

EatSafe - Evidence and Action Towards Safe, Nutritious Food

Story Sourcing in Birnin Kebbi, Nigeria

March 2021



This EatSafe report presents evidence that will help engage and empower consumers and market actors to better obtain safe nutritious food. It will be used to design and test consumer-centered food safety interventions in informal markets through the EatSafe program.

Recommended Citation: Pierce Mill Entertainment and Education. 2021. Story Sourcing in Birnin Kebbi, Nigeria. A USAID EatSafe Project Report.

Acknowledgements: The interviews and stories were conducted and written by Abdullahi Ibrahim, Aishatu Madina Maishanu, and Mustapha Muhammad.

Agreement Number: 7200AA19CA00010/ Project Year 2 output

Project Start Date and End Date: July 31, 2019 to July 30, 2024

USAID Technical Office: Bureau for Food Security (BFS)/Office of Market and Partnership Innovations (MPI)

Agreement Officer Representative (AOR): Lourdes Martinez Romero

Submission Date: March 2021

For additional information, please contact:

Karolina Jasinska de Benavides
Pierce Mill Entertainment & Education
3121 South St NW
Washington, DC 20007
Email: Karolina@piercemillmedia.com

Walker Lambert
Pierce Mill Entertainment & Education
3121 South St NW
Washington, DC 20007
Email: Walker@piercemillmedia.com

This document is produced by Pierce Mill Entertainment & Education and made possible by the generous support of the American people through the support of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Its contents are the sole responsibility of Pierce Mill Entertainment & Education and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the U.S. Government.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	5
Introduction	6
Methodology	7
Results	11
<i>Profile of interviewed vendors</i>	11
<i>Stories from Birnin Kebbi</i>	14
<i>Stories of learning from errors</i>	14
<i>Stories of women in the market</i>	18
<i>Stories of service to others</i>	23
<i>Stories of resilience and motivation</i>	28
<i>Stories of health risks</i>	43
<i>Stories of reliance on the government for business help</i>	47
Analysis	56
Recommendations for Intervention Design and Future Studies under EatSafe	60
References	62
Appendices	63
<i>Appendix 1: Story Sourcing Guide</i>	
<i>Appendix 2: Birnin Kebbi Briefing</i>	
<i>Appendix 3: Interview Form</i>	

LIST OF TABLES

<i>Table 1: Demographic Profile of Interviewed Vendors</i>	11
--	----

LIST OF FIGURES

<i>Figure 1: Birnin Kebbi Story Scout bios</i>	9
<i>Figure 2: Sampling of initial interview questions</i>	10
<i>Figure 3: Radio and cell phone use among interviewed vendors</i>	13
<i>Figure 4: Sampling of rich details from stories</i>	59

ACRONYMS

Below is a list of all acronyms and abbreviations used in the report.

COVID – Coronavirus Disease (2019-nCoV)

GAIN – Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition

ILRI – International Livestock Research Institute

PM – Pierce Mill Entertainment & Education

SBCC – Social and Behavior Change Communication

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In January 2021, Story Scouts sourced stories amongst informal food market vendors in three markets in the city of Birnin Kebbi in northwest Nigeria. Story Sourcing is the semi-formal process that uses journalistic techniques to gather stories directly from the audience of interest. These stories will be used to create resonant and culturally relevant media interventions that integrate food safety messages and behaviors.

In Birnin Kebbi markets, three Story Scouts conducted 61 in-depth interviews with various food vendors. From these interviews, they selected 24 (eight each) stories to write up. Scouts interviewed primarily Hausa men and women aged 18-70 years old who sold a wide variety of foods, including staple grains, vegetables, meat, fish, and oils.

The Story Sourcing approach focused on gathering stories about different aspects of the lives of food vendors. The result was a multi-faceted montage of their world and the discovery of several themes which emerged from their stories, including service to others, resilience and motivation, women in the market, learning from errors, occupational hazards, pride and success, religious norms and values, seizing market advantage, and reliance on the government for business help.

These stories and the themes therein will guide the development of resonating media programs that feature food safety messages and behaviors (e.g., SBCC media such as radio dramas, videos used in training, etc.).

INTRODUCTION

USAID's Feed the Future's *Evidence and Action Toward Safe and Nutritious Food* (EatSafe) is a five-year collaborative agreement implemented by the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), the International Livestock and Research Institute (ILRI), and Pierce Mill Entertainment & Education (PM). A key objective of EatSafe is investigating what role consumer demand can have to improve food safety in informal markets in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). As such, EatSafe has two primary audiences: the consumer and the informal market vendor, both of whom play critical roles in improving food safety.

The EatSafe Story Sourcing activity (1.8) is formative research executed in support of designing EatSafe interventions, in particular around interventions focusing on food vendors. In January of 2021, PM executed fieldwork for the Story Sourcing activity among food vendors in three markets in Birnin Kebbi, Nigeria: Central Market, Yaryara Market, and Toshon Kasuwa Market.

What is Story Sourcing

Story Sourcing is a semi-formal, journalistic process conducted by Story Scouts using in-depth interviews to gather stories directly from the target audience—in this case, informal market food vendors. These stories will be used to inform the design and production of various types of media-based programs as part of the larger EatSafe intervention.

The heart of the Story Sourcing process is the people whose behavior the program seeks to influence. Intervention design is guided by speaking with vendors to gather stories from their life experiences to use as building blocks to construct resonant, entertaining, and culturally relevant media programs (e.g., SBCC media such as radio dramas, videos used in training, etc.). The aim, in part, is to prevent assumptions and stereotypes and to ultimately create stories that genuinely connect to the people whose behavior the program is trying to change. *Story Sourcing is predicated on the idea that each cultural context yields different stories that have the potential to influence and impact the behavior of that specific audience.*

Why Stories?

An extensive body of evidence shows how narrative communications (or stories) can have an impact on social, behavioral, and health outcomes of a group of people. It's not surprising then that development interventions have intentionally been using them in that manner for nearly six decades (Sood et al., 2017). The use of stories is particularly evident in entertainment-education programs that weave key messages and behaviors into compelling soap operas, radio dramas, TV show, videos, songs, and community theater aimed at changing expectations, behaviors, and norms (Orozco-Olvera et al., 2019; Singhal et al., 2004).

It follows then that understanding *how* stories can impact behavior is important to developing effective interventions, and there is an increasing body of work exploring those mechanisms (e.g. Shaffer, 2018). Researchers have identified several key mechanisms within narratives that help lead to behavior change, of which story immersion and character identification guide the design and objectives of Story Sourcing. (1) **Story immersion** (or transportation) is the mechanism wherein an audience is “transported” into the world of the story and, as a result, might be more willing to accept messages delivered through the story (Green & Brock, 2000). (2) **Character identification** is a narrative mechanism related to a connection between the audience and a character(s) in a story. Although there are many attributes woven into the idea of character identification, Story Sourcing leans heavily on Cohen’s (2001) conceptualization which suggests that character identification revolves around an empathetic connection related to “sharing the perspective of the character [and] feeling with the character” (p.251).

Story Sourcing then provides clues as to what kinds of stories might be immersive for this particular audience and what kinds of characters they might identify with. By speaking directly with the audience, we are able to capture glimpses of their motivations, aspirations, fears, hopes, and longings and uncover stories that demonstrate how those feelings play out in action. These can often be found in the answers to broad cultural and sociological questions. For example, in Birnin Kebbi these questions included: what are the economic, political, and/or family dynamics that influence a vendor’s behavior? Are there any cultural touchpoints that are important and why? How does religion influence the vendor’s life? Folklore? What are the various perceptions, beliefs, and superstitions within the vendor community? Where do vendors get their news? How do they manage their money? How do they raise capital? Such questions can lead to insightful personal stories and anecdotes about the target audience.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for executing Story Sourcing in Birnin Kebbi, Nigeria is rooted in the Story Sourcing Guide (Appendix 1). As noted in the guide, the first step is to localize the methodology for any given location. Below, we outline the specific and localized methodology used to execute Story Sourcing in Birnin Kebbi.

Implementing Story Sourcing in Birnin Kebbi

In October of 2020, PM commissioned an anthropologist to prepare an overview of Birnin Kebbi (Appendix 2). This first step provided PM with a broad contextual understanding of the location, the people, and the general market dynamics. With this baseline understanding of Birnin Kebbi, PM defined specifications for Story Scouts’ credentials and background and objectives of their assignment. After Scouts were hired, we collaborated with them to finalize the localized process.

With consideration to the size of the selected Birnin Kebbi markets, the general scope of the project, and our aim to have a diversity of journalistic voices, PM sought out three Story Scouts amongst Nigerian journalists who met the below criteria:

1. **Native Hausa speaker.** It was essential that Scouts were native speakers of Hausa, the dominant language in Birnin Kebbi, in order to develop a rapport with market vendors and allow them to naturally open up in an interview. In addition to this, the Hausa dialect spoken in Kebbi State is quite different from standard Hausa, as spoken in Abuja. Ideally, all Scouts could speak the Kebbi dialect.
2. **Contextual knowledge of market environment and vendors.** It was important that selected journalists had an understanding of the market and the vendors and were all intimately familiar with the local culture and cultural norms and included male and female representation.
3. **Strong English language skills.** It was important that PM and potentially other EatSafe global partners could easily communicate with the Scouts. It was also expected that the final report prepared by Scouts would be written in English.
4. **Reasonable and fair daily rate.**
5. **Strong past performance.** We sought Scouts who had demonstrated strong journalistic experience within northern Nigeria, including interviewing experience.
6. **Competent writing skills.** It was important that Scouts communicate in their own style the core of the stories they would find. (It was less important to us that the written story be “publishable” than for it to capture the essence of the vendor’s story and experience.)
7. **Positive References.** It was important for us to learn about the work style and work quality from the Scout’s past journalistic assignments.

To locate scouts, PM placed the consultancy announcement and targeted ads on LinkedIn and Hot Nigerian Jobs, which is one of the largest job boards in Nigeria. We also reached out to an extensive network of journalists, including those affiliated with the BBC World Service, BBC Hausa, Voice of America, National Public Radio, Vox, The Wall Street Journal, The Pulitzer Centre for Investigative Journalism, Rural Reporters, Premium Times, and the Daily Trust.

60 people applied. After initial scanning of the applicants, we remotely interviewed 13. This process yielded a number of qualified candidates.

To choose which journalists to hire as Scouts, we were guided by our interest in bringing different perspectives to the process.

Kebbi State sits in an Islamic region in northern Nigeria where genders are often separated in various aspects of social life (Casey, 2008). Consequently, it was important that at least one Scout be a Hausa woman who could more easily gather genuine stories from female vendors.

In addition, we wanted to collaborate with at least one journalist from Birnin Kebbi who was natively familiar with the local markets and with at least one journalist who had a significant byline with major news networks (e.g. BBC World Service). Finally, we were interested in collaborating with Scouts of various ages.

Taking these factors into consideration, the final Scouts hired to execute Story Sourcing were Mustapha Muhammad, Aishatu Madina Maishanu, and Abdullahi Ibrahim (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Birnin Kebbi Story Scout Bios

Mustapha Muhammad, Kano, Nigeria: For over two decades, Mr. Muhammad has been a stringer for BBC World Service, Bloomberg, and Radio France International, and he currently serves as CEO of Quick Action Media Nigeria. He has authored hundreds of articles focused on Northern Nigeria. He is a native Hausa speaker and has extensive experience in interviewing and talking with sources. He holds a masters from Bayero University in mass communications and development. He brings a wealth of journalistic experience specifically in Northern Nigeria.

Aishatu Madina Maishanu, Abuja, Nigeria: A native of Sokoto, (which is the same ethnic group as Kebbi), Ms. Maishanu was an international broadcaster with Voice of America (VOA) in Washington, DC for a year and a half ending in October 2020. Before returning to Nigeria, she reported the news for the VOA Hausa service and oversaw all VOA Hausa digital media platforms (including websites and social media handles). Aisha has also worked at BBC World Service as a Broadcast Journalist creating digital content. She holds a degree in Mass Communication from Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria.

