

Kitchens in Besongabang

This is a quick report from Pearly Wong to give an idea of the way people cook in Besongabang.
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Number of people in the kitchen

Usually In a household, only one or two women will be responsible for the cooking. But certain activities might require more household members to help out in the kitchen. For instance, I visited a family when they are processing cassava to make gari, a local staple. So there are 6 people in the kitchen simultaneously working on different processes: Most of them are peeling cassava, others are preparing other ingredients or cooking (See picture below). They explained to me that such activities take place once per week. For woman without so many children, they will ask help from 2-3 neighbours and friends.

In occasion of wedding, funeral or other celebrations, they will invite other women to set up a few more fireplace nearby the kitchen (usually all cannot be fit into kitchen) to cook.

In usual days, it is normal to have 1 or 2 visitors visiting while cooking. They will sit together with the host and talk with them.



Figure 1: the woman is grinding pepper



Figure 2: Others are peeling cassava

Place to prepare food

They either prepare food inside or nearby the kitchen. Most of them have no working surfaces. However, one woman I visited is using the log for firewood as her temporary working surface. It looks beautiful and neat. To prepare certain food such as fufu, preparation needs to be made in advance to soak the cassava, so that it can be soft enough to make doughs. These consume spaces in kitchens. People also store plantain and maize in their kitchen. Typically they hang their maize right above their cooking places so that the maize can be smoked each time they cook. The purpose is to dry the maize for longer storage.

*can we still do any of the smoking of maize with the chimney?



Figure 1: Maize hung above the three-stone fire to dry. This is an enclosed kitchen - the same place where I recorded the process of starting fire (See report Firewood in Besongabang [http://www.groundwork.org/English/Cameroon/PearlyFirewood in BesongabangWeb.pdf](http://www.groundwork.org/English/Cameroon/PearlyFirewood_in_BesongabangWeb.pdf) for notes on stoves and firewood.).



Figure 2: log surface to prepare food (cheap table). This is a semi-open kitchen, with three sides enclosed and one side completely exposed.



Figure 3: soaking cassava in the kitchen

Time spent in Kitchen:

Most women say that they spent 1-2 hours cooking, depending on the type of food. For instance cooking fufu takes 1 and a half hour but boiling plantain takes 45 minutes. But the men complained to me that the women usually take more time than that (and they were starving). From my experience with Takor, 2-3 hours cooking is normal but he usually cooks in a big amount that lasts for days. When waiting for their food to be cooked, they do other kitchen work such as cleaning dishes, peeling melon (egusi) seeds, talking to friends/visitors. They might also attend to other housework such as laundry.

*In general, I have a feeling that they are not rushing when cooking but taking their time. Also the lack of convenient cooking space might reduce their efficiency. However, even when we introduce convenient cooking space, it might take time to change their habit to suit the space, if at all. For instance, I have not seen people cutting food on a surface. Most are sitting down and cutting using two hands with a bowl on their lap.

Improving Kitchen

When being asked how to improve their kitchen, those with open kitchen (see below) will prefer an enclosed kitchen with big windows for ventilation and light. Some mention having water in the kitchen. Some would like bigger spaces to store their things. Others mentioned about having a large gas stove, refrigeration, etc.



About Indoor and Outdoor kitchen

Some of the people in Besongabang have already an indoor kitchen (see picture below) with gas stove. However, all of them maintain an outdoor kitchen, except for bachelor). They explained that the indoor kitchen and outdoor kitchen is suitable for different dishes. For instance, they use the former for cooking rice and stew, warming food while other dishes such as fufu have to be cooked on fire. So it is essential for a family to have wood stove, while gas stove will add a lot to their convenience. But generally, indoor kitchen is considered an improvement of living standard and most would like to have them.

See: <http://www.groundwork.org/English/Cameroon/PearlyKitchen%20picturesWeb.pdf> for more kitchen pictures, especially relating to kitchen enclosure.



Eating

Usually they carry the food into the house and eat. But if they are in a rush, they might eat in the kitchen. They might also feed visitors food in the kitchen.

How to make cooking more fun?

When I asked people whether they enjoy cooking, most of them said yes, followed with a big laugh. When I asked again the reason they laugh, they said that it is their obligation, so they have to enjoy cooking, as no one else is going to feed the children. The concept of making cooking more fun is difficult for them to grasp. But generally, they like receiving visitors when they are cooking.

In the kitchens where we weight the firewood consumed by households, the kitchens of neighbours are built closely together, even though their houses are of different directions. From observation during my frequent visit, I can see that they often interact and help each other when cooking. Cooking is a completely social activity in this case. The kitchens are built around the well in the compound, which adds a lot to the convenience of carrying water. On the contrary, there are also relatively isolated houses and compounds towards the end of the village, so kitchens are separated and neighbours should pay their visit on purpose.

