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Attitudes of Zimbabwean university students towards indigenous foods

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Abstract

The current study sought to find out the attitudes of university students towards indigenous foods. Attitudes involve feelings and emotions hence the adoption of a qualitative approach. The study used a case study design in order to find out the attitudes of the female scholars. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were the tools used to solicit data from a sample of thirty participants. The sample which was conveniently selected comprised of twenty female students and ten males from four faculties. The results from the study revealed that most students had negative attitudes towards indigenous foods except for a few who were in favour of the foods. Lack of knowledge about the importance of the indigenous foods was established as the main predisposing factor of their negative attitudes. Acculturation was also established as another cause of negative attitudes as most of the students were alienated from their culture in favour of foreign cultures and food. The study recommends that universities as centers of higher education and knowledge pursue the cultural values of the society as they teach the students about their cultural heritage which include traditional foods. Media such as monographs that encourages students to eat traditional foods are necessary and these may be a brainchild of the nutrition section.

Keywords: Indigenous food, acculturation, attitudes, students, culture

Introduction

The use of indigenous foods was common in the primitive world. Diets evolve over time, being influenced by many factors such as geographical, environmental, social and economic factors all interact in a complex manner to shape dietary consumption patterns (FAO, 2005) [9]. This may mean that complex interactions such as migration, income, prices, individual preferences, beliefs, and cultural traditions influence food choices. Zimbabwean universities are a convergence of people from different cultures, religions and backgrounds who have different eating habits. Fishman (2001) [10] posits that food choices and intake behaviours are probably related to place of birth, attitudes and acculturation. Indigenous foods in the context of this study are those original and native foods which grow naturally without the aid of inorganic manure and also animals which do not eat genetically modified foods. The use of organic manure in Zimbabwe is still practised by most subsistence farmers who do not afford inorganic fertilizers. Before the use of technology locally available foods in their natural form were used by families across the globe including Zimbabwe until the advent of modern civilization. In Zimbabwe, the arrival of the western culture caused changes in the attitudes and use of indigenous foods due to acculturation (WHO, 2010) [28]. Universities were not spared from the influence of acculturation in regard to provisions of food to the students of which they may favour or disfavour. Attitudes arouse interest or disfavour towards an entity (Thompson, 2007) [25]. Food habits and food consumption are affected by acculturation at different levels as people accept or reject the new culture (Sam & Berry, 2010) [21]. This implies that the meal patterns and the healthfulness of the Zimbabwean native diet have been substantially changed.

Eze (2014) [8] asserts that the introduction of western culture in Africa caused people to abandon their culture and life styles including food habits and dietary patterns. Most African countries which were colonized adopted foreign cultures and almost abandoned their cultures as they in most cases having attitudes which regarded their own as inferior. Culture, defined as the unique shared values, beliefs, and practices of a group, can influence the behaviours of

individuals by affecting their thoughts, feelings, acceptance, and adoption of health education messages (Boyington, Carter-Edward, Piehl, Hutson, Langdon & McManus, 2008) [3]. Gustafson (2013) [14] observes that the Western diet has taken over the world in the past 30 years and the results have been disastrous. Fast foods are commonly served in most university canteens as they are quick to prepare and serve (Manwa & Mahundi, 2015) [17]. Global obesity rates have doubled, pushing the growth of diet-related illnesses such as diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease (Gustafson, 2013) [14]. The African continent is home to hundreds of indigenous vegetables and other food plants that fell out of favour as well-known vegetables were introduced from other parts of the world (Borlaug, 2006) [2]. These native plants provide rich nutrition that is more favourable to the body as compared to the borrowed foods. Unfortunately, traditional diets and indigenous crops that have reliably fed communities for centuries across the world are rapidly being replaced by unhealthy foods (FAO, 2005) [9].

The high cost and challenges on availability of familiar foods act as major barriers to the retention of food habits among African populations (Papadaki & Scott, 2002). It has long been recognised that the acceptance or rejection of food is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, which is both dynamic and variable, influenced not only by an individual's attitudes but also by individuals interacting within a group in different contexts and over different periods of time (Hartwell, Edwards & Brown, 2011) [15]. This implies that acculturation at university level played a pivotal role in the change of food habits and attitudes of students towards food in most universities. During acculturation, groups of people and their individual members engage in intercultural contact, producing a potential for conflict (Berry, 2005) [1]. The current study focuses on understanding the complexity of the process of change of attitudes in order to help determine intervention strategies that will encourage university students and the Zimbabweans in general to regress to their native foods.

