated with eating, who to eat with, at what place, when to eat, what to eat by some categories of people and so on. The paper also touches on some beliefs the people have on eating. How people should conduct themselves when eating will also receive attention in the discussion. Through observations, discussions and interviews among selected villages and elderly folks in the area, the author Some specific situation(s) will be highlighted to unveils how the people of Abora Traditional area recognises eating as a perfect social behaviour.

Keywords: eating habits, Abora Traditional Area, habit, social behavior villages

1. Introduction

This paper is structured in five sections. The first section introduces broadly the paper, followed by the second which discusses issues pertaining to euphemisms, and dilates on forms of indirection. In the third section the papers examines Sociolinguistics variables in eating habits while the forth section speaks to good and bad habits in eating. The fifth section addresses issues pertaining to some prohibits in eating to precede the last section, the conclusion.

The concept of eating is practiced everywhere around the globe. It is an act whereby food is put into the mouth to chew/and to swallow with the aim of satisfying' one's hunger. At times, the kind of food to be eaten is of one's own choice. At other times, the situation will determine the kind of food to be eaten or it will depend on the food available. The Fantes say, *Kuntunn biara ye ɔmee* (whatever fills the stomach means satisfaction).

Among the people of Abora Traditional Area, like any other community around the globe, the act of eating is considered a very important aspect of human life and as such it must be done properly and at the appropriate place by the various categories of people in the community. It must be noted here that eating habits are not static - they change. This is due to the period of eating, what is being eaten, circumstances surrounding the eating event, the place of eating and so on. For example, if somebody is eating alone at his farm, he will not behave as eating with others at home.

It is worth mentioning here that, the people of Abora Traditional Area metaphorically view drinking of wine as form of eating.

There are some categories of people in the area under review (eg. Chiefs, Heads of clans, Leaders of Asafo companies etc.), people should not see them eating at public places. This is because the people attach much importance to eating; and for that matter, their important personalities must not eat anyhow at anywhere. Another reason to this effect is that, they believe that some people possess evil spirits and juju so if any of these important personalities is seen eating publicly, those with bad spirits will use their spirits and juju to destroy them. Also, eating at the appropriate place by these important personalities is a form of *Face Saving mechanism*. Again, may be the kind of food that the person might be eating does not befit his position; so when many people see him eating such food, they may look down upon him.

2. Theoretical Framework

As a native of the area and a traditional leader, I based my discussions on my experience and training of young ones. That is to say, intuitive knowledge will be applied in the discussion. Also, I analysed what some scholars have written on the phenomenon.

3. Euphemisms

Because the people consider eating as a very important and sacred act, they often use euphemism when they want to talk about the act. It is known euphemisms are used as forms of indirection, i.e. to tune peoples' minds out of the real act under discussion. Also, it is used to cover up the unpleasantness of something. For example, when food is ready and children are sent to call their fathers or elderly relatives from the streets or at any public place: the children only inform the elders that they are needed at the house or some visitors are waiting for them. Children who inform their elders at public places that food is ready are rebuked or in most cases punished. It is culturally unacceptable in the Abora Traditional Area, for somebody to announce eating time publicly - hence the use of euphemisms for eating. Some of the euphemistic expressions are: *Morokɔbɔm'ano twɛr* I am going to knock at my mouth, *Yerokɔto hɛn nsa nsu mu* - we are going to dip our hands into water, *Mirikeyi me nsa* - I

am going to take my hand out, *Yerekeka hen ano* -We are going to touch our mouth, and so on. We see from the above statements that all the expressions have some kind of relations to eating. Whenever we are eating, the hand is raised to the mouth and as the hand touches the mouth, there is a kind of knock. Again we wash our hands before eating. So at eating we always dip or put our hands into water; and also, during eating, we put the hand in the bowl and take it out several times.

4. Sociolinguistic Variables

Every society is made up of different categories of people. That is to say that, not all members of any given society are of the same rank; some hold higher positions while others are at the grassroots. Some have economic power whereas others are at the receiving end and so on. The Akan community, like any other society in the world is made up of different categories of people occupying different positions on the social ladder and political hierarchy.

To look at eating habits among the Abora people very closely, I have considered the participants or the various categories of people who engage in the act. In order to have this achieved, I will consider the social classes in the community in line with the acronym 'GRAPD' - where we have 'G' as *gender*, 'R' as *rank*, 'A' as *age*, 'P' as *power* and 'D' as *distance* (Agyekum, 2002)

In a traditional Fante home, there are two parts of the same household - *Pramado* or *Mbanyin mu* - the part of the house where the adult males stay and *Gyaadze* or *Mbasiako mu* - where females and children stay. This division in the various households has some kind of effect on the eating habits of the Akans.

