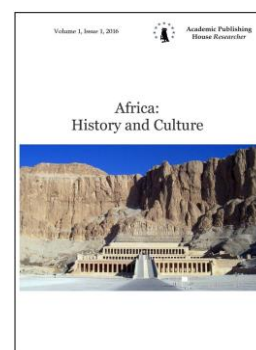


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Get the Rabbit Habit! National Rabbit Project, Mamattah and the Psychology of Rabbit Consumption in Ghana

Jacob Owusu Sarfo ^{a, b, c, *}

^a University of Cape Coast, Ghana

^b All Nations University College, Ghana

^c Eastern Regional Hospital, Ghana

Abstract

Rabbit breeding and rabbit meat in Ghana have both political and animal husbandry values. Beginning from the famous “Operation Feed Yourself” (OFY) by the regime of Colonel Ignatius Kutu Acheampong’s National Redemption Council (NRC), rabbits gain popularity into national history, food production and nutrition of Ghanaians. The OFY housed the National Rabbit Project (NRP) which was created and managed by Newlove Mamattah. This paper seeks to examine the historical NRP, rabbit production, benefits and potentials existing and future governments in Ghana and other African countries can unearth to advance food production. Although OYF, Mamattah and the NRP made historic triumphs, the role of rabbits in national development has not received much attention till date. The loss of interest in raising and consuming rabbit meat may be attributed partly to the political fall of the NRC and the poor political commitment of future governments towards sustainable meat production in Ghana.

Keywords: animal husbandry, Ghana, national rabbit project, national redemption council, operation feed yourself.

1. Introduction

Rabbits have a long history with many countries worldwide and are raised for several purposes. These small mammals are raised most often for their fur and meat. In some cases, they are kept as pets or as show rabbits (McNitt et al., 2013). Rabbit breeding as an industry has been evolving over the years to include governments, international agencies, and commercial farmers. In Ghana, history has it that domestic rabbits were brought into the then colonial Gold Coast by missionaries. These missionaries introduced the congregations in their missions to raise them. Nonetheless, local rabbits which were hunted or reared were treasured and highly priced (Lukefahr, 2000; Opoku, Lukefahr, 1990). One of the greatest motivation then was that, “rabbits were easy to handle by women and children, feeding and management practices were simple and locally sustainable, and a plentiful (albeit inexpensive) meat source was secured” (Lukefahr, 2000: 308).

* Corresponding author

E-mail addresses: sarfojo@yahoo.com (J. O. Sarfo)

2. Results



Fig. 1. Rabbits feeding on vegetable leftovers at Rabbit Reino, Eastern Region, Ghana (photo credit: J. O. Sarfo)

Currently, rabbit breeding is done at the backyards of local Ghanaian farmers, with few commercial breeders. To begin and maintain a rabbit farm, basic guide is provided by Ghana's Ministry of Food and Agriculture (n.d.) at their district and regional offices. Generally, the ministry recommends that a healthy breeding stock should be obtained from a trusted rabbit breeder to start with. Other necessary information like reproduction, hutch construction, feed rack and nest box construction, site for breeding, and issues regarding feeding are briefly outlined on their website* (see examples from local farms in [Figure 1, 2](#)).

Post-independent Ghana had Ghanaians engaging in small backyard rabbit breeding. Though this farming was ongoing, it is vital to note that the movement of keeping domestic rabbits on a more extensive and popular scale began in Ghana during the NRC's OYF ([Lukefahr, 2000](#)).



Fig. 2. Rabbit hutches at Savanna Farms, Ashanti Region, Ghana (photo credit: Raphael Owusu Sekyere Assim)

Mamattah and the NRP

The historic OFY by the NRC government of Colonel Ignatius Kutu Acheampong, under Colonel Frank George Bernasko [Commissioner for Agriculture] was driven in 1972 by food shortages in Ghana ([Ghanaweb, 2010](#); [Girdner et al., 1980](#)). The OFY as a food relief intervention

* https://mofa.gov.gh/site/?page_id=14081

encouraged Ghanaians in both rural and urban areas to grow food in their backyards and open spaces. It was in this same period that came the NRP (McNitt et al., 2013; Okolie, 2003).

The NRP, which first began as “Rabbit for Food for the Millions in Ghana” was suggested by Mr Newlove Mamattah, a past adult educator and a lover of rabbit breeding. He was approached and supported with 160,000 Cedis (equivalent of USD 184,000) by the Government of Ghana to make the NRP a reality. The passion of Mr Mamattah got him to be appointed as the first Director of the NRP. With a foundation stock of 80 local rabbits, he developed a 32-hectare farm at Kwabenya in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana (Lukefahr, 2000; Opoku, Lukefahr, 1990). Figure 3 shows the signboard of NRP at its Kwabenya location in Ghana. This site became the home of rabbit breeding during the rule of NRC.



Fig. 3. NRP signboard in Kwabenya (photo credit: S. D. Lukefahr*)

Mr Mamattah and the NRP were fortunate to receive exotic stocks from Australia, Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Switzerland and the United States of America upon request between 1972 and 1984. Governments of these countries donated breeds such as Alaskan, Blue Vienna, Californian, Champagne D’Argent, Checkered Giant, Chinchilla, Creme D’Argent, Danish Giant, Danish White, Dutch, Flemish Giant, French Lop, New Zealand White and Thuringer to the project (Lukefahr et al., 1992; Lukefahr, 2000). The NRP progressed from 80 rabbits to an approximate population of about 4,000 rabbits after 3 years of Mr Mamattah’s leadership, though these exotic breeds faced adaptation challenges (Opoku, Lukefahr, 1990). Today, most of these exotic and hybrids can be found in many local farms in Ghana (see Figures 1, 4, 5).