Abdullahi Ibrahim, Birnin Kebbi, Nigeria: A native of Sokoto, Nigeria and long-time resident of Birnin Kebbi, Mr. Ibrahim currently serves as the general manager of Vision FM 92.9, one of the two primary radio stations serving Kebbi State. Prior to this role, he worked as communications consultant for UNICEF projects on malaria prevention, for the USAID-funded Compass Social and Behavior Change Communication (SBCC) Program, and for FHI360.

Story Scouts targeted market vendors in Birnin Kebbi's selected markets, 18 years of age or older, able to give their consent to be interviewed, and who sold food such as grains, vegetables, meat, fish, and ready to eat foods.

Taking into consideration the size of the selected markets and the need for each Scout to develop relationships with vendors to draw out stories, each Scout was tasked with conducting in-depth interviews with at least 20 market vendors over the span of roughly 10 days. Based on these interviews, each Scout was responsible to write up stories from eight of the vendors, resulting in 24 written stories from Birnin Kebbi. PM asked that each story be between 400-700 words long.

The aim was to capture the essence of a story, not to write a piece ready for publication in a periodical.

Of the 24 written stories, we set a target for 5-8 of the stories to be about women, as preliminary research indicated that the majority of established vendors were men.

Each Scout was asked to complement their story collections with photos and videos of the interviewees, the market, and the general environment.

To support the work of the Scouts, PM, through GAIN Nigeria, established a relationship with the market leadership. The names and profiles of the three Scouts were shared with the leadership in December, and PM secured permission of the market leaders for the Scouts to conduct their field work in the selected three markets. In addition, GAIN Nigeria provided contact information for all local leadership and Scouts were encouraged to make connections with them prior and during their fieldwork.

Each Scout worked with PM to define questions that would serve as starting points for conversations with vendors. A sampling of the initial questions is found in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Sampling of initial interview questions

- How did you start with this trade?
- What are the things you need to improve or expand your businesses?
- Which of your life achievements are you most proud of?
- How does the business impact your life and life of your family?
- What was the impact of the coronavirus pandemic and lockdown on your businesses?
- What informed your choice of business?
- What can you recall from your first day in this business?
- Did you ever feel like changing businesses and why?
- What other challenges do you face in this business?
- Is any member of your family partaking in this business?
- Is there any popular traditional song/poem or joke shared about this business?

Scouts executed their Story Sourcing assignment in January of 2021. Once in the field, Scouts surveyed the markets and approached vendors in a way they deemed most appropriate and effective to develop a relationship with the vendor and to secure consent for the interview and photos. Consent forms were written in Hausa. Scouts read consent forms to those that were illiterate and asked them to mark an “X” on the signature line.

As Scouts were interviewing vendors during the workday, they compensated them for their time with a 500 naira phone credit recharge card.

Finally, following Covid-19 precautions, Scouts wore face masks, provided face masks to interviewees, conducted all interviews outside, and to the extent possible kept at least a two meter distance from interviewees.

Using a printed interview form, Scouts collected the following information about each interviewed market vendor: market where he/she sold food items, GPS coordinates, name, phone number, gender, tribe, age, town of residence, food sold, and media consumption habits (Appendix 3). Scouts were asked to transfer this information regularly to PM via an online Google Form along with scanned signed consent forms, audio files of the interviews, story summaries, and photos/videos via Dropbox. PM reviewed the submissions as they arrived to ensure information was collected properly and consistently.

RESULTS

Profile of interviewed vendors

Scouts interviewed a variety of vendors (Table 1). Collectively, Scouts interviewed 61 vendors who met the inclusion criteria. Most of the interviewed vendors (36%) sold food at the Central Market, followed by Tsohon Kasuwa (28%) and Yaryara (23%) markets, which are significantly smaller. The majority of vendors were Hausa (84%) and residents of Birnin Kebbi (67%). One third (31%) of interviewed vendors were women. Over half of interviewed vendors (52%) were between ages of 31 and 50. Interviewed vendors sold a variety of food types, often not specializing in only one commodity. Most of the vendors interviewed sold rice and grains, vegetables, and meat and poultry.

Aisha Maishanu interviewed market vendors between January 7th and 15th (9 days). Abdul Ibrahim conducted the field work between January 12th and 23rd (12 days). Mustapha Muhammad executed Story Sourcing between January 14th and 22nd (9 days).

Table 1. Demographic profile of interviewed vendors (n=61).

Market where vendor sells food		
Central Market	22	36%
Tsohon Kasuwa Market	17	28%
Yaryara Market	14	23%
Areas adjacent to markets	8	13%

Town of residence		
Birnin Kebbi	41	67%
Other	20	33%
Gender		
Male	42	69%
Female	19	31%
Tribe		
Hausa	51	84%
Igbo	4	6.5%
Other	4	6.5%
Fulani	2	3%
Vendor Age		
31-50	32	52%
51+	18	30%
18-30	11	18%
Food sold (often more than one commodity was sold by the vendors)		
Rice and grains	12	20%
Vegetables	12	20%
Meat and poultry	10	16%
Fish	8	13%
Other (cola nut, locust beans, peanut dumplings, gum arabic, moringa leaves, cassava, potatoes, spices, palm oil, milk)	22	36%
Can vendor easily stream videos on his/her phone?		
No	46	75%
Yes	15	25%
What is vendor's most preferred way of getting news and entertainment?		
Radio	45	74%
TV	5	8%
Other people	5	8%

Mobile apps	4	8%
Movies (DVDs)	2	3%
Newspaper	0	-
What other ways are used to get news and entertainment?		
Radio	45	73%
TV	26	42%
Movies (DVD)	18	29%
Other people	14	23%
Mobile apps	13	21%
Newspaper	5	8%

Figure 3: Radio and cell phone use among interviewed vendors

To get anecdotal information on how to best reach market vendors during Phase II media interventions, Scouts were tasked with asking vendors about their media consumption preferences. These questions revealed interviewed vendors’ strong preference for radio. 74% of vendors stated that radio is their most preferred way of receiving news and entertainment, with newspapers being the least preferred option. Vendors access radio through their cell phones. Often, they gather in certain vendor stalls when it is time to listen to the news. As one Scout put it, “They do not joke with their radios.”

To watch television, you need a steady electricity supply or satellite dish, but for radio, vendors use their small phone or transistor radio. Still, some interviewed vendors indicated they also get news and entertainment via TV and movies, suggesting that visual media could be an option as part of EatSafe intervention.

It also became clear that most interviewed vendors do not use smartphones to access media, with 76% of vendors stating they cannot stream internet on their phone. Scouts observed that the vendors use phones, but not smartphones. A few vendors, most of them younger, use cell phones to access social network i.e. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc

Stories from Birnin Kebbi

The stories presented here are grouped by themes, which emerged from the stories the Scouts submitted:

- Stories of learning from errors
- Stories of women in the market
- Stories of service to others
- Stories of resilience and motivation
- Stories of occupational hazards
- Stories of reliance on government for business help

Stories of learning from errors



Looking good: Meat seller discovers the power of clean clothes and a clean stall.

Story protagonist: Faruk S Fawa (41)
Gender: male
Tribe: Hausa
Type of food sold: raw beef
Story Scout: Aisha Madina Maishanu

Neatness and fashion as a tool to lure customers is an uncommon skill used by few like Faruk S Fawa in Kebbi's Central Market.

It can be surprising to see how neat and dapper he looked: he is a butcher after all. Despite working with raw beef the entire day, his clothing was unstained. He had an extra

garment he wore on top of his attire to stay clean.

When asked about this, Faruk laughed and told the story of one customer who changed his life forever by giving him some simple advice. Faruk explained how he had always been an unclean young man. He never thought it was an issue because he sold raw meat and his garments would get dirty after working in the market.

A few years ago, Faruk met a certain customer who always complained to him of how he looked and smelled. She said, “Faruk, I only buy your meat because you offer the best prices in the market, but I cannot stand the way you look.”

Faruk did not think anything of what she said. One day, the lady and her entire household fell sick. Faruk still did not think much of the sickness but went to visit her at home to see how she was.

It was not until he got calls from three of his customers telling him about their declining health, that he suspected it had something to do with his meat. Faruk started getting worried and that is when he called the disease control center in Kebbi to come and check his stall.

He was shocked after what they revealed to him. Faruk’s lack of cleanliness has been affecting his workspace and the meat he sells. Apparently, his workspace was so dirty that the meat he sold was becoming contaminated and causing food poisoning.

Soon, the story of him spreading food poisoning went viral. Faruk had to quit his job. He began to reflect on how to get his customer base back.

When his customers got better, he summoned the courage to go beg for their forgiveness, and he promised to win them back as his customers.

That is how Faruk’s neatness started. He became the neatest meat seller in Kebbi’s central market and gained many customers because of his cleanliness and dapper looks. To this day, Faruk always wears a white garment.

“I realized my mistakes, and I am happy and proud of the neat man I have become today. Cleanliness should be one of the most important factors a market trader should consider while doing business.”



From six naira and a cup of porridge to 40K a day: Bale Sue on mastering the craft of cleaning cow heads.

Story protagonist: Bala Sule (43)

Gender: male

Tribe: Hausa

Type of food sold: meat, barbecue, sticks and meat flakes

Story Scout: Abdullahi Ibrahim

When meat vendors kill their animals, they take the heads, legs and tails to Bala Sule to clean them up.

Bala has been doing this for 21 years.

Cleaning cow heads requires burning and cleaning the hair off, washing then, and then splitting them into pieces. It takes roughly 30 minutes to clean an average sized cow head, legs and tail.

In an average day, Bala works up to 13 hours to prepare 40 cow heads. During festivities such as the Muslim Eid when lots of animals are slaughtered, Bala cleans between 40 to 60 heads.

As a young man, he started as a wheelbarrow pusher, transporting animal heads from the old abattoir to the market under a Master [Malam Dan Mudi] who was a cow head trader. The Master paid Bala six naira and a cup of porridge [fura] a day for this work.

In time, Baba secured a job as a cow head cleaner and was able to move on from pushing wheelbarrows. Bala was pleased by this and had been hoping for it, as there is more business potential as a head cleaner.

In his new position, he worked from 7am to 7pm daily, but his pay increased 10-fold, from six to 60 naira a day. He was much happier in this job and did it for several months before his next promotion to head butcher, receiving 100 naira per cow head.

He recalled his first experience as head butcher when he was handed a cow head. At that point he did not appreciate the difference between a cow's head and an ox's head, other than one is a female's and the other a male's head. Cleaning a cow head does not require nearly as much heat as that of an ox. He learned this by burning his first cow head beyond skin level. Next, he could not split the head open. It was too strong. He had to ask for some help. It was then that he

learned that the skin of a cow is softer, but the bones are much stronger. Over time he learned by watching how his seniors handled the cow heads.

According to Bala his new job is not without hazards. It requires that he stands close to the fire throughout the day. Five years ago, it led him to inhale dangerous smoke [carbon monoxide] from burnt tires used as source of fire. He said old vehicle tires were cheaper and more available, but the smoke from the tires was lethal.

At the time, Bala did not know the magnitude of the danger in inhaling carbon monoxide until the State Health Ministry visited his spot and enlightened him and at the same time banned the use of tires for fire.

Today, Bala is the most popular individual in the business in the entire Kebbi metropolis, which means he earns a lot of money. He is personally capable of processing 40 cow heads a day. Bala is now the leader of Head Butchers in Kebbi with 30 young men working for him and all sharing in the profit. Each day, he makes as much as 30,000 - 40,000 naira and sometimes even more.

Because of his success, Bala was able to marry. He is married to three wives and has 11 children. Although he still lives in his parents' house, he has two pieces of land he purchased and intends to develop it in the future.

At one point in the past, Bala was invited by his brother to join his transportation business, and he handed him a key to a new truck. Bala did not object to the idea at first until his three wives met over it and advised Bala to return the keys. The family saw the transportation business as too risky considering the Nigerian roads and many accidents and incidents of robberies. Besides, how could he meet their needs when he is always on transit. These questions made him rethink, and finally returned the new truck and explained the reason to his brother, and the brother accepted his decision. He took back the keys without any sign of hurt feelings.