The consequences of eating processed and fast foods have already taken their toll on the ordinary people who afford them. In developed and developing countries such as Zimbabwe, conditions such as strokes, diabetes, obesity and cancer have been counted as major killers of most people (FAO, 2005) [9]. Dietary issues were seen to be contributing greatly to such conditions among other factors such as stress. There is need for a change in eating habits in order to reduce the mortality rate of future generations and increase the life span for the ordinary people of Zimbabwe. University students are the future of any country as their life span is critical to the overall wellbeing of any country. Zimbabwe is blessed with a variety of indigenous foods which can go a long way in alleviating human suffering and mortality rate of young people. Targeting university students may assist in changing communities since educated minds are in most cases liberal and quickly adjust to change. Since the university comprises people of different races, nations, ethnic groups, creeds, caste and religious affiliation may help to spread the message fast and many more people may change their attitudes and diets in favour of their indigenous foods. There is need for an attitude and behaviour change in order to revert and adopt the indigenous diet in order to adapt to a healthy life style.

Food choices and behaviour is integral to individual views and collective identity embedded in cultural process and practice (Hartwell *et al.*, 2011) [15]. In Zimbabwe the indigenous foods which were commonly used as

carbohydrates were rapoko, sorghum and millet. Maize meal and rice were adopted at a later stage and were added to the diet as staple foods. Carbohydrates play a pivotal role in the meals of Africans and Zimbabwe in particular. Meal planning in Zimbabwe is contrary to the modern ways of having protein and its accompaniment. In the African diet it is the other way round as it is the carbohydrate and its accompaniment. 'Toseva nei sadza' (meaning to say: what is the accompaniment (protein/vegetables) for our thick porridge?). The reason for such an order is due to the fact that protein in Zimbabwe is very expensive and may not be used by other families on daily basis. In some impoverished families they may eat beef and chicken during Christmas. It seems that there is a gradual erosion of the African meal plan and diet as people adopt the western diet. Mawere (2010) posits that the coming of the Europeans in Zimbabwe posed serious challenges related to the onslaught of the African culture.

Protein from indigenous sources was basically from wild animals, ants and crickets. Wild animals common in Zimbabwe were the rock rabbits, hare, buck and kudu. Small flying creatures were the white ants (ishwa), sambarafuta, locusts (bambomukota), madhumbudya and crickets such as zvukubwe, makurwe and termites. Small creeping creatures/caterpillars such as harurwa, masodya and hondokotewa were also used as relish. Leaf vegetables which were commonly used were pumpkin leaves, cucurbit (*mukakasango/mukakashango*), chenopodium album (*mubvunzandadya*), cleome monophylla or wild spinach (*mutsvandimire*) black-jack (*mutsine*) brassica juncea (*chembere dzagumhana*), amaranthus hybridus (*mowa danga*), citrullus lanatus-plant of cattle watermelon (*mundochicha*) mushrooms (*howa*) etc. The fruits were marula (*mapfura*), wild orange (*matamba*), grewia flavescens (*bhubhunu*), artabotrys brachypetalus-wild grape (*mudavashoko*), piliostigma thonningii (*masekesa*), chakata etc. The introduction of western foods has radically changed the food habits of the Zimbabweans. However, meal planning for the ordinary Zimbabweans is still done according to the ancient order where carbohydrates are considered the main dish of the meal (Manwa & Mahundi, 2015) [17]. The addition of rice, pastas and potatoes in the diet has also caused some changes on the choice of relish. In the precolonial Zimbabwe there was no choice on what to include as relish. There were no guidelines on what to serve with what in the traditional Zimbabwe.

