

Photo Blog: Hand-Cooked Food in the Gambia

LSE's Sylvia Chant recounts the story of Fatou who sells food on the roadside in the Gambia.



Here, a hot and tasty sauce comprising tomatoes, peppers, garlic, chillis and palm oil is literally 'hand-cooked' by a Gambian woman, Fatou, in Kanifing. She operates this completely within the precarious realms of the 'informal' urban economy. She has no licence, no security, nor guarantee that she will be evicted from her spot on a daily basis.

After mixing her diverse ingredients painstakingly by hand, Fatou's pot is placed on a charcoal-fired brazier and is then used to enhance the taste of fritters and bread, a snack coveted and consumed by numerous local urban residents.

Every day, Fatou gets up at about 5am and goes to the market to buy her produce (which also comprises some fresh fruits and salad ingredients). She then lingers in her spot, adjacent to an informal 'bicycle doctor' just off one of Banjul-Kanifing Municipal Council's main traffic thoroughfares, until around 7pm.

Fatou declares that she sells fresh and cooked food to 'feed her kids'. Having no-one to help her look after them, her 9 year old daughter, also named Fatou, misses school to assist in her mother's income-generating ventures. Adult Fatou rests her 9-month old baby boy on her back, or on the hard wooden bench she occupies from dawn until dusk, six days a week.

When Fatou is blessed with regular visits from 'loyal' customers, she gives royal discounts, sometimes not wanting to take any money at all from those people she has come to regard as 'friends'. Such integrity beggars belief in an urban economy blighted by high un- and under-employment and low wages, but has also resulted in something of a 'following' for Fatou and her food.

*Sylvia Chant is Professor of Development Geography at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). This post originally appeared in **Urban Vignettes**.*

March 17th, 2014 | [Urbanisation](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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