*I think a kitchen should be enclosed enough to give the sense of hygiene and protection, but open enough to have chances of interaction with passerby and visitors.

About Cooking

When lighting fire, people usually use palm oil wastes, kerosene or burning plastic bag to assist them. They describe the process as easy. It is also common where people pick up some firewood under the pot of cooking neighbours to help start their own fire. After lighting the fire they might need it with big intensity for as long as two hours (to steam koki) or 1 hour 30 minutes (to make fufu and soup). While making drinks, heating food or boiling rice, they require fire burning with smaller intensity for shorter time. To control fire intensity while cooking, they adjust distance of fire from the pot. Some of them also add more wood branches or sprinkle water to control the fire itself. While three stone fire is the most common from what I encountered, I saw one woman using a pot stand bought from a local welder in the village. It costs 2500 franc (US\$5.32). She explained that the stand is steadier and thus safer than three-stone.



Figure 4: blurry picture (due to smoke) of pot on a stand above fire

Typically, cooks will light their fire twice, in the morning to warm up food or make hot drinks, and in the afternoon to prepare new meals. It is not uncommon that they skip cooking some days as there is food from the day before remaining. However, they will still need to warm up the food.

The common problem faced during cooking is the smoke produced by certain types of wood and wood that has not dried completely. During the rainy season this can especially be a problem. Hence some people also use alternatives such as sawdust stove during rainy season. I once sat with someone cooking and it took me 20 minutes to relocate myself outside the kitchen due to irritation of my eyes by smoke. Fuel is easily available in their farms but household can spend a significant amount of time collecting them, depending on the distance of their farms from their houses, and what kind of wood to be collected/cut (Harder wood needs more efforts and time to cut). Cooks will appreciate less smoke, more efficient woodstove (thus less firewood needed) and less time for cooking (by improving transfer of heat to pots).

Firewood use and List of Cooking

To understand how much firewood each family uses, we measure the firewood stored by three families and count the days they use them. See table below:

Family Name	Tambe Felix	Tambe Raffe	Ayuk Mathew
Household member	3	5	2 (frequently feed others as well)
Amount of firewood (kg)	39	66	123
Firewood use			
19-Aug		Plantain, Rice, Stew, Groundnut (for sale)	Cabbage, Plantain, Groundnut
20-Aug	Ekuang (cassava flour wrapped in leaves)	Plantain	Plantain Porridge
21-Aug	Plantain & Vegetables	Fufu & Soup	Rice & Stew
22-Aug	No data		
23-Aug	Jllo Fried Rice	Plantain Porridge	Irish Potatoes
24-Aug	Fufu & Soup	Fufu & Vegetable	Fufu & Vegetable
25-Aug		Coconut rice	
26-Aug	Rice & Stew	Plantain	Plantain & Vegetable
27-Aug	Koki		Fufu Corn
28-Aug			Plantain & Groundnut
29-Aug	Fufu & Vegetable	Plantain, Beans, Rice	
30-Aug		Plantain Porridge (firewood finished)	Plantain & Vegetable
31-Aug	Rice & Soup (firewood finished)		Fufu & Soup
Total number of days	12	12	26 days- finished on 13/9 (she left the village in between for 3-4 days to attend funeral)
Number of cooking days	9	10	Around 20 days

*White, blank spaces indicate no cooking on that particular day

Notes:

1. Both families use about 13kg per HH member for a period of 12 days, i.e. a little more than 1 kg each day per HH member or more than 7kg for a week.
2. It is common for families to not cook on some days. This is mostly because they have food leftover from the day before. Tambe Raffe did not cook on 27 & 28 August in her own kitchen as she was helping with the cooking in a funeral.
3. Tambe Felix and Tambe Raffe's families do not carry out activities such as processing palm oil and frying gari during the period of experiment, both of which are common activities in the village and known to consume much firewood.
4. Ayuk Mathew's wife is described by neighbours as a heavy firewood user. From what I observed myself, she does not have the habit of putting off the fire after finish cooking and let them continue to burn. Ironically, she is the one who told us that many trips have to be done to the farm to collect firewood. She also has used the firewood for palm oil processing (which consumes much firewood) during the period of experiment.

*While these families are not necessarily representative of the many families in Besongabang, they can be useful as baseline to compare whether our stove can indeed reduce firewood consumption, if those stoves can be provided to same families for experiment later.

About Cooking Pots

Cooking pots in Besongabang come in a range of sizes. They are made of metal and come with lids. The diameter measured so far ranges from 24.2cm (for bachelor) to 34.4cm. The height measured ranges from 12cm to 18cm. The height increases as the diameter of the pot increases. For instance, the pot with 24.2cm diameter is 12.2cm tall; one with 29.8cm is 14.5cm tall; the one with 34.4cm is 18cm tall.