The changes in dietary patterns and attitudes of the Zimbabweans were influenced by several factors besides acculturation and the introduction of western food. Sabellah (2010) posits that negative attitudes towards something results in disfavour of that thing. Education has played an important role in changing the attitudes of most people in Zimbabwe. Meal planning and the introduction of nutrition lessons from primary level have caused the post-colonial generation to know foods which are mostly linked to the western culture. Udeani (2001) [26] during a study on x-raying the Western cultural onslaught on the Africans arising from colonization lamented that the system has succeeded in the erosion of the African identity. The result of losing the identity was due to the alienation of Africans from themselves (Eze, 2014) [8]. This may mean that life choices and attitudes of most Africans are based on borrowed cultures. The use of indigenous foods has declined as western foods take center stage. Food is a cultural symbol (Verbeke and López, 2005) [27]. This implies that food is one of the cultural traits that

humans learn first from childhood. Food behaviour modifications of consumers change with the greatest reluctance at older age (Cervellon and Dubé, 2005) ^[4]. This may mean that at old age people become more conservative in their diet.

Fast foods, food takeaways, restaurants and hotels have also played a pivotal role in the decline of the use of indigenous foods. Modern ways of cooking, serving, processing foods and advertisements attached to them may have caused the majority of the Zimbabweans to look down upon the indigenous foods in Zimbabwe (Udeani, 2001) ^[26]. The physical characteristics of food and contextual challenges related to dietary choices were mentioned as hindrances in the pursuit of healthy nutrition habits (Boyington *et al.*, 2008) ^[3]. Zimbabwean university students seem to have been exposed to modern foods as compared to their indigenous foods. The idea of eating out by modern families has been seen as another cause of eating western foods as most food outlets offer fast foods. There is need to remedy the situation and rescue people from this foreign cultural onslaught (Eze, 2014) ^[8]. Food choices have been rated as one of the major causes of many ailments and the rise in mortality rate in many countries across the globe.

The use of therapeutic diets has also been undermined by wrong choices of food. Food when correctly chosen, combined and well prepared and served is medicine for many diseases which have no side effects. The attitudes of an individual on certain foods influence their choice of foods. Thompson (2007) ^[25] asserts that people are attracted or repelled to something by their views or attitudes concerning that thing. Manwa, Ndamba and Jinga (2013) ^[16] assert that there are predisposing factors that influence attitudes towards an entity. The use of indigenous foods versus modern foods has been of late a controversial issue in Zimbabwe. The debates on the use of genetically modified organisms/foods (GMO's) and genetically engineered foods (GEFs) have also intensified the questions surrounding the use of inorganic and processed foods (WHO, 2010) ^[28].

Modern ways of food preparation and presentation have been on spotlight by many nutritionists. Indigenous foods unlike the western food lack the attractiveness that causes people to like it. Serving of sadza (thick porridge), pumpkin leaves in peanut butter and termites may be a dull meal as compared to serving rice, salads, roasted chicken and butternut which may be very colourful. Western dishes may be more attractive than the traditional dishes when they are garnished with garnishes such as parsley, red, green and yellow pepper. One major determinant of chronic diseases is the environment and its influence on lifestyle behaviours that are intended to maintain social status (Boyington *et al.*, 2008) ^[3]. Garnishes in the Zimbabwean tradition were rarely used or used not knowing that there is an effect on the presentation of food. Food presentation has also brought changes in the choice and attitudes towards indigenous foods serving rapoko sadza and termites in peanut butter looks unpleasant because rapoko and termites share almost the same colour yet when eaten is very delicious and nutritious. Serving of indigenous foods in a way which is attractive may encourage the university students to favour the indigenous foods. The ordinary scholars are attracted by fast foods which are attractive such as chicken and chips.

The modern generation has been carried away by instant or fastest means of achieving results. Most of the indigenous foods require longer time to cook. Cooking a road runner takes quiet a long time as compared to broilers which can be

roasted, fried or grilled. Hartwell *et al.* (2011) ^[15] suggest that changes to dietary habits due to cooking time and ingredient availability, indigenous culture and financial circumstances have affected many cultures. The use of energy serving devices such as pressure cookers may be used to quickly prepare some of the foods. Indigenous vegetables such as cow pea leaves or vigna unguiculata (*munyemba*) and cleome gynandra (*munyevhi, rudhe, nyivhi*) require a long time to be cooked as compared to fried cabbage or salad which one needs not to cook. Factors surrounding the preparation, cooking and serving of indigenous foods may have an influence of food choices of individuals especially scholars who have limited time and resources for food preparation. Sources of carbohydrates such as millet (*mhunga*) and rapoko/finger millet (*rukweza*) requires a lot of time to prepare before taking it to the grinding meal. Hartwell *et al.* (2011) ^[15] posit that one of the challenges in eating traditional food is the time necessary for preparation. Access to labour, time and energy serving devices are beyond reach of most university scholars and the ordinary rural folk.

