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**THE URBAN MARKETING OF THE MOPANE WORM:
THE CASE OF HARARE.***

By

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INTRODUCTION

This paper reports a preliminary study of the marketing of the edible caterpillars known as mopane worms. The study is a part of the author's ongoing research on the harvesting, distribution and use of these caterpillars in Zimbabwe.

This report is based on observations and interviews conducted in Harare in May 1993 at Mbare Musika market and at two companies which pack and distribute the edible caterpillars known as mopane worms. This period is an off-season one for the market supply of the caterpillars, therefore much information on the actual transactional processes between the suppliers and the distributors was missed.

Also missed was detailed information on how the caterpillars actually reach the market place. Cheater (1979) mentions that in Matabeleland some collective wholesalers (colloquially referred to as transporters) who operate their own vehicles purchase from the peasant farmers local products, including bags of dried caterpillars which they then sell in urban centres at both retail and wholesale levels. Maphosa (1993: from a personal communication) also mentions this practice. Hawkes and Madzudzo (1991) also observed that women in Bulilimangwe sold the caterpillars they had collected and processed to a local shop owner who then transported them to urban areas. Despite that personal observations of the actual transportation of the caterpillars from the rural areas to urban centres and the actual transaction process between the suppliers and the distributors has not yet been possible, some very valuable information on these tendencies was acquired from interviews with the distributors at the Mbare Musika market and mopane worm packers in the urban centre. Emphasis in this paper will be on the urban market values of the caterpillars. A separate paper by the same author on a detailed description of the transportation and quantities of the marketed mopane worms is forthcoming.

Basically, two types of urban mopane worm distributors can be loosely distinguished: the formal and the informal. A lot of work on the debate on the distinction between the formal and informal marketing systems has been documented by various authors. Since this distinction is complex, and this paper has not set out to further elaborate on it, emphasis will be on personally conceived distinctions which I feel comfortable with. Thus the formal marketing structure in this paper will refer to those traders who are legally-approved. These traders are, ideally, registered and licensed. This structure in Harare includes the companies which buy, pack and distribute the caterpillars and the traders at Mbare Musika and other markets in the city (who own legally-approved stalls there). The informal marketing structure will here refer to those traders who are not licensed and hence are not legally-approved. Such traders do not have a fixed point of operation and may actually resort to peddling their wares. A description of the formal and informal marketing systems of the mopane worm will be given separately due to the marked differences in their operations.

There are two species of caterpillar that are found on the Colophospermum mopane tree, among other trees (Wilson: 1987); the green caterpillar, which, when dried turns brown and the greyish-brown spiky caterpillar which when dried assumes a black colour. The Shona refer to the former as magandari or masinini and the latter as madora, while the Ndebele call them amapipi and amacimbi respectively. The first (apparently Gynanisa maia) is the less prized. The second is Gonimbrasia belina which is more prized. Both these species appear during the rainy season and are collected and processed in large numbers in the communal areas of Zimbabwe. Some of the processed caterpillars are stored to be eaten as a relish or a snack and have been part of the diet of Black Zimbabwean since time immemorial. However, a vast amount of these caterpillars are traded in the urban markets. Though there is mention of this trade in literature (see for example, Wilson: 1987, Bradley: 1992, Dewees: 1992, Mujakachi: 1992 and Hawkes and Madzudzo: 1991), I have found no work that describes in detail the urban marketing system of the mopane worms in Zimbabwe. Hawkes and Madzudzo (1991: 5) briefly refer to the rural marketing system as observed in Bulilimamangwe.

THE FORMAL MARKETING SYSTEM OF MOPANE WORMS

There are marked differences within the traders in the formal marketing systems. The formal traders at Mbare Musika do not have a specified source of their stocks of mopane worms, they generally sell at retail level, they do not prepack their products and the quantities and buying or selling prices of their wares are not rigidly adhered to in the transaction process. Emphasis, to a greater extent, is on good bargaining and negotiating skills. The packers and distributors of mopane worms in the city centre are supplied by gatherers who bring their produce to them. They are approached first by individuals who have caterpillars to sell and they buy them at a price predetermined by the company. The companies pack the caterpillars into bags of varying sizes and sell them at fixed prices. Since the marketing patterns of traders at Mbare Musika and those of trading companies in the city centre vary considerably, they will, for purposes of clarity, be dealt with separately.

