

How the Salmon Cup became a Rice Measure in Liberia: Elements of an Answer

Adam Manvell, June 2019, Version 1.0



"The rice so prepared is measured in several ways. The smallest measure is the *kapi*, which is obviously derived from the English "cup." This measure may have one of two values, depending on whether the rice is being sold or bought. The local trade uses what is called a *sâmo-ko*, "salmon cup," for dealing in rice. It is the large size tin can (U.S. tall #1) in which salmon is normally packed. Since few of the *Kpelle* are wealthy enough to afford tinned salmon, it is not clear why they use this term." (Gay & Cole 1967: 64)

I am not sure when I first heard the term salmon cup used for a measure of rice¹ like the one shown over, but when I did, I recall being a little perplexed. From a British background, I took salmon to be an expensive food and in a smaller tinned form, a rare sandwich spread. Like John Gay and Michael Cole, I thought it beyond the means of the majority of Liberians. As I never saw one of these cups with an original label indicating it had ever contained salmon, I idly thought the moniker might have come from a North American English name transfer on to what I would call sardines, pilchards or tuna, which I could envisage being the original occupants of such tins². After all, I was working in a corner of West Africa where in the local English, ground-hogs, opossums and raccoons stalk the farm-forest mosaic; animals that are also known as pouched rats, cane rats and civets.

Several research jobs passed without me giving this curiosity any further thought. Then for one reason or another I fell upon a reference to the remarkable Flemmie Kittrell's pioneering study of food and nutrition in Liberia in 1946-47. Intrigued, I nudged the good folk at Howard University library to put this online, which they duly did. Recently I have been looking at fresh fish supply and this led me to think about the role of fish in diets which returned me to this study. Flemmie's aim had been to find out what Liberian people—men, women, adolescents, and children—ate from day to day so she examined the dry-season diets of about 4,500 individuals from a “cross-section of the people—America-Liberians, natives of the hinterland, and natives who live in the cities of Monrovia, Sinoe, and Cape Palmas” (p.5). Focussing on fish I was pleased to find that she had taken care to look inside the fish category, which is often frustratingly undifferentiated in dietary studies. And there it was, among her table of nutritional values of common foods that grow in Liberia or commonly found in trading stores, "salmon, pink, canned". Time for the can opener.....

The Pivotal Role of First World War Rations

At the beginning of the twentieth century the global salmon industry was centred on the northern Pacific Ocean with canneries stretching from the shores of the Sea of Okhotsk around the Kamchatka peninsula and across the Bering Straits to where the majority lay in Alaska, British Columbia, Oregon and Washington. During the First World War, the North American canneries sent millions of cases of tinned salmon to supply Allied troops and civilians in Europe. Coen (2017) describes how the salmon packers successfully lobbied the Canadian and US governments to supply their products as the ideal nutritious ration. The resulting boom had some far-reaching consequences e.g. regulations in the wake of over-fishing, war time licensing favouring white settlers over Indigenous fishermen in BC and the entry of women into the canning workforce. For the purposes of this Liberian story, the WW1 legacy is more simple:

“At the end of the war, Ottawa and Washington, DC, returned all unused stock to the canned salmon companies, much of which had never left local warehouses to begin with. With the industry now sitting on millions of pounds of salmon, it initiated a marketing campaign designed to boost consumption both domestically and in the global export market.”
(Coen, 2017: 463)

1 Other goods such as bush pepper, beans and gari/farina are also sold in this measure.

2 As for example in this superior illustration: <https://www.mercycorps.org/articles/liberia/fish-cup-rice>

Canned Salmon Comes to Liberia

Though the WWI surplus was an important stimulus for the global distribution of tinned salmon, the product had overseas markets before the war. Salmon is thought to have been first canned in Aberdeen in 1824 and in North America in New Brunswick in 1839 before reaching the Pacific coast in 1864 (Jarvis, 1943:2-3). When tinned salmon first arrived in Liberia will probably never be known. As European expatriates were largely reliant on tinned provisions at the beginning of the 20th century (Maugham, 1920:147) and some American-Liberians had the means to consume goods from the US (Allen, 2004), it is likely that some cans found their way to Liberia before 1914.

With the complete opening of the Panama canal in 1920, shipping rates to the Atlantic seaboard fell (Maurer & Yu, 2008) and this presumably also stimulated the movement of salmon cans around the world. Writing nearly 20 years later, DeLoach notes that most Pacific canned salmon was shipped out of Seattle as ocean-going transportation was more economical than rail (1939: 88). In the only Liberia specific canned salmon data I have found so far, Purdon's figures below show a curious peak in 1920. It should however be noted that in the author's corresponding tables for exports from Canada and re-exports from the United Kingdom, Liberia is not listed separately, but may nevertheless have also received supplies from these nations.