University canteens because of lack of time and due to technology prefer to serve foods which can be quickly prepared and served. Some canteens may find it difficult to serve the indigenous foods to the scholars since most of them may have negative attitudes and opt for western foods. This kind of scenario may seem to be casual but speaks volumes of attitudes and food choices that are detrimental to health. The use of indigenous foods in Zimbabwe has a history of producing strong people who were resilient and resistant to major ailments as witnessed during the ancient days of great, great grand fathers and mothers. The general comparison is that those Zimbabweans who depend upon processed foods are becoming weaker as generations comes and go as compared to their predecessors. It is common knowledge that the older generations were more resilient to pressure of hard work than the present generation. Research has also proved that eating of refined foods, fried and fast foods are the causes of cancerous tumors and other diseases such as sugar diabetes and heart coronary diseases (FAO, 2005) ^[9]. This seemed to be an awakening call to the Africans and Zimbabweans in particular that there is need to revert to eating the indigenous foods which were proven by scientists to be very nutritious and harmless to the body. For the older generation it seems that it may be easier for them to adopt the idea of indigenous foods. However, the younger generation which includes the university students may have attitudes which inhibit them from adjusting their diets so that they also eat indigenous foods. The current study seeks to find out the nature of attitudes the students have and how they influence their food choices. The study also seeks to find possible solutions to improve on food choices of the students.

Methodology

The aim of the current study was to find out the nature of attitudes university students have towards serving and eating of indigenous foods. Attitudes are evaluative hence the need to use the qualitative approach. The qualitative approach seeks to understand the meaning of events from the point of view of participants involved (Aspers, 2009; Denscombe, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln 2000) ^[6]. This study adopted the case study design in order to establish the nature of attitudes the university students have towards indigenous foods. A case study design specialises in an in-depth study of emotions and feelings of individuals such as university students on an entity. Fouché (2005) ^[11] posits that a case study aims to

understand and interpret the meaning of emotions and feelings of individuals. Food choice are based on attitudes hence the need to be thoroughly investigated at a specific place, with a specific group of people and then find the possible solutions to the specific problem.

The university population which comprises of more than twelve thousand students in five faculties was the target population. Strydom and Delpont (2005) ^[24] suggest that the researcher should consider the parameters of the population before a sample is chosen in order to adequately represent the population. The sample was conveniently sampled from three faculties namely the faculties of Education, Sciences and Arts which were considered the largest. The three faculties were purposely targeted as they are comprised of a variety of nationals and ethnic groups. Creswell (2009) ^[5] and Neuman (2006) ^[19] points out that purposive sampling is best when seeking prospective participants who have the right information for the study. The sample comprised of thirty (30) students that is 20 females and 10 males. More female students were chosen since they are involved in meal planning.

In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were the tools used to collect data. Focus group discussions were conducted with five groups of five students. Silverman (2004) suggests that interviews and focus group discussions are good for collecting qualitative data. The other five students were interviewed individually in order to find information that may be private. Both interviews and focus groups took almost an hour and all students involved were freely providing information. In-depth interviews were chosen for their strengths of collecting detailed information about the topic under study (Frankel & Wallen, 2006) ^[12]. Focus group discussions were done in a set-up of general discussions which were done in a natural way (Denscombe, 2006) ^[6]. Data was collected in natural settings of the students and all the data collected was recorded on schedules maintaining anonymity to ensure confidentiality.

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

Data collected is presented in narrative forms and thematically around two objectives of the present research.

The nature of attitudes of university students towards serving of indigenous foods

Generally, most university students admitted that they have a negative attitude towards indigenous foods. This is persistent with Frongillo's (2010) ^[13] findings that American structural adaptation resulted in the loss of Korean culture. Most of the students said that western foods have proved to be fashionable and tasty as compared to the indigenous foods. Some of them expressed that we buy foods which are easy to cook and filling. Most female university students who participated in the current research indicated that there is a lot of stigma associated with eating of indigenous foods. Padilla and Perez (2003) suggest that the question of stigma should be considered when explaining the processes involved in acculturation. The use of peanut butter instead of cooking oil sounded to be weird and attract stigmatisation to most students.