Stories of women in the market



Before the wedding: How friendship supports the business of two young female moringa leaf vendors.

Story protagonist: Habiba Abubakar (19) and Rukayya Abdullahi (20)
Gender: females
Tribe: Hausa
Type of food sold: boiled moringa leaves
Story Scout: Aisha Madina Maishanu

Women becoming the sole providers in their households is not a common thing in the northern part of Nigeria, where women's roles are often attached to household duties. However, Habiba Abubakar and Rukayya Abdullahi broke with social tradition and chose to fend for a better living by becoming market traders.

These two young women, friends for years, have been selling moringa leaves in Kebbi's Central market since they were 13.

They have grown to become the main support to each other, and they have helped each other grow in the market. One trick they use to attract customers is applying heavy makeup. They noticed it attracts customers to them and enables them to make more money.

Occasionally, they step in for each other during market fights or if clients take their goods without payment, which happens from time to time as many of the men assume they are young and unwise.

Recently, they fought off two men after they tried to steal their moringa. "I removed my hijab approaching the fighting scene, as I heard Habiba shouting my name. We fought them and forced them to drop our goods and leave us alone," Rukayya said.

When Rukayya's father heard of the incident, she wasn't allowed to go to the market for weeks, as he already regarded trading in the market as a man's job, but when hunger got the best of her family, she got the approval to go out again.

Rukayya explained that she grew up in a household where she has always known her parents to be jobless. "Some days, we woke up without having food to eat." Motivated to help her parents and siblings get a better life, she went into selling moringa leaves.

Rukayya began selling moringa at age 13, with a start-up capital of only 20 naira. She explained how she struggled to get accepted in the market, because she was a young unmarried female and interested in business. "Our society looks down on women who are unmarried and want to get into business. This is one of the reasons why I struggled to get accepted in the market."

Although societal gender boundaries have eased up in the past few years, Rukayya still says she wouldn't have succeeded if she was not passionate about the business.

She says she enjoys making her family happy by giving them a better life, and it also makes her satisfied seeing the number of young girls that are also in the market today striving to succeed in their businesses.

Rukayya met Habiba when they were both 13 years old. "Due to our similar backgrounds, we had this instant click" said Habiba.

Habiba also sells boiled moringa leaves in the market. She faced the similar issues as Rukayya and also started working in the market to make ends meet for her family.

Habiba is passionate about attending school and succeeding in the market, and she enjoys her day to day interaction with people, but she says she knows her days are numbered: girls like her are supposed to get married at a certain age and stop whatever businesses they have started.

Asked if this worries her, she brushed it off, "I do not have a choice, this is the right thing to do. My family and the society expect me to get married and focus on my future husband and kids. I do not have a choice." Habiba said to me she would have loved to continue her business and also be able to attend school, but she knows her life is going to take her different directions.



The milk race: Fulani woman's faithful daily routine provides for family.

Story protagonist: Tumba Mai Nono (40)
Gender: female
Tribe: Fulani
Type of food sold: milk
Story Scout: Abdullahi Ibrahim

Tumba is normally woken up by the cries of her cows every morning, especially by the calves suggesting that they are hungry, which also suggests it's time for Tumba's daily

morning exercise. Tumba must get up in good time otherwise the little calves will suck away the same milk she would want to collect to sell in the day's market.

Every morning is a competition between Tumba and the calves. As Tumba hurries to milk a cow, the calves feed on the rest. This competition between Tumba and the calves, otherwise the rightful owners of the milk, goes on for a couple of hours until Tumba fills her calabash, which normally hardly fills beyond seven liters, and which she keeps until 2pm when she would go to the market to sell.

Tumba does this every morning along with the household chores. It is the full responsibility of the Fulani woman to clean the house and sell milk every day. The husband makes sure there are enough of the cows, and he is also responsible for selling and replacing them when the need arises.

On a good day Tumba would make a profit of around 3000 naira. Tumba uses different sizes of cups to measure milk when selling it, the price of which is not final but subject to bargaining. At the end of every day, she uses the proceeds to purchase food stuff and other provisions for the family.

Although both Tumba and her husband are fed up with her milk trading, she cannot quit it so long as she is healthy, because, as she states, her husband has done his portion by providing cows, which serves as a source of steady income for the family, and because it is an age long tradition—the pride of every Fulani woman, especially those in the rural areas or suburbs, to partake in the sale of milk in a calabash. And Tumba does not want to hurt that pride.

Every day Tumba would trek from “Tungar Na Samu”, a village among the suburbs of Birnin Kebbi, 1.5 miles from the highway. Sometimes she pays 100 naira for a commercial motorcycle [Okada] to take her to the highway and from there she goes to Yar Yara Market, and in three hours she is done with the sale.

Tumba is 40 years old and has four children. According to her, when she can't get enough milk from her cows she collects milk from neighbors who have excess. She always delights when the cows go “moo! moo!!” when they see her return home.



From milk to medical school: 15 year old wants to be a doctor to help local women.

Story protagonist: Rayyanatu Muhd Ahmed
Gender: female (15)
note: her mother consented to her interview
Tribe: Fulani
Type of food sold: cow milk
Story Scout: Aisha Madina Maishanu

For Rayyanatu, it never made sense to have so many male doctors in a state that is highly populated by women who are brought up in a manner that demands they be shy of men.

Rayyanatu's intelligence was clear immediately upon meeting her for the first time. She is 15 years old, and like other Fulani, sells cow milk mocktails in the market, but in her case it's to fund her education towards being one of the few female doctors in Kebbi state.

The mocktail is popularly known as Fura Da Nono, and it is made from blended grain that is molded into balls and then mixed up with thickened cow milk. These two products are put over ice and served.

Rayyanatu's only goal in life has been becoming a medical doctor—a female doctor who would be like a warm blanket to other women in Kebbi. She spoke of her relatives and understood how hard it is for women who were brought up to be shy, to then open up to male strangers. She said, “My cousin Halima almost lost her baby because her doctor was a man. She was not comfortable with him and was always avoiding going to the hospital while she was pregnant.”

Rayyanatu said to me that the hospital had only two female doctors, and one was on another shift while the other was on holiday. Her cousin deliberately skipped hospital checkups, because she was not comfortable with the male doctors. It was only until the baby started having complications and Halima lost consciousness that she was forced to go to the hospital.

The baby had been in the wrong position for weeks and Halima did not know, because she did not see the doctor. Rayyanatu said that experience was an eye opener for her, and that it increased her interest in becoming a doctor.

Every year hundreds of women in states with the same cultural upbringing as Kebbi state lose their babies due to lack of proper health care during pregnancy, a large part of this issue happens because the women are often not comfortable having male doctors assess them while they are pregnant so they choose to avoid going to the hospitals.

Rayyanatu comes from a poor home and her parents could not afford to enroll her in school, so she ventured into the milk business. Her father owns some cows, so she milks them and makes the mocktails from that milk.

When Rayyanatu was 11, she had earned enough money to pay for her school fee. But by that time, she was the oldest in her class and often even got mocked. “I was laughed at and teased because of my age, but I knew my aim and why I was in school, so I did not let any of that bother me,” said Rayyanatu.

Now she is almost done with her high school and has already started looking for scholarships to study medicine in the university.



Saved by kindness: Woman supported by Almajiri boys throughout her life.

Story protagonist: Aisha Go Slow (65)
Gender: female
Tribe: Hausa
Type of food sold: peanut dumplings
Story Scout: Aisha Madina Maishanu

Ms. Aisha is 65 years old and a single mother and grandmother who lost her husband a few years ago to cancer. He left her without any money or a job to do.

When he died, she sought help from her family and his family, but they all turned their backs to her, simply because her husband had a huge passion for helping orphaned boys.

“They had always hated my husband for spending all his income on orphaned boys instead of giving it to them,” said Aisha.

When I asked her the reason her husband loved helping the orphaned boys, she narrated to me how her husband was out of town for business when they were younger, and she was pregnant. Her husband travelled a lot and hated how the orphaned boys would come begging for food early in the morning. He would send them away despite of how much Aisha tried to correct him.

One day, Aisha’s labor started, and her husband was still not back in town. She did not have any family close by or a phone to use, so she kept crying, because she thought she was going to die.

All of a sudden, the orphaned boys heard her cry and came to her rescue. “These boys carried me like a baby and walked me more than one kilometer to the hospital. I would have lost my baby if not for them.”

When he returned from his travels, her husband rushed to the hospital full of joy and happiness. When she told him how she was able to reach the hospital, he cried for almost a week, filled

with regret about how he treated the Almajiri boys. Kebbi is one of the states with the highest number of kids that live on the streets popularly known as the “Almajiri”.

Since that day, he vouched to always use the money he had to take care of them and give them all the help they needed to succeed in life.

After Aisha lost her husband, and she had no one to turn to, as all of her children were girls and had been married at a young age and did not work. In other words, they were unable to help her. So, she used her final savings to buy bean dumplings and start selling them at the market so she could continue catering for the needs of the orphaned boys just like her husband did.

To her surprise, the orphaned boys became her business partners and made the business much easier for her to handle. At some point, when the boys were on their feet, they stopped collecting her money and started giving back to her and taking care of her instead.

Aisha said she has learnt one vital lesson in life, “always be kind to people, because you do not know when you will need them.”

According to UNICEF, under the Almajiri system, parents send their children, mostly boys aged 4-12, to distant locations to acquire Qur’anic education. Many rural and poor families who can’t afford formal schooling have made this choice. While parents may believe they are fulfilling their obligation to provide a religious and moral education to their children and that the learning is provided free of charge, Almajiri children are often forced by their teachers (Mallams) to beg in the streets to fund their education.



Food in a time of war: Soldier finds his calling in a market.

Story protagonist: Alhaji Muhd Sani Sharp Sharp (69)
Gender: male
Tribe: Hausa
Type of food sold: tomatoes
Story Scout: Aisha Madina Maishanu

Alhaji Muhd is a 69-year-old former soldier who fought protecting Nigeria during the Biafran War in the 1970’s, but as he grew older, he chose to serve Nigeria and its citizens

in a different way: selling tomatoes.

Alhaji Muhd says one can have the same intention in his heart and fulfill it by doing different things at different times.

He has fought many wars and has been on the battlefield since he was a young man. He said he appreciates his time fighting, but he had a good reason for leaving the battlefield.

“When I decided to leave the battlefield, a lot of people thought I was insane because fighting for Nigeria as a soldier was a very big deal back in the days, but I knew what I wanted,” said Alhaji Muhd.

During the war, he mentioned how much he and his colleagues starved on the battlefield while fighting, “We were underfed and malnourished. Everyone around us was fighting and no one had the role or time to focus on our feeding. That prompted me to leave the battlefield and take up that feeding role.” He started working in a market to serve his fellow colleagues and even the people in the local town.

Alhaji Muhd would gather foodstuff and anything that could be eaten and take it to the soldiers on the battlefield so as to ensure they were all well fed. “I know what it is to fight on the battlefield on an empty stomach. I believe making sure they’re not hungry is another form of serving my country.”

Alhaji Muhd said that by doing what he did he felt a certain fulfillment and job satisfaction that he never had while fighting on the battlefield. He would take food to the soldiers and also sell it to the people in town. Since that time, Alhaji Muhd has been in the market.

“I love selling food stuff to people. I am now into tomatoes, because that is the most bought good after rice. I just want to make families happy and help them with a basic necessity that they will need in their lives,” he noted.

During the two and a half years of the Biafran war, between 500,000 and 2 million soldiers and Biafran civilians died of starvation. People lacked basic food stuff because of the closure of most shops and the disruptions from the war.

Even though Alhaji Muhd says he will forever be recognized and proud for his fighting during the war, he mentions that he is more proud of all the lives he saved by provision of food during the war through today.



Fish seller mentors Almajiri to become the next generation of businessmen.

Story protagonist: Atiku Umar (29)
Gender: male
Tribe: Hausa
Type of food sold: fish
Story Scout: Aisha Madina Maishanu

Atiku Umar used to be an orphan living on the streets, and one man's kind gesture towards him changed his life and left him wanting to do the same for others.