Mr Mamattah pushed the rabbit agenda in Ghana with the help of a Malawian Professor of Communications, Joseph Ascroft, who was on leave from the University of Iowa. This team got Ghanaians interested in “everything rabbit”; from local posters to rabbit cuisines. Farmers received various workshops in rabbit breeding after registration with the NRP, before obtaining their stocks. Schools began to include rabbit breeding in their curricula and the whole of Ghana embraced the concept of rabbit farming. Mr Mamattah also circulated the NRP concept and achievements at local and international conferences, workshops, radio presentations and scientific publications. He was later on appointed as the Secretary for Developing Countries in 1976, at the first World Rabbit Congress which was organised by the World Rabbit Science Association in Dijon, France (Lukefahr, 2000; Mamattah, 1978).

* <https://world-rabbit-science.com/Developping/Documents/Projects-Stories/Ghana-Rabbit-Project.htm>



Fig. 4. A colony of rabbits [with their kitten] feeding at Rabbit Reino, Eastern Region, Ghana (photo credit: J. O. Sarfo)

Between the beginning of the programme till 1977, Ghana had 13,948 rabbits after its first national rabbit census. After working so hard and promoting rabbit farming in Ghana, Mr Mamattah handed over to Mr Eugene Opoku by the late 1970s as the Director of NRP (Lukefahr, 2000). After the fall of the Colonel Acheampong's NRC, the OFY became unpopular including the NRP (Baidoo, 2014).

The Psychology of Rabbit Consumption in Ghana

Rabbit meat is famous as one of the healthiest white meat when compared with other domestic meat sources like chicken, beef or pork (Nistor et al., 2013). It contains higher quantity of protein (28 g) while lower in fat and calories. It is high in potassium, calcium and phosphorus but practically cholesterol free and low in sodium. It also contains vital vitamins and minerals like vitamin B, copper, iron and zinc. In a chemical analysis of rabbit, chicken, beef and pork, "rabbit meat was richer in calcium (21.4 mg/100 g) and phosphorus (347 mg/100 g) than other types of meat and lower in fat (9.2 g/100 g) and cholesterol (56.4 mg/100 g). Beef had the highest cholesterol content (114.5 mg/100 g), almost double than rabbit meat, while pork was rich in fat (28.2 g/100 g)" (Nistor et al., 2013: 172). This makes rabbit meat, highly digestible and very friendly to children, elderly, diabetic and heart disease patients.

Notwithstanding these important benefits, cheaper breeding requirements and the role of rabbit meat in Ghana's food history, the current breeding and consumption of rabbit is not encouraging. Fewer farms in Ghana like the Savanna Farms in Ashanti Region (see Figure 5) and Farm of Mr Adotei Brown (popularly called Farmer Brown) in the peripheries of Greater Accra Region have commercial rabbit farms (Baidoo, 2014).

Today, the behaviour of the average Ghanaian towards rabbit meat production and consumption may range from indifference to less interest due to many factors. Unlike the days of the NRP where the Government of Ghana and media support boosted the 'taste' of the general population regarding rabbit meat, the case is currently the opposite (Baidoo, 2014; Lukefahr, 2000).

In addition, the inadequacy of public knowledge regarding the health benefits of rabbit meat when compared to popular meat sources like chicken, turkey, pork, beef, sheep and goat meat may be a factor. At present, Ghana still struggles with high protein-energy malnutrition (PEM) and other nutritional problems. Though the annual mortality rate per 100,000 people from PEM has reduced by 10.1 % since 1990 to an average of 0.4 % a year, Ghana is still lagging behind with annual PEM mortality rate of 25.6 per 100,000 people and Iron-Deficiency Anaemia of 9.3 per 100,000 people (Health Grove, n.d). These nutritional deficiencies could easily be realised by making rabbit meat accessible to the masses at affordable prices.



Fig. 5. Exotic rabbits in their hutches at Savanna Farms, Ashanti Region, Ghana (photo credit: Raphael Owusu Sekyere Assim)

As the Government of Ghana launched the “Planting for Food and Job Campaign” in 2017, a similar policy should target sustainable meat production in Ghana (Frimpong, 2017). This is worth considering as a nation because of the inadequacy of meat production and related health problems (Health Grove, n.d). In that sense, rabbit breeding and consumption can be given the priority and support as done during the NRP days.

Rabbit breeding also has the power to create jobs and provide adequate meat production as these mammals are noted to have a faster breeding rate; beginning from 6 months old, an average rabbit will breed and kindle within 31 days*. Ghana can also join exporters of rabbit meat to places in Europe, United States and Canada as done by nations like China†. This will help improve our national income through export to grow the domestic economy.

3. Conclusion

In summary, rabbit breeding and consumption had been with Ghana since the colonial days through the coming of missionaries. The NRP took it to a national pedestal and encouraged scientific breeding and nationwide consumption. The hard work of Mr Mamattah, followed by Mr Opoku came to an end as the OFY collapsed. Notwithstanding these issues, rabbits breeding and consumption have answers to Ghana’s demand of protein, other health concerns, and socio-economic problems. The paper recommends a national rabbit census to document the current state of rabbit breeding in Ghana. In addition, rabbit breeders in Ghana should come together to organise scientific publications, conferences, workshops and other in-service breeders training. Government of Ghana should support these initiatives to boost the production of rabbits in Ghana.

4. Conflicts of Interest

The author declares the work has no conflicts of interest.

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