FORMAL MOPANE WORM TRADERS IN THE CITY CENTRE

Two companies (herein referred to as company A and company B) both of which are packers and distributors of mopane worms (among other products) were located. There are some wholesaling companies which stock mopane worms, but interviews with such companies were not possible. Of the two companies interviewed, company A is rated as the biggest dealer of mopane worms. In both companies only male staff were observed; the managers are male and so are all the other workers who are the packers and shop attendants. Both companies said that they obtain their supplies of mopane worms from collectors who approach them with their merchandise. The companies distinguish between black and brown mopane worms and they pay different prices depending on the type.

A set of open ended questions were administered to the companies. Some of the questions asked were:

- how long has the company been trading in mopane worms?
- where does it get its supply of the caterpillars?
- how much does it pay for the caterpillars and how much does it sell them for?
- how do the sales of the mopane worms compare to other commodities they trade in?

Since the two companies gave somewhat contradictory responses, detailed descriptions of their trading activities will given separately.

COMPANY A

This company started operating in Bulawayo and has been trading in mopane worms for 15 years. The Harare outlet has been in operation for 7 years and has been trading in the caterpillars for the same number of years. Besides mopane worms the company packs and sells a variety of agricultural products such as beans, groundnuts, popcorn, maputi and nyimo.

Supply and Processing of the Mopane Worms

The company gets its supply of mopane worms from collectors who come from the "mopane belt". This belt includes areas like Gwanda, Zvishavane, Kezi and West Nicholson. The collectors bring the caterpillars either to the Bulawayo branch or to Harare. Initially representatives of the company used to go and camp in the mopane worm areas. It established a contact point and people who had any caterpillars to sell brought them to them. However, due to problems of security, storage and accommodation, the company was forced to abandon this arrangement. The company, however, decided to increase their buying price to compensate their suppliers for transport costs incurred. Their supply of mopane worms has not been affected by the change of buying arrangement.

The company distinguishes between black and brown mopane worms and buys and sells them at differing prices. The black caterpillar which is said to be more popular but scarce is more expensive. Thus, the company buys the caterpillars at these prices:

Table 1 Company A - Buying and Selling Prices of Mopane Worms

Type of caterpillar	Buying Price per kg	Selling Price per kg	
		Wholesale	Retail
Black mopane worm	\$10.00	\$17.00	\$18.00
Brown mopane worm	\$ 9.00	\$13.00	\$14.00

Very little processing is done by the company. It mainly packs the caterpillars into smaller packs i.e 100g, 200g, 500g and 1kg. But because their customers do not want to buy broken caterpillars, the packers pick out any broken caterpillars and in this process the company loses 4-6 kg per every 50 kgs which amounts to about 10%.

The Sales of Mopane Worms

The company sells the packed caterpillars directly to the public, to hawkers and vendors, to retailers and wholesalers. Just as the buying price varies per type of mopane worm so does the selling price. Furthermore, the prices vary as per customer. Hence, there is a wholesale price and retail price (see Table 1). The company spokesman rated mopane worms as their number one seller. So popular are the caterpillars with their customers, that the company says the demand exceeds supply. Their stocks of the commodity rarely last them till the next season.

COMPANY B

This company has been trading in mopane worms for the past 14 years. Although the company has another outlet in Rusape, most of their trade in mopane worms is carried out at the Harare branch. Besides mopane worms, the company packs agricultural products such as beans, nyimo, and groundnuts. The company also trades, to a greater extent, in dried fish.

Supply and Processing of the Mopane Worms

The company gets its supply of mopane worms from people who gather them in Matabeleland and bring them to them in Harare. The company buys directly from the gatherers as they pay less than when they buy from a "middle person". The buying price of the caterpillars depends on the type. The black mopane worm is bought at a higher price than the brown one.