Atiku who is 29 years old and sells fish in Yaryara market. He keeps a look out for young boys on the streets who seem to be like he used to be. Once under his tutelage, he guides and teaches them how to become proper businessmen. Atiku says his goal in life is to use his success to help others just like someone did for him.

“I slept on the streets and ate people’s leftovers when I was a child, but one kind man who is presently still in my life picked me up, cleaned me up, and taught me how to venture into selling fish. He changed my life forever.”

When Atiku was found by that man, he was about 10 years old and didn’t know much. The man was in the fish business, and he started by introducing Atiku to running errands for him, and then slowly he started teaching him how to catch fish and clean them.

Atiku was a fast learner as he quickly became his boss’ favorite boy because of how smart and inquisitive he was. At a young age, his boss sometimes left the whole store for Atiku to take care of on days that he wanted to rest.

Atiku was showered with love and kindness. He learned to stand on his feet and become his own man. He got a house, a car and could take a wife at 22 years old.

Fast forward to years later. Atiku now runs his own shop where he sells fish and also has young boys that he takes off the street to help them get a better life. Atiku mentioned how he does not want to have kids, because he knows there are a lot of kids on the streets like him who can easily be adopted.

“I now have about eight boys that are under me. I picked them up from the street and taught them how to become businessmen. The same love that I was showered with is what I try to give back to these boys. They need it” said Atiku.

Atiku’s biggest dream is to open up a business center that will focus on sheltering and educating street boys. He wants to have at least 500 boys under him in the next 3 to 4 years he says.

Atiku says he makes sure he has the parental consent of the kids who know their parents, before he takes them on as an apprentice. As for the ones who do not know their parents, he tries his best to make sure they enjoy the business and consent to working with him.

Kebbi is one of the states with the highest number of kids that live on the streets popularly known as the “Almajiri”.

Even though the Government claims that they are empowering the Almajiri kids and taking them off the streets, the increasing number of kids on the streets of Kebbi contradicts this statement.

Stories of resilience and motivation



Vendors risk the highways to drive in profit.

Story protagonists: Hassan Umar (36) and Hauwau Abubakar (50)

Gender: male / female

Tribe: Hausa

Type of food sold: grains such as rice, maize soya beans, beans etc. / gum Arabic

Story Scout: Mustapha Muhammad

Despite the insecurity occasioned by the activities of bandits and kidnappers bedeviling Northwestern Nigeria, grains, rice and other food stuff sellers said their business is still doing well. Still, in some villages bordering Zamfara state, traders could not travel to buy food stuff for the fear of bandits and kidnappers who have been disturbing the region for some time now.

Hassan Umar, 36, is in the business of buying and selling rice, grains, soya beans, and other food stuff in Birnin Kebbi. He said some time ago gunmen attacked a market while they were transacting their business in the market. “They came on motorbike, shot a policeman dead in our presence in the market and ran away before the military came.”

He continued, “Our business ... is seasonal. There is a peak period of high demand, most especially during the dry season, and low demand during the harvest period. These are the two main seasons we have in this business. I buy and sell. I also go to other village markets to buy and bring it here to Birnin Kebbi. But because of the problem of insecurity occasioned by the activities of bandits and kidnappers, we do not go to some places now.”

He said he had been in this business for over 25 years buying and selling food stuff, and he has travelled to all the nooks and crannies of Kebbi, Zamfara, Sokoto, and Katsina states in search of rice, beans, grains, soya beans, and other food stuff to buy and sell.

“I grew up in this business, and with this business I have achieved a lot; I married and have three kids from the marriage. All my children are in private schools with the money accrued from this business.”

Umar also relies much on his religion. “The solution to the problem of insecurity is to repent and turn to Allah. We might have offended Allah, and He decided to punish us in this way, but the best solution is to supplicate and ask God for forgiveness of our sins.”

Meanwhile, Hauwau Abubakar, 50, a gum arabic seller, who displayed her wares on a tray at a market in Birnin Kebbi, has a different take on the security situation. It hasn't stopped her at all. For her, the business of gum arabic is thriving, and it is worth doing business despite the challenges of insecurity on the roads in the region.

“I started this business of gum arabic buying and selling since when I was a young girl, and Glory be to Allah, I have achieved a lot with this business; I built a house, married my daughter and travelled to Saudi Arabia for pilgrimage. We don't have much of a problem on the road. The road is a bit safe and motorable.”

She appealed to the government to assist them with soft loans in order to boost their business. “I would appreciate it if the government could assist us with capital to boost our business. Apart from this business of gum arabic, I also buy and sell grasshoppers and several other things.”

For Hassan Umar, he has a capital to run his business, but he only worries about the insecurity in some villages he buys foodstuff.

“I have been to several villages in search of food stuff to buy, places like: Dan dume, Mangi, Salga, Yawuri, Dadin kowa up to villages in Zamfara,” Umar has said. “But I have stopped going to Bena, due to fear of kidnapping.”



Going low: Elderly vendor captures locust bean market by cutting prices...in half.

Story protagonist: Yake Bagudu (70)

Gender: female

Tribe: Hausa

Type of food sold: locust beans

Story Scout: Aisha Madina Maishanu

70-year-old locust beans seller Yake Bagudu is the most popular locust beans seller in Yaryara market.

For years after losing her husband, she had struggled to keep up in the industry, because of her old age and all the young kids coming up with new tactics to keep their customer base growing.

“I became frustrated because I have always wanted to succeed in business, and at the time that I needed the money I was not succeeding,” said Yake.

Yake was in business when she was a young girl, but like almost every young girl in northern Nigeria, social norms and tradition told her that marriage was the only thing she could aspire to achieve. So she did as she was told.

Years down the line after her husband died, even though she was not young anymore she still tried to make it back into the business world by selling locust beans. Unfortunately, things didn't go too well for Yake.

“All the younger locust bean sellers that were vibrant and smart were taking away all the customers. No one was buying from me, so I had to think of something to make them turn my way.”

That is when Yake tried a simple but rewarding trick. She slashed her prices in half, and the customers came in running from every direction. She said she was able to do that, because she was the only person running her business. She grew the beans in her farm, and she didn't have any workers to pay.

Other sellers had staff to pay, but Yake was a one-woman operation. After slashing her prices, customers could not stop coming to her. Soon she was dominating the locust beans trade in Yaryara market.

“I was so proud of myself. I knew I was smart when I was younger, so I tried to find that side of me once again.”

All the other locust beans sellers have moved to different locations, as business was not going well for them due to Yake’s loyal customer base.

Yake never thought her customer base would be this large. Now, as the years go by and as she gets older, she gets help from some of her daughters and nieces so as to keep things moving and also teach them the business for their own good.

“Sometimes a simple tactic can make you succeed. Not everything has to be complicated. When you calm your mind down, great ideas will start flowing,” said Yake.



Teenage “Iron Lady” dreams to grow business with new rice mill.

Story protagonist: Maryam Mohammed (17)
note: her mother consented to the interview
Gender: female
Tribe: Hausa
Type of food sold: rice
Story Scout: Mustapha Muhammad

Maryam Mohammed helps her mother process rice paddy and supply it to Birnin Kebbi’s Central Market. She dreams to own a local rice milling machine to boost production and earn more money.

Today, she purchases the paddy from the Ambursa market, takes it back home, boils, and dries it, and takes it to a local milling company. After milling, they sell it to retailers in the markets.

Her mother, who occupies a major role in the trade, asked Maryam to go to the market and sell the rice after being processed. From that point on, she is in control of the profit. She notes that they produce and sell no less than 5 sacks and maximum of 7 every week.

She is like an iron lady who goes to the village markets and buys the paddy for the family to survive. Her father is poor and cannot afford to take care of them, so they had to find a means of livelihood.

She said the rice business is very lucrative and they use the money to feed themselves and other domestic expenses. Many traders have gone into rice production since Nigeria's ban on rice importation and rice milling companies are increasingly springing up across the country.

"My mother buys clothes for me and my siblings. Everything we need in life we get it from the money we earn."

Maryam said her father is alive, and in support of what they do. He even helps to let them know if a paddy is being sold somewhere nearby so they can get the raw material for the production.

"Our father encourages us, and he is in full support of the business. He searches for the paddy and lets us go purchase it."

Maryam says she is happy with the business, although she is not at school, as school is happening when she is busy with rice production and sale.

She narrated the activities they do for the rice to be ready for the Central Market.

"On every Sunday we go to Ambursa market (the market day), and we buy paddy. We come back home late in the evening. On Monday, we boil the paddy and soak it in water till the next day. On Tuesday we boil it again and remove it from the water then place it under the sun to dry. On Wednesday we take it to the local milling machine; after that we take it home to sort it and remove the unwanted shell. Then, we go to the market and sell."

Maryam is enthusiastic about getting a local milling machine of their own, which, according to her, would help and boost their business.

"We want help to acquire a local milling machine, and we pray that this dream becomes a reality; we want to own it."

Maryam Mohammed is among the thousands of girls who are not in school just to make both ends meet in Birnin Kebbi. Some hawk on the streets to earn a living, but Maryam has a business with a vision to expand it; she is praying to own a local milling machine to get more money and speed up the rice production.

Sometimes they may have to wait in a queue at the rice mill before they get their own rice done, but should they have their own local milling machine that would help them process the rice quicker and more reliably without ever having to wait.

Although Nigeria is a signatory to the Child Rights Act, the law is rarely enforced, and Maryam's family feels it is a blessing that their daughter can earn money and help their family.

Some children, like Maryam Mohammed, get backing from their own parents to do the work even though they are not yet 18 years old.



Rice trader looks back on what made him successful: mother's trust, experience, and buying a donkey at 10 years old.

Story protagonist: Mustapha Muhammad (35)
Gender: male
Tribe: Hausa
Type of food sold: rice
Story Scout: Abdullahi Ibrahim

In the Tsohon Kasuwa market, Mustapha is second to none amongst his age mates who are into rice trading. Mustapha came

into the world without a father to raise him, the youngest, and the only male child in the family. Mustapha had an idea about his father. He was told that his father was a fish vendor, but Mustapha had nobody to teach him fish trading.

Mustapha's mother, Hajiya Hauwa, was into rice trading right from when he can remember. She used her house as a local rice mill and engaged her three daughters to take the rice from Gwangwaji, a suburb some few miles away from Birnin Kebbi metropolis, to sell at the Old Market.

While Mustapha was growing up, his mother instructed his sisters to always carry Mustapha along when they went house to house selling rice, so that he could learn the trade. Eventually the three sisters were given away to marriage, leaving Mustapha alone.

At 10-year-old, Mustapha's mother decided to let Mustapha work independently; she gave him a soft loan to start his own rice trading. With this loan, Mustapha bought a donkey and assumed

his own rice trading, only this time with a difference. Instead of carrying rice in a basin on his head, he carried it in sacks to the market on a Donkey.

Mustapha started his business with three 100kg bags, each costing 5000 naira at the time. He rode his Donkey to the Old Market to sell. This was not an easy period for Mustapha as he did not have any customers to buy from him. Things got worse, and Mustapha went bankrupt. He abandoned the rice business and left Nigeria for Niger Republic.

While in Niger, Mustapha became a commercial motorcycle rider [Okada] with the aim of saving enough to go back to his rice business. He lived in Niger doing the Okada business for two years. Within the two years, Mustapha raised the equivalent of 200,000 naira. With this amount in his possession, Mustapha came back to Nigeria and resumed his rice business in the Kebbi Old Market.

Having gone through thick and thin, in time Mustapha began to master the trade. He now has many customers, and he is capable of selling up to thirty 100kg bags every week. According to Mustapha he makes a profit of between 20,000 and 30,000 naira daily, and he was doing fine until just recently, due to the pandemic and current global situation.

Times are now hard according to Mustapha; the little profit he makes is what he uses to support his family and his aged mother. To complement his rice trading Mustapha also farms during the rainy season. Besides his mother who still helps him from time to time, he also receives support from the big rice traders who assist him with bags of rice to sell and pay back in due course. This has helped him grow his business.