Exports of Canned Salmon From the United States to Liberia, 1919-1923

Source: Purdon (1925: Table 2)

Year	Pounds	Metric Tonnes	Value USD
1919	8,218	3.73	\$1,761
1920	12,425	5.64	\$2,440
1921	1,721	0.78	\$218
1922	3,930	1.78	\$403
1923	1,684	0.76	\$195

Setting aside the problem of unknown quantities of tinned salmon imported from elsewhere, perhaps the most interesting aspect of Purdon's figures above is how deceptively small they are. Around 1920, Maugham (1920:14 & 103-4) estimated the Liberian population at 700,000 'native' people plus 14-15,000 people of American descent and 30-40,000 born of liaisons between the two. He also estimated that there were just 70-80 European expatriates, mostly British, after the expulsion of the Germans in 1917. Assuming that only the 15,000 Americo-Liberians and handful of Europeans were the prime tinned salmon consumers, in the peak import year of 1920 they would have been eating about half the annual average per capita figure of Americans (1.646 pounds: Purdon 1925:39). A more likely scenario is that only a subset of this population, for the most part living in and around Monrovia, were the salmon-eaters. Some of them would have been eating rather a lot and it is quite likely that their empty cans were reused in their pantries and beyond the back door. With most salmon cans of the time seemingly³ containing 1lb in weight, the figures above indicate 27,978 tins in theoretical circulation. Did the salmon can simply enter into common parlance as a unit of measure through a process of discrete diffusion out of the households who could afford to consume the contents? Perhaps they just provided the most readily available suitable sized can and their appealing labels helped make the name stick—see Coen (2013) who notes the use of eye-catching labels typically of a deep vibrant red colour, used partly to signify the flesh colour within but also to hide rust spots that might have developed in storage.

3 Deduced on the basis of browsing web images of old salmon can labels.

The Salmon Cup becomes a Rice Measure

The earliest evidence I have found on the repurposing of empty salmon cans is in an article by George Shattuck, a physician on the 1926 Harvard expedition (1929: 228):

“By agreement with the Liberian Government before leaving Monrovia, the porters were paid a shilling a day, but when unusually long marches were made we gave them more. As a rule they fed themselves, but when they could not return home on the same day we would give each man a cup of rice. The standard cup for a day's ration is a salmon tin which holds rather less than a pint. ”

The Harvard expedition was financed by the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company which in the same year on the basis of a \$5 million loan to the Liberian government had acquired a 99 year lease for up to a million acres of land to create the world's largest rubber plantation. Since 1924, the company had been operating the 1,500 acre Mount Barclay plantation as an experimental enterprise (Knoll, 1991: 50). Here the company hired its own labourers and suffered no shortage of applicants since the work was paid, unlike various alternate labour demands from the Americo-Liberian settlers and the government. Firestone's American recruiters went into the interior to bargain with paramount and clan chiefs for the labourers they required, taking care to avoid depleting any area too severely (*ibid.*). However, by early 1926, the government sought to control recruitment by reviving the 1912 Labor Bureau to supervise the hiring of workers and the remuneration of the chiefs who supplied them. The agreement with the Firestone Plantations Company was that the Bureau would supply them 10,000 men annually, 2,000 from each of Liberia's five counties (*ibid.*).

My suspicion is that Shattuck's report of a standardised daily rice ration arose from either Firestone or the Labor Bureau's hiring practises around the time⁴. For many of the recruited labourers their first encounter with the object and name salmon cup may have been with their rations whilst trekking to the Firestone plantations. Handwerker (1980) notes that up until the early 1900s, the presence inland of imported items from the coast, such as cloth and enamel and tin cups, was limited in the only part of the nation with any established markets, which was the north. Though this gradually changed, as the government imposed its will over the interior through the 1920s, the Firestone migration experience may have provided many their first acquaintance with a novel fish product⁵. If and how this introduction moved from beholding the empty vessel to tasting its original contents remains to be seen.