Table 2 Company B - Buying and Selling Prices of Mopane Worms

Type of caterpillar	Buying price per kg.	Selling price per kg.
Black mopane worm	\$ 7.00	\$ 14.00
Brown mopane worm	\$ 6.00	\$ 12.00

The caterpillars are then packed into smaller packs of 100g, 200g, 500g and 1kg. All the packing is done by hand and in the process all the dust falls out. The packers only have to pick out any pieces of charcoal and leaves before packing them.

The Sales of Mopane Worms

The packed caterpillars are sold directly to the public. The selling price varies as per type of the mopane worm, with the black caterpillar fetching more than the brown one.

Compared to other commodities that the company trades in, the sales of mopane worms are said to be slow. The caterpillars certainly don't sell as fast as kapenta fish for instance. The company spokesman attributed this poor sales to the fact that the caterpillars are only popular with a particular group of people. This poses a problem for the company because the longer they keep the caterpillars the more dust they accumulate and the less sellable they become.

MARKETING OF THE MOPANE WORMS AT MBARE MUSIKA

Five licensed (we assume) dealers were interviewed at Mbare Musika (the total number of observed mopane worm traders was 12). Three of the respondents were male and the rest female. I was informed by the traders that this year there are fewer people selling mopane worms than other years because the buying price was too high due to the scarcity of the caterpillar this year.

Source of the Mopane Worms

There is no rigid formally established source of mopane worm supplies for traders at this market. Thus, sources of their supplies were as varied and almost as many as there were the number of the interviewees. The table below illustrates the varied sources of their supplies. What is evident, however, is that none of the traders is also a collector.

Table 3 Traders' Sources of Mopane Worm Stocks

Trader's #	Source of mopane worm stocks
1	Bought them from people from Matabeleland who approached him with their merchandise.
2	Bought them from some people who had bought them from gatherers in Plumtree and Gwanda.
3	Travelled to Bulawayo to buy them from gatherers
4	Was supplied by her sister who lives in Gwanda and is selling them on her behalf for a commission.
5	Bought them packed from a wholesaler

Unlike the case with the traders in the city centre, here there are no predetermined buying (wholesale) prices for the mopane worms. The prices are determined, to a large extent, through negotiation and bargaining. The scarcity or abundance of the

caterpillars also influences the prices. In a year of scarcity, the price of the caterpillars goes up. Thus, traders pay varying prices for the same quantity of mopane worms (at least for those who buy them from other informal dealers), reflecting to some degree the bargaining skills of the trader against those of the supplier.

At "wholesale" stage the caterpillars are measured into 20 litre buckets and sold at prices ranging from \$70.00 to \$100.00. Alternatively, the caterpillars are measured into 50 kg bags (*this is not necessarily the weight of the contents!*) and for such a quantity the traders pay anything between \$460.00 and \$700.00. The traders who get their supply from wholesale dealers pay \$16.52 for a pack of 10 x 100g.

The Distribution of the Mopane Worm

Except for those who get their supply prepacked from a wholesaler, the stocks of caterpillars are stored in sacks which are displayed on the trader's stall. The caterpillars are then measured into containers of varying shapes and sizes and the prices of the contents vary accordingly. Just as the buying prices for the caterpillars differ, so do the selling prices (probably this variation reflects the variations in the buying prices). Thus, the prices range from \$1.00 to \$30.00. Caterpillars measured into a standard tea cup, for example, sell for between \$2.00 and \$2.50. If measured into a squashed 2.5litre tin the caterpillars sell for an average of \$25.00 while those measured into an un-squashed one of the same size sell for between \$28.00 and \$30.00. A prepacked 100g gram packet of caterpillars is sold for \$2.50.

While these are general prices, there is room for negotiation to some degree. For example if the customer is a few cents short of the price, the trader may accept the money without necessarily reducing the quantity. Even the quantity is not strictly adhered to. For example if a customer has bought a large quantity of caterpillars he/she may be given a "mbasera". This is an extra quantity which the customer does not pay for, and it's generally considered as a gesture of appreciation of the amount purchased and also acts as a way of enticing the customer to keep buying from the trader in future.