Gender, as used in this work differentiates males from females in terms of eating. In this regard males and females do not eat together.

Gender, in terms of eating talks about the particular places in the household where males are expected to eat. It even extends to how the males' eating table is set, the kind of dish from which they eat as against their female counterparts.

At dinner, the food of the males in a household are put into nice enamels known as *komitsi* and sent to the *pramado* where the males have their supper; whereas that of the females who prepared the meals are put into *yabaa* or *apɔtyewa* (earthen ware) and eaten at the *gyaadze* or the kitchen. The eating table of the males is nicely set whereas the females often put their bowls on the ground or on top of basket or at times it is put in the mortar. It is not accepted for husbands or grown-up males to eat at the kitchen. Men are also not expected to eat with women especially from the same bowl. When any grown-up and responsible man is seen eating with a woman at the kitchen or from a cooking pot or cooking utensil, he is mocked at by his friends and relatives and even at times he is rebuked or he is nicknamed *Okotobonku* (a man who associates himself closely with women). This is because just after eating, many issues pertaining to the various gender groups are discussed; for example issues pertaining to war (in the olden days) are discussed by men.

So far as eating is concerned, pregnant women in the Akan community are restricted. In support of this Minta (1996:44) posits that, there are foods that a pregnant woman should eat at specific times of the pregnancy period and there are others, which she should not be eaten by them. The reason for this restriction is to ensure good health of the pregnant woman and the unborn child. Also, pregnant women are not allowed to eat in public because it is believed that if they do so, people with evil spirits will destroy their unborn babies through the eating.

Rank and Power as used in this work refer to one's status in the society. The people of Abora hold people in authority in high esteem. Thus, people in authority are highly respected. These people include the Chief, Head of a Clan, *Asafohen*¹, *Asafo Supi*² *Akɔmfo*³, members of the council of elders, some royals, the rich and others.

Each of these people is expected by members of the Akan community not to eat anyhow and at any place. They are expected to eat indoors. They (especially chiefs) have to eat at where many people will not see them - not even at the compound of their various household.

According to Akuffo (1976:80) only the *Sodohene* and few members from his outfit are allowed to be at the dining place of the Paramount Chief (the *ɔmanhen*). They are allowed there just to serve the king. It is expressed in the Fante community that *ɔhen (Opanyin) nndzidzi bagua mu* meaning the chief (elderly) does not eat in public. When any of those mentioned above is found to be eating at unapproved place, he is scorned, mocked at, rebuked or even fined by the appropriate authorities. Women in their menstrual periods are not allowed to cook for some people like Chiefs, Heads of clans, *Asafo Supi* and so on.

At funerals and other gatherings, when it is time for the chief and his elders to take their drinks, they ask permission and go to the palace to enjoy the drinks. This is what the *ɔkyeame* tells the people: '*Nananom*

¹ Leader of Asafo company

² Leader of Asafo company

³ the traditional priests and priestesses

resere kwan akɔhwɛ ahɔho wɔ ahemfie. Meaning, the Chief and his elders are going to attend to some visitors at the palace. As stated earlier, the Fantes do not announce 'eating' in public.

In terms of age, the people of Abora Traditional area distinguish children from adults. Children from the same household eat together, in most cases from the same bowl; and adults too eat together, according to sex as mentioned under gender. This act of eating together encourages unity among members of each household. Children are not supposed to eat with adults. However, on few occasions, some well-behaved and clean children are allowed to eat with adults, especially with their fathers. The people have this to say, *Sɛ abofra hu ne nsa ho hohor a, ɔnye mpanyimfo dzidzi* (If a child is able to wash his hand well, he eats with adults).

Also, age affects what one wants to eat in the Abora society. Here, it is only adults (those having the purchasing power) who eat what they wish to take at a particular time. Children take whatever is available. Again, well-behaved and serviceable children at times get what they wish to eat. Because the people under review want their children to behave well, the latter are motivated by giving them what they like to eat. The expression, *Abofra a ɔyɛ somakɔ no, odzi n'abodweedze* (A serviceable child eats what pleases him) confirms this act. After eating, children in the household wash all the bowls from which they ate (including that of the adults) as well as the cooking utensils.

Distance, as used in this work refers to intimacy - i.e. how close is someone to a chief or an elderly person. Here, how one relates with another especially those in high positions and the rich influence his eating. We have already mentioned chiefs and other high ranking personalities and how and where they are supposed to eat. In the Abora Traditional area, some chiefs or high-ranking personalities at times invite some lower ranking individuals (privately) to join them either to drink or eat. This happens when the invitees are very 'close' and 'faithful' to those in power or the rich. When a high ranking personality in any of the community in the area under review invites lower ranking personality to a 'table', we often expressed it as "*Akokɔba a ɔben ne nã no dzi abebew ne sere*". (to wit., a chick which is close to its mother eats the thigh of a grasshopper).