4 Martin Ford notes around this time, “According to government sources, porters were to be fed and paid, but this was only the case for non-government work.” (Ford, 1991: 210)

5 Populations on or near the coast would however have been familiar with imported stock-fish and barrels of herrings (Johnston, 1906:399 and Taylor, 1939:25)

Canned Salmon at the Company Store

In an anonymous propaganda article featured in the May 1930 edition of the illustrated magazine *Modern Mechanics and Inventions* entitled "Building an Empire In Africa's Jungles"⁶ is a revealing quote about how the Firestone venture may have had a more profound role in the salmon cup story:

*"The Firestone influence in Liberia has provided the spark for a broad, new development that is quickening the spirit of the whole country. When the rubber men arrived they found trade largely in the hands of Europeans, who drove sharp bargains with the natives. In an effort to improve the condition of the natives and the country's economic outlook, the Firestone company has introduced a string of chain stores on the plantations and elsewhere. There either native or white may buy almost any common article to be had at home, at prices only modestly above cost. Practically any article from a thimble to a radio set is purchasable. Some of the most popular items with the Liberian workers are peaked American caps, wrist watches of the dollar kind, and **canned salmon, a delicacy of the Liberian table since the stores opened.**"*

The 'string of chain stores' introduced by Firestone were operated by a subsidiary called the United States Trading Company (USTC). So far, I have found limited information about the early days of this company, but the moderately priced products suggests it may have benefited from the tax-exemption details of the 1926 agreement (van der Kraaij, 1983:51). Just after the Second World War, Georges Balandier (1952: 351-2) offers a snippet of how these stores operated and made their items 'purchasable':

"L'U.S.T.C. (United States Trading Company), firme d'importation qui est une filiale de l'entreprise Firestone, consent, en outre certains avantages en nature au personnel de la plantation sous forme de cessions de pétrole, sel, huile de palme, allumettes, savons, tricots, couvertures, parfois poissons secs, à des prix relativement bas. Ces cessions ne doivent pas dépasser mensuellement une certaine limite"

[The USTC (United States Trading Company) an importation firm and a subsidiary of Firestone, grants certain benefits in kind to plantation staff in the form of kerosene, salt, palm oil, matches, soaps, knitwear, blankets, and sometimes dry fish, at relatively low prices. These advances must not exceed a certain monthly limit.]

Whether canned salmon was available on store credit in the early years of the Firestone operations is unknown. It's price in relation to salaries would certainly be interesting to determine. My assumption is that it was a prestige product for the low paid⁷ workers who made up the vast majority of the thousands of Firestone employees, which was perhaps bought on special occasions such as festive meals or as a homecoming gift.

6 Available at: <http://blog.modernmechanix.com/building-an-empire-in-africas-jungles/>

7 For discussion of Firestone salaries up to 1939, see Knoll, 1991.

By Way of a Conclusion

In the foregoing pages a feint sketch of the salmon cup's history in Liberia has been assembled within a timeline from after the WW1 and petering out, on the basis of the opening quote, in the late 1950s to early 1960s. I have found some evidence to suggest that the opening of the Firestone plantations and the labour it drew from around the nation may have had a pivotal role in exposing people to salmon tins. Archival research might produce a more complete set of importation figures though unfortunately the Firestone archives, which have been relocated from the University of Akron to Bridgestone America, which could be useful for USTC sales data, are still not open to the public. More importantly, field research is now needed among the elder generation on their personal memories of canned salmon as both food and vessel to test the Firestone theory and flesh out a much richer history of this humble can. I encourage anyone interested to develop the topic themselves and I'll see what I can add in due course.

Before signing off, I will leave with two observations. Firstly, the salmon cup is not alone as a unit of measure in Liberia with an interesting old-fashioned name: I can think of at least two other examples. Palm oil is typically sold in quarter bottles (6.3 US fl oz/187.5 ml) called Schnapps which harks back to the period when bottles of this size contained imported gin⁸ rather than the dazzling array of contemporary blended spirits. On the coast, small fish such as *boney* and *kanway* are sold in large plastic tubs called 'Blue Band' after the margarine brand that used to be available in distinctive containers of this size.

Finally there is a possible twist to my initial musings about whether the salmon name had been transferred to sardines, pilchards or tuna. In both Buchanan and Robertsport, I have heard the name salmon used on several occasions for the cobia (*Rachycentron canadum*) which is called *won-ton* in Klao (Kru). Has the name been transferred from the approximate likeness of this fish to the images on the original salmon cans? Curiously, George Miller who was a marine fishery technician in Liberia from 1952-54 gives the local English names for various fish caught on hand lines, among which is the "salmon" fish (tuna) (Miller, 1957:13). Perhaps the name application has changed in time? Names can be deceptive.....



8 For an excellent study of the social significance of Schnapps in West Africa see van den Bersselaar (2007).

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