Mustapha has attributed the success he has had in the business to his determination and honesty. Mustapha is now married with two wives and six children, and they all go to school for both Islamic and western education. According to him, the children deserve the right to go into any business of their choice so long as it is legitimate.

When contacted, Mustapha's mother, a soft spoken and shy old woman, expressed gratitude to God for giving her Mustapha, her only male child. She blessed Mustapha for providing her with all her needs.



A fisherman's life: travel, trading, and sleeping with an alligator.

Story protagonist: Usman Mai Kifi (65)
Gender: male
Tribe: Hausa
Type of food sold: fish
Story Scout: Abdullahi Ibrahim

He started his fish business in his mid-thirties, and he is now 30 years in the fish business. For many years, he both caught fish and sold them. According to Usman there is more gain for a fish vendor who catches and sells at the same time than a

mere vendor who only buys from fishermen.

Usman is a master of every aspect of fishing. He also produces fishing gear, such as nets and hooks. For years, Usman enjoyed multiple benefits from his talents; selling fish gears to his fisherman colleagues and fish to other vendors.

Before his retirement from active fishing, Usman built two houses, one in Argungu, his hometown, 50km away from Birnin Kebbi, and one in Takalau where he stays with his family.

Usman was a big-time fisherman and travelled to many places far and wide for fishing. He spent many years in Niger state neighboring Kebbi State, moving from one fishing village to another in search of more fish. He has been in Zamare, Bukadu, Agwara villages even as far as Benue state, a riverside area almost 700 miles from Kebbi. Wherever he learnt there was plenty of fish, he would go there.

He travelled to the Chad Republic, to the riverside villages between Nigeria and Chad. Chad is known for its availability of good fish. According to Usman, he had made much profit dealing in fish: he made good money and good friends in the business.

Today, age is no longer on his side, so finally he made up his mind and returned home to his family. He returned home and combined farming with fish selling.

During his years traveling around and fishing, Usman said he escaped death twice by the whiskers; once, he spent the night in a River face to face with a Hippopotamus, and he wrestled a crocodile and escaped with a few cuts.

I asked Usman his most recent sad experiences in the business and he said “*Ya faru jiya jiya*” meaning “*it happened and just yesterday*”. According to Usman he has a perpetual worry. Any day he fails to sell his catch before Sunset is a bad day because it has to be sold at a giveaway. Just yesterday he sold his fish worth 6,000 naira at the rate of 3,500.

Usman is married to one wife and with four children. In his farm, he produces tomatoes which he sells to the vendors and some his wife sells at home. Two of his children, 17 and 15 years old, have also followed the ‘footsteps’ of their father, and they catch Fish too. To him there is no business as fish business and “only death can do them apart,” he said.

I asked Usman whether hygiene is considered important seeing that the spot where the fish is processed is next to a garbage area, and he said their Fish is always covered, and most of the trash is just plastic bags. Generally, hygiene is not given much consideration. The greatest ecological problem in the area is plastic. Everything bought is served in plastic bags and this is causing a serious problem in the community and the farmlands as it is not biodegradable. The plastics are everywhere including in the drainages.



Oil and beans: Vendors fund education and call for better facilities to navigate price fluctuations.

Story protagonists: Mansur Aliyu (26) and Abubakar Salihu (35)
Gender: males
Tribe: Hausa
Type of food sold: palm oil and groundnut oil / soya beans, beans
Story Scout: Mustapha Muhammad

Mansur Aliyu, a groundnut and palm oil seller at Yar Yara market in Birnin Kebbi, is a 200-level student of the Federal University Birnin Kebbi, and said he is determined to acquire a university degree in order

to add value to his business of selling palm and groundnut oil. It's difficult though, The 26-year-old Aliyu, who is studying statistics, said the major challenge they are facing now is the hike in prices of the commodity.

He said two months ago 25 liters of palm oil was sold at 14,000 naira, but now the same quantity of palm oil is sold at the cost of 20,000 naira which forced some of his customers to resort to only buying a half or quarter bottle.

He said a customer who in the past used to buy 4 liters now has to resort to buying only a one liter bottle or even half a bottle. The hike in price of the commodity, which is attributed to the harsh economic condition in the country, has brought untold hardship on the people.

“Our main problem is the daily increase in the prices of the commodity...Once the price comes down, there will be high demand and once there is high demand there will be more turnover and sales. The other challenge we are facing is capital. Most of us are living from hand to mouth and the little capital that we are managing from our business is not much. [Still,] we thank God for this trade; it is from here that we feed ourselves. We use the earnings for school as well. I bought a motorbike and go to school if there is a lecture and come back to the market if there is none.”

His elder brother was a pioneer for the palm oil and groundnut oil business before he left for government work after he graduated from the university. Aliyu said, “My brother that introduced me into this business has achieved a lot; he has built his house, married a wife and sponsored himself to University with this business. What I always remember that makes me happy is that my brother and I have gained so much from this small shop—trading palm oil and groundnut oil, making life better for both of us.”

Another trader, Abubakar Salihu, at Tsohuwar Kasuwa Market sells soya beans, beans, grains, and groceries, said the business is booming and thriving on a daily basis.

Like Mansur Aliyu, Abubakar Salihu also used what he earned from the business to pay for school. He said that with this business he has achieved a lot: “With this business, I have bought a house, married a wife with whom we have four children, and three of them are schooling. I have my National Certificate in Education (NCE) and hope to further my education.”

In the past, he noted, they have suffered much in preserving beans where they resort to using chemicals to preserve. But those methods have disappeared with the arrival of companies that have safer methods of preservation by producing woven sacks.

“We thank God for this business. Before now, our method of storage was the use of chemicals, but now, there is woven sack that is being produced by some companies for the preservation of

beans. You can keep it for a long time without it spoiling. Once in the sack the beans can stay for up to 2 years.”



“Home is home”: Clothing vendor makes the best of his tomato business through relationships with customers.

Story protagonist: Muhammad Sani “Sharp-Sharp”

Gender: male

Tribe: Hausa

Age: 65

Type of food sold: tomatoes and other vegetables

Story Scout: Abdullahi Ibrahim

Muhammad Sani is 65 years old and has been trading tomatoes and vegetables for over twenty-five years. Initially he traded provisions and clothing material some of which he procured through a loan, but which he has since repaid. This work initially took him to Kaduna state where he ran a

makeshift shop selling children’s clothes and general underwear.

Muhammad returned briefly to Kebbi and got married, and then took his wife back to Kaduna and continued his clothing trading. This went for several years until one day he thought of trying Kano, because, according to him, Kano was more of a commercial center than Kaduna.

He left for Kano, leaving his wife and children in Kaduna, because his children were in school there. During that period, he shuttled from Kano to Kaduna periodically to see them.

While still in Kano, Muhammad took another wife, someone close by to comfort him. With the second wife around, Muhammad continued his business. News of the sudden death of Muhammad’s first wife in Kaduna shook and dislodged him. After grieving for some time Muhammad was left with no option but to relocate back to Kaduna.

He returned to his former base and together with his younger wife tried to pick up from where he left. According to Muhammad, restarting his business back in Kaduna was not easy. Some of his business associates and familiar faces had relocated to unknown destinations.

So many changes had affected his business. More shops and shopping malls were now running; there was much more competition; and people's purchasing power was lower due to inflation. All of these negatively impacted his business, and moreover he was unable to secure short term loan from his business associates as they too were affected by the same phenomena.

Eventually he went bankrupt. He wandered around trying to get back on his feet, but he felt it was all in vain. Of course, he still had family demands, and so Muhammad decided to return to Kebbi, his hometown. Home is home he said.

When he returned to Kebbi, he began to brainstorm on what to do next. He thought of trading in spices and flavors, seeing that it is one of the common businesses in his area. After a few trials he dropped it, because there was not much profit. He then tried the vegetable business, because according to him though perishable, vegetables were cheap, and through this, he thought he could support his family again.

His first sad experience as a vegetable trader was from buyers; buyers have their existing customers in the Yar Yara Market and as a result did not patronize him much. Many times, Muhammad would go home with most of the vegetable unsold and before the next day some of it would go bad.

This went on for some time, but he was never discouraged, and eventually it began to work.

Two reasons Muhammad attributed to his success in business are his friendliness and sense of humor and his nickname "Sharp-Sharp," as he is fondly called by his customers, especially children who mostly are the ones sent to buy things from him. He got this nickname from his customers back in Kaduna. Muhammad's shop used to be bustling with customers and Muhammad would say to the customer next in line "what do you want, say it sharp-sharp, other customers are waiting."

Although he is comfortable in vegetable trading, according to Muhammad he is still eyeing his former business of trading in clothes. His dream is to hit a million naira, and with that he will dump tomato trading and go back to his former business of trading in clothing material, because it was what he knew how to do best.

I asked Muhammad of his success story, and he said he is married with three wives and has 25 children, some of them in the government employment and some married with children. These and his two houses in Birnin Kebbi he counts as success. He said that if all goes well, he may go after the fourth wife. I asked him whether at 65 he still feels like taking a new wife...he looked at me and laughed.



Relentless: Rice trader never stops, even when things look hopeless.

Story protagonist: Bala Yarawal (40)
Gender: male
Tribe: Hausa
Type of food sold: rice
Story Scout: Abdullahi Ibrahim

It was morning, and Bala woke up as usual, sat down alone in his room preoccupied with the thoughts of his situation. Bala was one of the young men in “Tungan Dan Nupe” a village about 30 miles from Birnin Kebbi, who was jobless and had no capital, nowhere to begin. Bala’s situation got him so worried he stood up and just decided to go to the market, not to buy or sell anything, but just go to the market; perhaps he could get some manual job, by which he would find some food to eat.

Bala roamed the village market for quite some days in vain. One morning, as Bala was lying down in his room, he had a brainwave and thought he could approach the paddy rice vendors, the ones that he often enjoys jokes with. Perhaps if he offers to help them sell their rice, they may agree to give him part of the profit.

Bala gave it a shot. He went to the market and made an attempt. Luckily for Bala, a rice vendor accepted Bala’s proposition and enrolled him as a helper. The arrangement between Bala and his new master was satisfactory. Bala began with four sacks of 100kg rice. This he took to the Old Market in Birnin Kebbi, sold it off, returned the money, and was paid 800 naira.

Determined to be his own boss, Bala worked doggedly and saved part of his daily pay. He intended to start his own business. Day in and day out, Bala added numbers of rice sacks from four up to 17 to be sold at the Old Market in Birnin Kebbi. Bala had no problem selling all the sacks once in the Market, because rice vendors generally have no problem selling as rice is the common food in Kebbi.

Today, Bala is independent, but it is still difficult. He was able to start his own business from his savings. Things had been working well for Bala, but now the global economic situation has changed and this has affected his customers’ purchasing power, which is now much weaker than before.

To augment the rice market sales, Bala decided to visit the farm for dry season rice cultivation. He puts in the capital from his rice business into the farm and according to Bala he did have a good harvest. Most often he would harvest about 40 sacks of 100kg rice. Some of it he takes home for the family, and the rest he takes to the market.

He does not stop there. Bala also collects wood fire for sale, because he does not want to spend a day without earning money. Bala is married with a wife and eight children. His ambition is to make enough money to build an additional house, buy a bike, and to get married again.



Bulldozed to success: Vendor's business prospers after being destroyed.

Story protagonist: Malam Isa Zaki (53)
Gender: male
Tribe: Hausa
Type of food sold: vegetables
Story Scout: Abdullahi Ibrahim

Isa showed up at his business premises one morning and saw a bulldozer at the site clearing anything by the roadside. The government was going

to expand the road network around the area and Isa's place was by the shoulder of the road, just before the entrance to the Yar Yara market.

Isa did not even have a makeshift kiosk at the site as all items he sold were displayed on the ground, so did not feel as if he had lost money. But this was where he had to be located, and this was where his customer base knew to find him.

Isa was into the sales of polythene bags, paraffin and wood for fire, and normally when he closed, he packed everything and left.

After the bulldozers showed up, the only space available for Isa was to go a little further into the market and that was not a good place for the sale of his type of commodity. Though there was a space for the paraffin and the polythene bags, there was no space for the wood for fire, which was the fastest moving item among the items he sold.