From the five respondents interviewed only one said that the caterpillars do not sell very well. The general feeling among the traders is that the caterpillars are a very profitable merchandise and are very popular with their customers. One respondent said that the caterpillars are such a dependable merchandise that, no matter what, she can be assured of their sale every day. Despite that this year the caterpillars were more expensive than the other years, their sales have not been affected. The caterpillars are said to be very popular with their customers for different reasons. For example bachelors prefer them to beef because they are easier to cook. Some eat them because health practitioners encourage their consumption because of their nutritional value.

THE INFORMAL MARKETING SYSTEM OF MOPANE WORMS

Only one unlicensed informal mopane worm trader was located and interviewed. The man of about 27 years of age was selling the caterpillars to some domestic workers and security guards along St. Kilda street in Mount Pleasant. Because of the illegal nature of his activities it was difficult to conduct an in-depth interview without making him suspicious or uncomfortable. The communication was therefore left at casual discussion level.

From our conversation, the man disclosed that he gets his supply of mopane worms from his relatives at his rural home in Plumtree (Brunapeg) who send them by rail. Initially he used to sell the caterpillars unboiled but his customers complained that the caterpillars were sandy. The hawker attributed this complaint to the fact that the customers do not know how to cook them. He has since started selling the caterpillars boiled.

The caterpillars are measured into a standard tea cup and sold for \$1.00 per cup and 0.50c per half cup of the same quantity. His sales of the caterpillars are very good and he makes a good profit (especially if one bears in mind that boiled mopane worms tend to expand, thus a less quantity is required to fill a container than dried ones).

CONCLUSION

From the above descriptions it is evident that mopane worms, which are transported from the rural areas, have become a profitable source of income for both formal and informal traders in Harare. Though the sex of the suppliers of mopane worms was not asked, it is nonetheless interesting to note that the caterpillars which are collected predominately by women (as per Hawkes and Madzudzo: 1991) have established a lucrative business for more men than women in the urban areas (at least basing on the observed and interviewed respondents).

The marketing set up of the traders have some marked differences. For example, the formal dealers in the city centre buy their supply of mopane worms from gatherers who approach them. The prices paid are predetermined by the company and the supplier does not have much influence in determining this price. With formal traders at Mbare Musika, the sources of mopane worms are varied. The caterpillars may be bought or given free of charge. In cases where the caterpillars are bought, the price is not strictly predetermined. Both the buyer and the supplier have a price in mind they are willing to pay or accept. The final price eventually arrived at is largely a result of their negotiation and bargaining. The trader in the city centre prepacks his wares into bags of varying sizes and charges as per quantity. The merchandise may be sold at retail or wholesale level. The price and quantity are fixed and the customers do not expect an extra quantity for free. At Mbare Musika, on the other hand, the trader displays his/her merchandise, which is stored in a sack, on the stall and has measuring containers of different shapes and sizes. The customer selects a container of a size of his/her choice and the caterpillars are then measured by the dealer into that container and put in a plastic bag or wrapped in some paper (this may be an old newspaper, a page from a magazine or disused computer paper). Though the price for a container full is established, the dealer may reduce the price if the customer asks for such a favour. The quantity may also be increased if the dealer is impressed by the quantity purchased by the customer. The informal distributor peddles his merchandise. The caterpillars are not prepacked and may be boiled before sale if the customers so desire.

Whatever differences may be apparent in the marketing systems, the urban marketing of the mopane worms plays a very important role in the urban areas. The marketing of the caterpillars makes it possible for the urban population to have readily available sources of their traditional food which people turn to as a substitute relish. The caterpillars can be bought from a supermarket shelf, from the market or from some non-formal dealer. Mopane worms are said to be highly nutritious, therefore their consumption contributes quite significantly to the dietary intake of the urban population which consumes them. The caterpillars have also ensured that some people in the formal and informal sectors earn a means of livelihood. Above all they also act, to some extent, as a link between people in rural areas and those in urban centres. For example, some people in rural areas send mopane worms to their relatives in urban centres to sell. This helps them to earn money and survive in urban areas.

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