A few students with a strong rural background were advocating the use of indigenous foods. The discussions were very interesting as it was a clash of two giants, good health and good taste. Surprisingly some of the students were expressing that they only know and have only eaten western foods at home and school. This became an issue of concern

since this was indicative of future generations who may know very little about indigenous foods but with a short span of life due to the effects of genetically modified foods. Paquette, (2005) ^[20] asserts that most of the young generation lacks important knowledge of indigenous foods. It was generally acknowledged by most students who specialise in nutrition that serving of indigenous foods was an important healthy and life issue which cannot be ignored. The discussions gave an insight on the plight of all who depend on processed foods. One of the male students participant said "*our lives are in danger because of lack of knowledge*". This was an expression of great concern by most scholars over the food choices of the general student population. It seems focus group discussions shaded light to most students who were not aware of the dangers involved in eating inorganic and processed foods.

Issues related to food preparation and serving of indigenous foods were cited by most participants as a major cause of negative attitudes followed by ignorance of their importance. Instant foods to them seemed to be very attractive to them in terms of time serving and taste. The level of knowledge the students have on the importance of indigenous foods was also a major influence of negative attitudes portrayed by most students especially males. Lack of knowledge of the importance of good food choices was said to be critical in influencing the attitudes of the students. One female participant said that if we are informed we may make good choices. This implies that due to lack of knowledge most students have bad food choices. The use of drinks and bread as a quick way of satisfying the need for food is also another possible cause of ulcers for most students. Some students blamed acculturation as an influencing factor in food choices. Attitudes are constructed by the influence of other cultures (Samaratunge & Härtel, 2011; Boyington *et al.*, 2008) ^[22, 3]. Western foods have negatively influenced most Zimbabweans as they are flooded on the market. Indigenous foods are rarely found in abundance in supermarkets hence they are unpopular said one student. Vegetable markets in most cases have significant volumes of indigenous foods but most of the foods are seasonal, such were some of the challenges that face those who want to eat indigenous foods. Dried vegetables are common relish in indigenous recipes/meals. However, they are difficult to prepare and serve. Most dried vegetables are tasty in peanut butter but then the appearance may not be appealing to the eyes.

Some students had an admixture of attitudes. These expressed that they eat what is readily available and cheap. Staple foods from their local environment were given priority. One female student said that I eat millet sadza because it's our staple food. This implies that the student is used to certain foods hence adopting other foods may not be difficult but without changing their attitudes towards their traditional foods. Such students combine western and indigenous foods casually. Students who had positive attitudes towards indigenous foods were also those who were doing nutrition courses. The university modules in nutrition include the advantages and dangers of the use of organic and inorganic manure respectively and also problems associated in growing such crops as well as the use of genetically modified foods. Most of the students doing this course appreciated their indigenous foods as they are not genetically modified. Dietary guidelines in meal planning also enhance the knowledge base related to importance of eating unprocessed foods of the students (Maroyi, 2012) ^[18]. The country's niche is on cultural heritage hence most courses taught in most universities involve

cultural issues such as norms and values that are acceptable. Some of the students echoed that indigenous foods improve one's well being and the foods have in most cases no side effects.

Attitudes of students and food choices

Most of the students admitted that their attitudes influenced their food choices. Negative attitudes towards certain indigenous foods have been the main cause of leaving out them from their diet. Serving of indigenous insects such as termites, fatty locusts (*madhumbudya*), small ground black or brown crickets (*zvikubwe/makurwe*) and other crickets were shunned by most students because of their natural fear of insects. The attitude that insects may cause harm through stings have caused some students to avoid such food in their diet. Some insects have a strong aroma such as green insects found in trees (*harugwa*) and some students were expressing their disfavor of such foods. It seems that pre-conceived ideas, such as, prestige greatly influence attitudes and food choices by university students. Attitudes are tied to self-esteem and self image. Some people may refuse their cultures in order to adopt the new culture for reasons such as prestigious associations (Padilla & Perez, 2003).