As an internally displaced person, Isa saw his business existence under a serious threat. The survival of his family became a problem, and after a while Isa considered quitting the sales of

wood fire, because it required more space. He then thought of adding vegetables instead, as they were cheap to procure, and so didn't require a lot of capital. That was how Isa became a vegetable trader.

The beginning was tough for his vegetable sales, as he recorded little or no patronage at all, and much of the vegetables went to waste. To make the business possible, Isa shifted the sales of wood fire and some of the vegetables to his wife to sell to the people back at home in his area [Tudun Wada]. This has helped Isa and his family. He has an understanding wife who gave him every support, and because of that he had no psychological stress.

When he began the vegetable trading, he would buy a huge bundle of spinach at 2000 naira and many times return home with the whole lot unsold. This was how Isa had been managing his business. Eventually Isa was able to construct a shop in the market premises where he now keeps his items under lock and key and is able to store unused items until later days.

Isa's business is now prospering, and he is living fine. The Yar Yara market community loves and respects Isa for his simplicity and honesty. They chose him to be the Chairman of the traders, a position he still holds.

Stories of occupational hazards



Hypnotized: Neighbor's jealousy derails fish seller's business.

Story protagonist: Rufai Adamu (34)
Gender: male
Tribe: Hausa
Type of food sold: fish
Story Scout: Aisha Madina Maishanu

When I used to hear stories of jealous coworkers hypnotizing or incapacitating their colleagues, I found them strange and hard to believe. Then, in the Kebbi Central Market, I met a vendor named Rufai.

He is a 34-year-old fish seller who has been in business for 13 years after inheriting it from his father who inherited it from his father.

In northern Nigeria, old culture often supersedes more modern beliefs, and locals will often trust herbal medicines given by native doctors more than they would trust any medicine prescribed by a medical doctor or a religious cleric.

People sometimes meet traditional and spiritual doctors who claim a way to work with dark magic. They pay these spiritual doctors to help them hurt or heal people. Some of these spiritual doctors communicate with Jinns who are like spirits, and they execute their wishes for them. These doctors will give them poison or anything that if touched or used by the target would cause harm to them.

Years ago, Rufai was one of the most popular fish sellers and made thousands of naira per day. He was happy with his job and interacted well with all his colleagues—until the unfortunate day he became sick out of the blue.

As a sharp and adept young trader, he did not have many issues with selling his items day to day and his budget calculations. Then, all of a sudden, he kept giving his customers the wrong prices and miscalculating his prices. This resulted in the loss of thousands of naira.

In Rufai's words, he thought he was going to die, as that was one of the scariest times in his life. He started seeing psychiatrists and doctors because of his declining mental and physical health.

Rufai noted, "I was frustrated because every doctor I met would tell me my results show that I was clinically well, and they do not know how to help me."

In time it got so bad that Rufai had to sell his shop and everything he owned in the market to fund his family's day to day life. He grew bedridden and could do nothing.

Then one day, Rufai's old time friend Muhammad visited him, and he scolded Rufai for not trying any traditional and cultural herbalist for a proper diagnosis. Muhammad said, "these medical doctors do not know what they are doing. Let me take you to my herbalist."

The herbalist gave Rufai herbal drugs which made him stronger. He kept getting better by the day and even went to visit his colleagues at the market whenever he went out for his daily walks.

As he continued to get better, he was surprised when one of his colleagues came to his house begging him for forgiveness.

"I saw how well you were doing by selling fish, and I believed you were a threat to my business, that is my reason for meeting the herbalist and causing you harm," said Rufai's colleague.

Rufai's colleague mentioned that he got a powder from the herbalist, and he was asked to place it wherever Rufai would step—this is how he got his target. After this substance had touched Rufai, the spiritual curse started working.

Rufai forgave him after a few weeks, and even went back to the market. When his other colleagues asked why he came back despite everything, he said to them "going through that situation only made me stronger and gave me the courage to strive to succeed more and more in this market."

Rufai said he had to borrow money from some of his colleagues to start his business all over again since he lost most of what he had.

Stories like Rufai are quite common in northern Nigeria. People still meet herbalists and traditional native doctors for cases like this.

These native doctors claim to have ways to hypnotize people via using spiritual beings who just need contact with the targets. That is where herbal drugs come in. If the person is given a drink, or a certain powder that needs to touch them, then the spiritual beings have their access to either heal or harm.

Rufai is presently doing very well in the market as one of the most tactical young vendors in the Central Market of Kebbi.



Blessing or a curse? Fish vendor's health impacted by fire...and wife's wishes.

Story protagonist: Dalhatu Mai Kifi (40)
Gender: male
Tribe: Hausa
Type of food sold: fish
Story Scout: Abdullahi Ibrahim

Dalhatu picked his shovel early in the morning and headed out to the construction site.

Dalhatu was a blue-collar worker who was paid daily and whenever there was no construction job for that day survival became

a serious problem. His daily rate was 500 naira, and with this he could not take care of his needs beyond a couple of days.

When Dalhatu was done with work at the construction site, he joined his friend [Abu Dan Mama] in a nearby shade. The friend was a fish vendor and Dalhatu assisted him in removing the fish scales. This Dalhatu did every day, and the friend allowed Dalhatu to enjoy some of the fish.

Dalhatu was never happy with his blue-collar work, but he kept that to himself.

One fateful day Dalhatu's friend [Abu Dan Mama] suggested that Dalhatu try the fish business as he may like it more than the laborer work. Dalhatu went home thinking about the idea.

"I had no capital to start the business, so one day when we closed work at the construction site some planks were left over, and I thought of asking the contractor [Alhaji Yero] if I could use them. When I secured the planks, I begged my neighbor, a carpenter, to help me construct a bench and a table with a pledge to pay him back later on, which I did. People wondered what I was going to do with the table. I approached Usman Mai Kifi and explained my situation to him and begged him to come to my aid. Usman agreed to loan me some fish to begin with. Usman is a nice person, so he gave me fish worth 3,000 naira. With that, I launched my first fish business at the Yar Yara market, and steadily I gained

ground in the fish business. I have been into the fish business now for 15 years, and with it I married my wife and bought a house.”

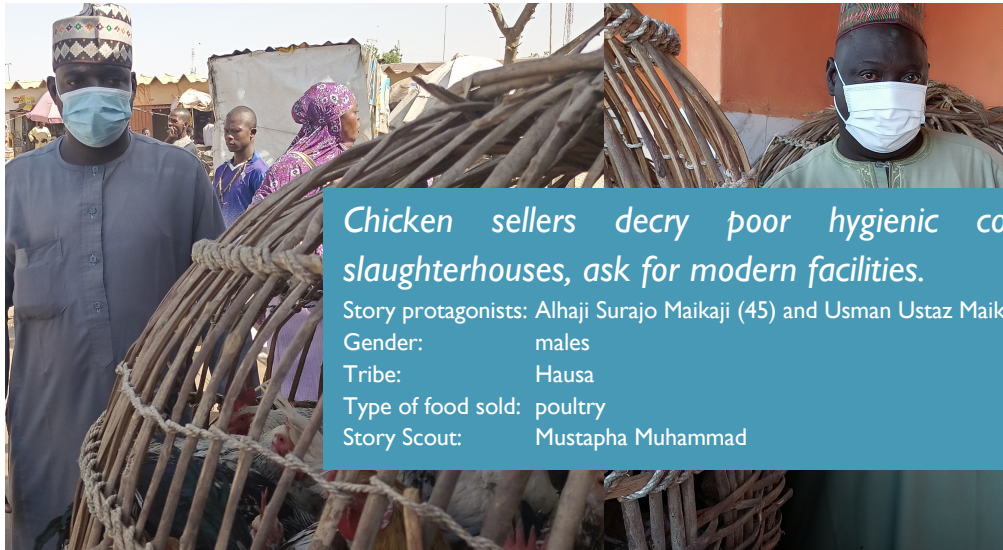
Although Dalhatu is doing well as a fish vendor, with time he began to notice heat rashes all over his body. On inquiry, he was told that it was the heat from the fire he exposes himself to anytime he fries fish, which is something he does every day. Sometimes his body swells up, and it was a condition other fish sellers and cow head processors experienced as well. He was diagnosed twice by a medical practitioner and was given drugs.

He went home the first time he felt sick and told his wife of his intention to quit the fish business, because of the heat rashes. “*And do what?*” The wife demanded. “*And find something else to do. Look at my body swelling, look at the rashes.*” According to Dalhatu the wife argued, “*Then where else would you make as much money? Do go to the Doctor to prescribe more drugs for you, it will heal.*”

When she said that to Dalhatu he felt bad because it appeared to him his wife does not care about him as much as she cares about the money he makes in the business. As he was not in the mood to argue, he took it with a pinch of salt and let it go. He now takes medication to help with the rashes.

Dalhatu has two young children and has already introduced them to fish business, with the hope that one day they will come to his aid. In the meantime, Dalhatu is still hanging on to his business, as his wife suggested.

Stories of reliance on the government for business help



Alhaji Surajo, 45 years old, is the chairman of the chicken sellers' association in Kebbi State. He has spent over 30 years in the business of chicken meat processing and selling, and he inherited his business from his father. He said there is a need to have a modern poultry slaughterhouse to stay safe, hygienic, and healthy.

“We need a very hygienic chicken slaughterhouse in such a way that the water system will wash away all the blood stains in the place,” Surajo said in an interview in the Central market Birnin Kebbi.

“The government has promised to construct a borehole for us here to help us with steady water supply and wash the dirt and blood around the place from when we cut the chicken into pieces; but it's yet to happen. We are calling for the government to fulfil its promise, as it will go a long way in making the chicken safer to eat.”

Surajo shared his pride in what he had achieved: “I have achieved a lot in this business, because with this business I have built a house, sponsored my father, mother and myself to Saudi Arabia for pilgrimage, and I have my eldest son in his final year diploma program.”

He appealed to the government to come in to modernize the place where they prepare the meat to make it more conducive for them to run their business by providing a modern cage and water.

Many of the small traders here wait for government assistance. They will not personally invest to improve their business, and as a result, customers have no other options.

Another poultry trader, Alhaji Usman Ustazu Mai Kaji made an appeal to the authorities to modernize the system of poultry trade in Birnin Kebbi market. “We are appealing to the government to help us modernize the place where we do our business. I grew up seeing my father in this business of chicken meat selling. He died, and I have taken over the business. I have continued to take care of the family my father left behind, they are about 15, including my children all under my care. I have been sponsoring them for school. Some have finished university and others are at secondary and primary level.”

For both Alhaji Surajo Mai Kaji and Alhaji Usman Maikaji inherited the poultry business from their parents and called for the authorities to modernize the system and give some loans to the traders.



Export potential: Fish sellers project gains in fish sector if government ramps up storage facilities.

Story protagonists: Umar Bakatara (60) and Yau Abubakar Bugga (40)

Gender: males

Tribe: Hausa

Type of food sold: fish

Story Scout: Mustapha Muhammad

Fish sellers in the northwestern state of Kebbi, one of Nigeria’s leading states in fish production, are upset over the lack of cooling systems that could allow them to store the fish and prevent them from going bad. Lack of these cooling systems diminish their hopes to go into export.

Umaru Bakatara Goron Daji, 60, the Chairman of the fish sellers association in Kebbi State, noted that it is a well-known fact that Kebbi state is the epicenter of fish. It would be good to have a cooling system and encourage the fish sellers to go into export by supporting them with significant capital.

He said they have enough fishponds that could produce millions of fish that could be exported outside the country and thereby generate revenue for them and the government.

“The state government has constructed the building for the refrigeration here. You can see it, but it is empty and has no cooling system in it. If the authorities could provide the cooling system inside the building, I believe it would help us a lot to reduce the losses.” Bakatara said.

“Before I ventured into selling fish, I was a fisherman. Both the sellers and the fishermen are financially incapacitated as a result of economic meltdown that affected almost all the sectors of the economy. We have enough fishponds, but we do not have enough money to venture into the business of fish farming in large quantities.”

