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## Cultural knowledge in child complementary feeding in agropastoral settings of northern Benin

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### Abstract

The Benin Demographic and Health Survey recently revealed that 32 % of children under five are malnourished. Local nutrition practices and knowledge are increasingly seen as reliable solutions to the problem of malnutrition. However, little is known about the extent to which child nutrition is related to the interaction of local and external nutrition environments, as well as related beliefs and associated cultural knowledge. The present study aims to investigate conceptions and knowledge related to children's complementary feeding. Data were collected from mothers of children under five from the communities of Bariba, Peul and Gando in Banikoara and Nikki districts in northern Benin. Participant observations were conducted in 34 households of mothers with children to collect data on the provision and preparation of food for children and their consumption between 2021 and 2022. In addition, 6 focus groups were conducted with about ten mothers on stories and proverbs related to child nutrition. The findings showed local foods as porridge and dough are predominant in the three communities. The sauces served are usually made from dried local vegetables. The preparation and consumption of meat or fish is almost non-existent in Peul households, but is common in Gando and Bariba communities. In Peul communities, sauce preparation based on okra leaves mixing with crushed beans as vegetal protein containing food is rather common. Also, most of child mothers cooked a mixture of boiled sorghum flour and *moringa* leaves called dambou as special meals for diversifying household diets. In the Bariba communities, special children's meals made from external foods such as rice, pastas and couscous are particularly common. Furthermore, thirteen stories and proverbs collected meant that mothers' feeding practices are underpinned by: 1) the idea of 'taking care of the belly' of family members; 2) the valorisation of food or the attitude of 'not wasting food' (e.g. re-preparing leftover food); 3) the local notion of 'valued foods' (e.g. viewing some foods as sources of 'power' for children). These findings highlighted positive deviant knowledge and practices among targeted child mothers that are likely suitable for improving children's complementary feeding practices in neighbouring malnourished households or communities.

**Keywords:** Agropastoral settings, Benin, child feeding and nutrition, child mothers, food ethnography