Most students associated indigenous foods to poverty or backwardness. In their interactions with others, people often expose or hide certain beliefs, ideas or behaviours to manipulate the perceptions of these people hold of them (Frongillo, 2010) [13]. Most students did not want to be associated with primitive foods. One male student participant said that indigenous foods are for the old folks. This may imply that their food choices are in relation to fashionable foods. The results of such food choices may cause future health problems as it is not always the case that fashionable foods have no side effects. The food choice in this regard is influenced by physiological implications. Attitudes are mostly psychological hence not the best to be used in food choices. The study revealed that some students were told by doctors not to eat certain foods due to health reasons. It seemed that most students' attitudes were not placing health first since they were following the doctors' diet not by choice but by fear of the end result. Positive attitudes towards indigenous foods cause individuals to voluntarily eat the food and help in developing some interest in such foods. When the funds to purchase the foods are limited positive attitudes towards certain foods may be a reason for buying the foods. Some students were admitting that given the limited funds they have, they prefer to buy foods they like most.

Indigenous foods in most cases were said not to be on the list of basic food items due to the degree of favour, associated to them. One female participant said that I cannot buy monkey apples (*matamba*) when exotic apples which are prestigious are readily available. This may mean that buying of certain foods may not materialise due to negative attitudes. Some students were also stating that facilities to store and prepare the indigenous foods were also a challenge. However, some were for the idea of using the available resources to their advantages as they use indigenous foods. The study also revealed that those in need for an attitudinal change so as to effectively use indigenous foods. A degree of disfavour or favour determines the effort and how the individual will look for the food type (Maroyi, 2012) [18]. Some indigenous foods are scarce such as the small grains like rapoko but one's attitude determines the effort applied in-order to find the commodity. The willingness to pay the price of the commodity is greatly determined by the value placed to the

type of food. Indigenous foods have become of no significance to the ordinary people who afford the western type of foods.

Some students were blaming the cultural and religious beliefs that prohibit people from eating certain foods. Totems and other beliefs such as that there are certain foods which are not supposed to be eaten by females or males such as offal (tripe) by pregnant women and okra by men (FAO, 2005; WHO, 2010) [9, 28]. One of the male student indicated that there are conflicting views in most cultural and religious beliefs which are associated with indigenous foods. This has caused most educated people to eat western foods as there is a wide variety to choose from. Belief systems have reduced the list of indigenous foods as some should not be eaten for other reasons.

Conclusions and Recommendations

There is need for a paradigm shift that entails the emphasis of going indigenous through educating the nation by providing information about the importance of their native diet and the dangers of eating processed and genetically modified foods. The following is a model that summarises the recommendations from this present study.

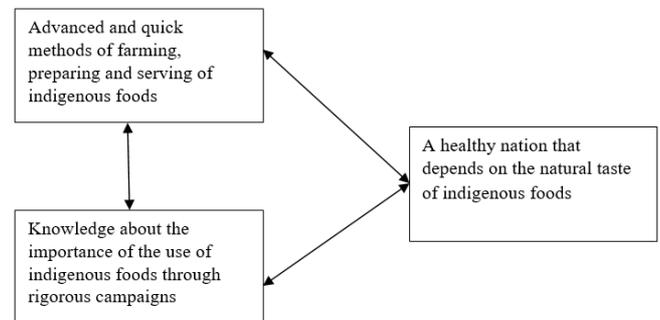


Fig 1: LM model (2016) is for improving the attitudes of university scholars towards indigenous foods

The above model emphasises a paradigm shift that elevates the status of indigenous foods in place of processed and modified foods. Young people like university students favour fashionable foods and a program can be put in place that promotes indigenous foods to get into fashion then that also helps to remove the stigma associated with native foods. Modern and advanced methods of serving foods may also assist in upgrading the position of indigenous foods. In addition, major health concerns related to processed foods may be instilled to the students so that they put their health first. These native plants and animals are powerful tools for tackling many basic health problems across the African continent including Zimbabwe.

The findings from the study recommends that the nation of Zimbabwe as a whole through the help of international organisations be involved in the process of reverting to their native diet which is mainly composed of indigenous foods. There is need for a motivational strategy that exterminates the myth associated with indigenous foods. Hotels and food outlets may also be encouraged motivated by the Ministry of Tourism to prepare indigenous foods by use of incentives for those who excel in the use of indigenous foods.

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