5. Some Good or Accepted Eating Habits

Opoku (1964: 16) is of the view that, the Akans, among whom are the people of Abora Traditional area, normally eat twice (morning and evening) a day. That is to say that one needs strength for the day's work so between 9.00 and 10.00 in the morning, the Akans take their first meal for the day and between 5.00 and 6.00 in the evening when they have returned from their farms, they take their second meal. Meanwhile, one has the right to eat some fruits like oranges, bananas etc. between the two major meals. It is not accepted for somebody to eat between meals. Some elders make sure that children adhere to eating twice a day. This is to train the children to be able to cope with every situation especially in case of famine.

It is the belief of the people that, no matter how sweet or palatable a food may taste, one does not eat with both hands. It is accepted amongst the Akans that it is only the right hand, which must be used for eating. When a child begins to learn how to eat, the adults make sure that he/she eats with the right hand only.

One must sit straight on a stool when eating. The adults enforce this on children during eating times. Even where there are only few stools for the adults, children are made to sit on rags; and they must sit straight. It is scientifically true that if one does not sit properly when eating, he/she may develop some abdominal problems. When a child or any member of the community under review puts the left hand on the ground while eating, thus not sitting straight, he/she is rebuked by the elders in the house.

The amount or size of a morsel into the mouth must not be too big. It must be such that chewing and (or) swallowing will not be a problem. We say that, *Abofra tsi fufu a ɔbɔkɔ n'anomu*- (a child picks a morsel that can go into the mouth).

6. Some Prohibitions in Eating

- One must not lick the finger frequently when eating: We have already mentioned that, the people of Abora encourage group eating to ensure togetherness in their various households. As two or more people eat from the same bowl, it is not accepted for any of them to lick the fingers too often. When any member of the household is found to be frequently licking the fingers, he/she is rebuked or scorned. The licking of the hands is avoided to protect people from being infected by any communicable disease.

When people are eating together, it is against the cultural etiquette of the people for any of them to open his or her mouth wide. It is the belief that some fluid from the mouth (saliva) may drop into the food - thus contaminating or polluting the food in case the one is sick. Also it is not hygienic; so one must not open the mouth too wide when eating.

When one is talking or singing, it is likely that some bits of spits come out of the mouth. So eating and talking or singing at the same time will mean polluting the food (which others are also enjoying) with spits. Also, talking or singing while eating will cause some kind of disorder in the throat and may cause serious ailment or even death. The Fantes say "*Obi mmfa edzidzi mmfa kasa so*". to wit., one cannot talk while eating. The adults tell the children that when one talks/sings while eating, that person's mother will die. So this act is considered a

taboo.

- According to the Akan cultural etiquette, when one begins to eat, he/she needs not to go anywhere until eating is over. This is because if one of the members moves away, by the time s/he comes back, the rest might have consumed all the food. Also if one stops eating to listen to a call, s/he might be told some bad news (death of a relative) which may bring the eating to an abrupt end. In order to encourage smooth and uninterrupted eating habits among the people, children are discouraged from moving from place to place when they are eating.

Finally, putting the left hand on the ground while eating is not encouraged by the people of Abora traditional area - thus, it is also a taboo. The act of putting the left hand on the ground while eating does not ensure good sitting posture in eating. As this may cause some disorder in the body if it continues, the people discourage children from this act. Any child who continues to do that during eating is punished. These prohibitions as we have seen them must not be encouraged so as to instill good eating habits amongst the members of the Abora Traditional Area.

7. Conclusion

The Akans consider the act of eating as a very important aspect of human life. Because of this, eating is not done anyhow and at anywhere. Special people in the community under review are restricted in various ways so far as eating is concerned. They are not allowed to eat at anywhere, to eat anything and even it is not anybody who must cook for a chief or any other traditional leader.

Children are trained on what to do before, during and after eating. Both adults and children are rebuked if they do not comport themselves well during eating processes. Those who flout good eating habits are scorned.

In the nutshell, the people of Abora Traditional Area try to encourage good eating habits among themselves, especially the young ones.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Agyekum, K. (2000): The socio-cultural concept of face in the akan Community.
Akuffo, B. S. (1976): *Ahemfie adesua*; Ghana Publishing Corporation Tema
Minta, J. K. (1996): *Akan Amambra mu bi*. Bureau of Ghana Languages; Accra.
Opoku, A. A. (1964); *Abayɛn ne afitra*. Bureau of Ghana Languages; Accra.