According to him they have a plan to smoke the fish and prepare it for export, but because they do not have enough capital to cover the large-scale machinery required to dry large amounts of fish, the plan remains an unrealized dream.

“We even have a plan of smoking the fish for export, but there is no capital to do that. You cannot venture into such business without enough capital because it is a capital-intensive business. We are appealing to the government to consider our plights and come in,” he said.

“Under the auspice of our union, we have converged on Abuja for a meeting more than 30 times, but the government has not come to our aid. We have fulfilled all the requirements for a loan, but up till this moment I am talking to you, the government is yet to answer our call for a loan to boost our market and business of fish selling.”

Bakatara said Covid-19 has worsened the situation and has crippled them and brought about a very harsh economic condition, stressing that before the advent of the coronavirus, you cannot count the numbers of truckloads of fish that came to this market on daily basis from the other parts of the state.

“Before now, if you came to this market, you would see everywhere stock piled fish; but now you can see for yourself how the market is. Before now, one person could buy and stock fish of over 2 million naira but not now. If government can help us with loan to boost our business, this business will employ our teeming youths who are roaming the street.”

Ya’u Abubakar Bogga is another fish seller in Kebbi state. He said he has been in the business of fish selling for over 25 years, and he started with nothing.

“I have been in this business for over 25 years now; I started with small capital buying the fish from the fishermen on the banks of the river. Then I started frying the fish to sell later on...Now, I engage in both dry and fresh fish sales. In Kebbi our main occupation is farming and fishing but

recently, activities of government officials are threatening the growth of the business. Some government officials who are appointed by the government to monitor and regulate fishing in the river are being selective, allowing some and denying other fishermen the privilege to fish,” he said.

He added that, “My advice to the government is to treat all fishermen equally and secondly is for the government to intervene by giving us soft loans to boost our business. We have never benefited from federal government loans, but the economic situation in the country warrants this call. We are appealing to the government to see to this and give us a soft loan.”



Covid-19 lockdowns hurting traders

Story protagonists: Alhaji Aminu Mainama (50) and Alhaji Hassan Dangiwa (62)

Gender: males

Tribe: Bakabe

Type of food sold: meat

Story Scout: Mustapha Muhammad

The Covid-19 related lockdowns in Nigeria’s northwestern state of Kebbi has significantly shrunk the capital of market traders. This coupled with the low

purchasing power of residents poses a danger to the survival of businesses here.

Alhaji Aminu Mainama, a meat processor and seller in Birnin Kebbi, has recently found himself in a critical situation, which he said is attributed to the lockdown and the subsequent closure of the country’s land borders.

According to him, in the past, on a daily basis his butcher stall would slaughter three cows and by 3pm they would have been sold. Now, they hardly sell half of a cow in an entire day.

“In the past I achieved a lot with the meat processing and selling business - I built houses, travelled to Saudi Arabia for pilgrimage, married, and trained my children in school—one of my children is schooling in the university while the other one is in school of nursing,” Aminu Mainama said this

in an interview at Birnin Kebbi Central Market, adding that, “No fewer than 10 people have learned this business from me and they are now on their own.”

He noted that if they were able to finance modern cool rooms through soft loans, loans without interest, they would be able to improve the meat processing and selling business and better withstand shocks like the lockdowns. Aminu said that the border closing has made it difficult to bring in cows from neighboring countries and that fluctuations in the exchange rate has negatively impacted the purchasing power of both the buyer and the seller. Cool room would help these kinds of shocks.

Aminu Mainama said the lockdowns have “crippled us economically” in more ways than one. Some of his association members are now in disputes with the courts over non-payments. He mentioned a dealer who would buy and sell over 11 cows, but now, he hardly buys two. “Before now,” he continues, “we slaughter 40 cows but now we hardly slaughter nine. These are the negative effects of Covid-19 on our business.”

The chairman of meat processors and sellers in Kebbi State, Hassan Dangiwa, said Covid-19 has affected their business negatively, which resulted in a situation whereby some of them have pulled out of the business altogether, because they could not cope with the situation.

Dangiwa said their businesses are in a critical situation and need government interventions to salvage them from total collapse. While lamenting the situation, Dangiwa said in the past they used to slaughter 50 cows and over 100 goats in a day but now they hardly slaughter 5 cows and 15 goats and they hardly sell them, because people don’t have the money to spend. “People hardly eat meat now.”

“I know the ins and outs of this business, of meat processing and selling, because it is a business that I inherited from my father and my father inherited it from his father; so you can see I am not an intruder in this business. I have trained and graduated over 100 people in this business of meat processing and selling,” he said.

In another part of the market, a palm oil seller named Francisca said the coronavirus lockdown has also affected her business negatively. She said the lockdown period of staying at home and not doing anything has exhausted her business capital. She said before the lockdown she’d buy no less than 50 cans of palm oil to sell, but now she hardly buys 5 cans, because she has no money.

“I have been in this business for over 30 years, and I have trained and sponsored eight of my children in the university, and I trained some women who are doing well in this business of selling palm oil. Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown have really affected my business, because during

the lockdown business became difficult, most people cannot settle their debts, and this led to a crisis,” she said.



Traders underwater: Heavy floods taking their toll on the rice business.

Story protagonists: Sanusi Umar (40) and Abubakar Kalgo (45, no photo)
Gender: males
Tribe: Hausa
Type of food sold: Rice
Story Scout: Mustapha Muhammad

Sanusi Umar, 40, a rice trader in Birnin Kebbi’s Central Market is among many thousands of farmers who lost their farmland to flooding last rainy season. Umar

lost 3 hectares of rice farm to floods dashing his hope to boost his rice business at the market, similar to many rice traders and farmers in Kebbi.

Umar valued the 3 hectares into hundreds of thousands of naira, before he saw it washed away by the heavy downpours.

Umar said, “From Argungu to Gumza and Zuru, almost all of the farmers lost their rice farm to floods. I am also part of those that lost. I grew 3 hectares of land, but [it] washed away. I applied fertilizer and everything that it needed. The farm looked great, but when I heard about the flooding, I visited the farm, [and] I saw it completely submerged in the water.” He added that, “the water stayed nearly three months on our farms. You see, you can’t expect anything from the farm; everything’s gone.”

“I started this business in my childhood when I helped my parents in the same business. It reached a stage that I buy the paddy myself from the villages and take it to the market and sell to retailers,” Umar said in an interview at Central Market, adding that, “ Now I have my own shop at the market, and customers buy from me.”

“I do sell not less than 20 sacks in a week or more depending on the availability of the rice in the market.”

He had planned to grow rice and mill it with the hopes to take it to his shop at Birnin Kebbi Central Market to expand his business and get more income, but now that income is buried completely in the water.

Umar's plans have been shaken with this flood disaster, and now he's in serious need of capital to close the gap.

"I need capital, so that I can purchase the rice in large quantities, because if you don't have enough capital you cannot get enough supplies; I have a lot of customers, but the fact is the capital is not huge, and I can't purchase enough." Umar stated.

Bank loans are often shunned away by most of the northern Muslim traders, as the interest to be paid is against Islam. Islam does not allow Muslims to accept interest. At times, the government steps in with free interest loans to pave way for Muslim traders to benefit from the loan.

The majority of the hundreds of thousands of farmers in the region worst hit by the flooding are in Argungu and Gumza, among others; all in Kebbi state have had their hopes dashed, paving the way for more poverty. The dams and rivers could not hold the heavy downpour causing flooding in most of the states along the Kebbi river, but Kebbi, the land of pride of rice production, was worst hit.

Abubakar A Kalgo, a rice dealer at Kalgo market in Kebbi state, corroborated what Sanusi Umar said. To him, the flood was the most devastating in recent history of flooding in Kebbi State.

Those who used to harvest over 100 tons of rice could not get a single paddy from the farms. It was particularly challenging as farmers had predicted a bumper harvest before the disaster occurred.

"The paddy rice prices went up due to this flood disaster that caused huge losses. A lot of farmers lost. Some that used to cultivate 300 to 100-bags have not gotten a single paddy" Umar said.

The prices of the paddy have gone up in most of the rice markets in the state that produces rice that is sold all over Nigeria.

Sanusi Umar says when recounting the loss from the floods, "I got married to two wives and have four kids. I did it all with the money I earned from the rice paddy business. I feed them well, even help others," Umar said, "my kids go to western and Islamic schools."

All of this is happening in the context of the government ban on the importation of rice, done largely to increase domestic production. However, rice shortages have been difficult on the poor.

Sanusi Umar is hoping to get some loans from the government and plans to move ahead despite the challenges he faced.

“We need assistance. Now that I don’t have enough capital, I had to give my farm to someone to pay me; I don’t have enough money to cultivate again.”



Opportunity not realized: Poor storage facilities stifling onion business.

Story protagonists: Umar Dan Aya (52) and Muddassiru Umar (35)
Gender: males
Tribe: Hausa
Type of food sold: onion, tomatoes, etc.
Story Scout: Mustapha Muhammad

Onion trading can be a profitable business, but it still suffers from poor storage facilities. You can see the onion packed in trucks ready to go to the south of the country and to neighboring countries like Ghana, Niger Republic, and Cote D’Ivoire among others.

Here in Kebbi, the non-availability of modern storage facilities to store and preserve onion and other horticultural products is a key issue bedeviling the farmers and traders in the northwestern state of Kebbi.

The local method to store onions is to place them on sand spread on the floor and to allow air to ventilate the area. Traders and farmers regularly check and remove the rotten ones, but they would prefer a storage facility with refrigeration and ventilation systems that would allow the onion to last much longer.

Umar Dan Aya, 52, in the business of buying and selling onions in Birnin Kebbi, said the business of onion is a profitable one but poor storage facilities cause the loss of a lot of money. He thinks it could be the reason why the commodity doesn’t have a stable price.

He said they often have no other option but to use the local method of preservation and storage, which has its own negative effect on the commodity. They are calling on the government to come in and help them with modern facilities of storage.

“We travelled to Harasawa village to buy onion. The farmers there combine rain and irrigation farming for onion and tomatoes. I am happy with what I am doing, I have 4 children at primary and secondary schools while one is studying at Sokoto for higher education”

An onion supplier from Alerio market, the international onion market, Mudassiru Umar, 35, said onion has been a great commodity that’s needed everywhere; but the issue is how to store it longer.

Mudassir Umar told us that he travelled as far as Kwanan Dangora, Bakori, Danja in Kano and Katsina states to buy onion and bring it to Birnin Kebbi to sell.

He said during the yuletide period (December) a bag of onion was sold at 40,000 naira last year, but now a bag is sold at 8,000 naira. This kind of fluctuation in price is typical and is all the more reason onion traders hope for better storage facilities.

“Our problem is storage and we will appreciate it if government can come in to help us with the modern storage facilities by way of soft loan to enable us to boost our business and built modern storage facilities to reduce the problem of incessant [volatility] in the price of the commodity,” said Mudassir Umar

“Onion has been transported outside the country to Ghana, Niger, Côte D’Ivoire among others,” adding that, “If the onion has no market outside the country I don’t know where we can store the onion we produce.”

A source at Alerio market stated that no fewer than 30 to 50 trucks daily packed with onion are being taken away to either Lagos, Port Harcourt in the south or exported to neighboring countries.

“If we can get a modern facility to store onions so it won’t spoil, we would have made a lot of profit. Many farmers don’t get much from cultivating onion, because they cannot store it to reach its peak in prices. It is lucrative if you can store onion for the time it gets scarce -- that’s when the prices double or even triple.”

ANALYSIS

The objective of deploying three different Story Scouts was to receive stories collected by people with different perspectives and different experiences. Abdul's stories were full of local flavor and lighthearted, often humorous, vignettes. Madina's stories, by and large, focused on positive angles to different and often difficult situations. As the one female Scout, she spoke with the most women vendors, and they opened up to her about gender issues they might have been less willing to share with a man. Mustapha, a long time BBC stringer, focused his stories on what might be considered "harder news." As a result, many of his interviewees focused on sharing their personal challenges to issues beyond their control (flooding, pandemic and lockdowns) and pleaded for the government's help, possibly assuming the stories will be published.

As a result, the collection of stories of food vendors gathered here provide a unique and rich landscape of life in the markets of Birnin Kebbi (see Figure 4). This landscape offers clues into broader trends of life as a vendor and instances of specific dramatic events in a vendor's life. Several themes emerged from these stories, which will be foundational in the creation of original stories that incorporate food safety messaging and behaviors for media interventions developed in Phase II of EatSafe.

Learning from errors

Dramatic accounts ranged from food poisoning of customers to overcooking cowheads and showcased ways vendors learn from errors to grow their businesses. These kinds of stories are, in a sense, tailor-made for behavior change media, in that we see the drama of a protagonist making the mistake and the resolution in the learning from it. One Scout even discovered a story of a food safety positive deviant, modelling effective food safety behavior. In that story, the vendor learned that his customers were getting sick because of how dirty his meat stall was. Despite not having extra resources relative to other vendors, he committed to the cleanliness of his vending stall and of his clothing. His story is an example of a positive character that could be modelled in EatSafe creative narratives. In an environment like Birnin Kebbi, positive deviance holds a lot of potential, particularly in the absence of significant infrastructure improvements throughout the market.

Service to others

Many of the stories focused on how the vendor helped someone else or how they were helped by others in critical situations. Although these kinds of stories are easy to embellish by the storyteller to place him/her in a better light, it is nonetheless notable that this kind of story seems to have currency amongst vendors and speaks to a type of story that could be effective in a behavior change context.

Resilience and motivation

It is not uncommon in a developing world context to find many stories of extreme resilience and people motivated to find a means to survive. That was no different here with vendors often telling stories of themselves overcoming hardships and finding paths forward to keep the business going. Powerful motivators are evident in how vendors talk about their business success enabling them to financially support their families, buy houses, take on multiple wives and have many children, and send their children to school. Pride and success in business is also a key motivator (see theme below).

Media aimed at food vendors could certainly use these kinds of ideas in any number of stories about the efforts vendors must take to stay afloat, the sacrifices they endure to make ends meet, and the motivating factors that help push them forward. In a food safety context, this is particularly relevant since interventions will likely ask vendors to do something different--something that might add to the challenges associated with running their businesses.

Pride and success

Several vendors spoke proudly about business successes, family life, wives, houses built, children attending school, or their own enrollment in university. This pride was a motivating factor for vendors, as many took the effort to narrate entire life stories about hard work and hardships they endured on the way to success. The fact that vendors repeatedly referenced these kinds of accomplishments suggests pride and success could be potent elements of media programs. Keeping customers healthy, as another source of pride and success, could potentially have resonance with vendors as well. Tying food safety with business success might be another way to reach vendors.

Occupational hazards

Several stories explored the existential threat certain types of occupational hazards have on a vendor's livelihood. For example, concerned about heat rashes from the cooking fires, one vendor sought to change his livelihood. In another example, highly noxious smoke inhalation negatively impacted the vendor's health. And in a third, notable example, the health risk posed was a result of traditional magic cast by a "spiritual doctor" on the vendor that fogged his mind and weakened his body. It's worth noting that the way the vendor broke free from the magic was by himself also visiting a spiritual doctor to get herbs that would counter the spell, and according to him, it worked. These kinds of stories have the potential to be very dramatic, which in certain kinds of media programming could be highly effective.

Reliance on the government for business help

A number of vendors shared stories about their need for capital in order to build infrastructure that would allow them to grow their businesses, and in some cases enter the export market. They noted that price fluctuations of certain commodities were highly volatile, which in turn,

significantly impacted their bottom line. In almost all of these cases, vendors wanted the government to help with capital investment. Vendors need “soft” or no interest loans to construct facilities such as storage units and large-scale drying machines. Several noted that the government promised to make these improvements but has not come through. It is certainly possible that vendors stressed these stories to the Scout in hopes that it might help their efforts, but nonetheless, it does point to some key ideas for designers to consider during EatSafe Phase II. Stories about vendors having the drive to grow their business only to be slowed by government inaction is a narrative frame that would resonate with many vendors.

Beginning young

Unsurprisingly, many vendors told stories of beginning work in this field as children, either because it was what the family did or because they had to find the means to live. One Scout reported that child labor laws are rarely enforced in the region. For those who did not come from a family of vendors, stories about beginning young seemed to fall into one of two categories: figured it out alone or found a mentor who helped. In both instances, these were, in a sense, stories about struggle, but the vendors framed them in a way to highlight their successes and how they came from nothing or very little and made something out of it.

Seizing market advantage

The stories often revealed ways vendors seized a market advantage, such as using a donkey to carry the rice, wearing makeup or presenting a clear and neat look to attract customers, undercutting prices, or selling fishing gear along with the fish. Finding ways to capture market share could be effective in narrative communications around food safety. As interventions will likely include new behaviors, framing them as a way to grow the business could be quite germane for food vendors.

Religious norms and values

The stories show that religious norms and values play a key role in the life of many traders, which is not at all unexpected for this region of the world. Vendors often cited traveling for Hajj as one of their most important accomplishments. Some also cited Allah as the reason for both their safety on the insecure highways and also as the reason for the insecurity itself due to the unrepentant. In addition, as Islamic law disallows usury (riba), many vendors were reliant on soft, interest-free loans from the government for capital investments. EatSafe interventions should consider religious norms and values as driving motivators to many social and business interactions. Naturally weaving them into stories will likely help to provide a more authentic context.

Women in the market

Female vendors were the main protagonists of several stories. In some instances, *why* women were working was the story. Some examples include (A) two young Hausa women, not yet married, who were allowed by their families to sell at the market to support the family; (B) a widowed Hausa woman forced to work to support herself and (C) Fulani women who sold milk at the market, as is often expected of Fulani women living in rural areas.

However, even when not the main story protagonists, women in their roles as wives or mothers were often present in the vendors' stories. For example, we learned of husbands consulting their wives before making business decisions and experiencing psychological stress when not having their wives' support. We saw a mother who sent her very young son into the market to learn the trade. We learned of widows reliant on others due to having no sons and their daughters being married off to other families. Finally, we learned that many vendors consider it a success to marry multiple wives and provide for them and their children. It is clear that women are an integral part of the vendor community even if they do not play a central role in selling food. This will be key to consider during the development of interventions and media programs.

Figure 4: Sampling of rich details from stories that could be used in narrative communications

- A rookie meat vendor makes first mistakes and loses money - burns the skin of a cow too deeply / tries to split the head open and can't.
- Every morning, a Fulani woman "enters a race" against her calves to "steal" their milk.
- Meat vendors until recently burned tires to create smoke needed for processing meat.
- Tomato vendor says "Sharp-Sharp" to customers to hurry them up so other customers don't have to wait too long.
- Vendor has 25 children and does not remember their names.
- Sisters take their small brother along when selling rice door to door so that he learns the business.
- Fisherman finds himself in deep water, face-to-face with a hippo, and fighting an alligator.
- Vendor wakes up to bulldozers clearing his vending site to make a road.
- A young girl takes off hijab to fight someone who stole from her friend in the market, to the displeasure of her father. The father bans her from returning to the market, but only for a while as she is the main provider for the family.
- Jealous vendor uses magic to harm a more successful vendor, making him miscalculate prices and fall ill.
- Pregnant woman is heard crying and walked to the hospital by orphaned boys (Almajiri) while her husband is away.
- Vendor mentors Almajiri boys to become vendors themselves.
- Young unmarried Hausa women put on lots of makeup in effort to attract more customers.
- A vendor takes up exciting business opportunities upon receiving a soft loan from the government.
- Young Hausa girl plans to buy a rice mill to speed up the process of bringing her rice to the market.
- Severe flooding washes away entire rice paddies and with them lots of profit.
- Vendors of different commodities often tease each other in a humorous way (meat vs fish vendors, salt vs cola nut vendors).
- Vendors huddle together to listen to the radio.
- One's business becomes part of one's name, otherwise people wouldn't know who you are talking about. For example, "Kifi" is Fish. "Mai Kifi" means owner of fish.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INTERVENTION DESIGN UNDER EATSAFE

EatSafe aims to generate evidence and knowledge on leveraging the potential for increased consumer demand for safe food to substantially improve the safety of nutritious foods in informal market settings. Central to EatSafe's work is understanding (and potentially shaping) the motivations, attitudes, beliefs, and practices of consumers and food vendors.

Recommendations for EatSafe interventions targeting food vendors, flowing from the results of Story Sourcing (Activity 1.8), include the following:

- (1) Create communications that build on the themes emerging from vendors' stories. These themes provide context for the development of immersive stories and identifiable characters for the food market vendor audience.
 - *Learning from errors.* This theme could be effective for behavior change narratives where characters model safe food behavior. This holds potential particularly in the absence of significant infrastructure improvement throughout the market.
 - *Service to others.* Stories about service to others have currency with the vendor community and could be effective in a food safety context where protecting the consumer is a variable.
 - *Resilience and motivation.* Vendors shared many stories of resilience and motivation to improve their businesses. In a food safety context, this is particularly relevant since interventions will likely ask vendors to do something different -- something that might add to the challenges associated with running their businesses.
 - *Pride and success.* Pride and success seem to be motivating factors for vendors, which suggests that these could be potent elements in food safety messaging and behaviors. Keeping customers healthy, as another source of pride and success, could potentially have resonance with vendors. Tying food safety with business success might be another way to reach vendors as well.
 - *Occupational hazards.* Stories featuring occupational hazards (e.g. burned in a fire, cursed by a jealous competitor) have the potential to be very dramatic, which in certain kinds of media programming could be highly effective at capturing the audience's attention.
 - *Reliance on the government for business help.* Many vendors described their ideas and readiness to expand their business being hindered by various constraints such as lack of infrastructure improvements or unavailability of interest-free capital investments from the government. This tension provides a useful background for narratives, particularly when addressing infrastructure-related food safety concerns.
 - *Seizing market advantage.* Vendors are highly adaptable and are looking for ways to strengthen business and increase sales. These traits could be of great value in stories about building a safe food environment.

- *Religious norms and values.* Religious norms and values organize community life. These should be highlighted in key narratives about vendors and around food safety.
- *Women in the market.* Although women might not be the primary sellers at the market, the role of women in the life of a vendor is often significant and should be woven into media and narratives about food vendors.

(2) Taken as a whole, these stories provide a broad picture of life as a market vendor. Future Story Sourcing activities should continue to involve multiple Scouts of different backgrounds to provide a rich and full picture of the target audience.

(3) Given anecdotal information Scouts collected from vendors about how they receive news, entertainment, and information, EatSafe should consider radio programming and collaboration with respected vendors as potentially effective channels for reaching market vendors with food safety messaging. Additionally, for captive audience occasions, for example, during an in-person training session about food safety, video could be used as a channel to model effective behaviors and the impacts of those behaviors.

REFERENCES

- Casey, C. (2008). "Marginal Muslims": Politics and the perceptual bounds of Islamic authenticity in northern Nigeria. *Africa Today*, 54(3).
- Cohen, J. (2001). Defining identification: A theoretical look at identification of audiences with media characters. *Mass Communication & Society*, 4, 245-264.
- Green, M. C., & Brock, T. C. (2000). The role of transportation in the persuasiveness of public narratives. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79, 701-721.
- Orozco-Olvera V., Shen F., & Cluver L. (2019). The effectiveness of using entertainment education narratives to promote safer sexual behaviors of youth: A meta-analysis, 1985-2017. *PLoS ONE* 14 (2).
- Shaffer, V. A., Focella, E. S., Hathaway, A. Scherer, L. D., & Zikmund-Fisher, B. J. (2018). On the usefulness of narratives: An interdisciplinary review and theoretical model. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, 52, 429–442.
- Singhal, A., Cody, M. J., Rogers, E. M., & Sabido, M. (2004). *Entertainment-education and social change: History, research, and practice*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Sood S., Riley, A. H., & Alarcon, K. C. (2017). Entertainment-education and health and risk messaging. *Oxford research encyclopedia of communication*. Oxford University Press. DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.245

APPENDIX I.