Tracking Translocality: Food Remittance Narratives in the Africa-Gulf Migration Corridor

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Abstract

This paper explores the overlooked practice of food-related remittances in the Ghana-Qatar migration corridor, emphasizing their social, emotional, and cultural significance within translocal households. While cash remittances are widely studied, food remitting remains under-researched despite its critical role in sustaining family ties and addressing food insecurity. Drawing on a mixed-methods study involving household surveys in Ghana and interviews with migrants in Qatar, the paper employs a tripartite conceptual framework incorporating gifting, caregiving, and moral economy to analyze migrant remittance narratives. The paper shows that remitting practices are shaped by cultural norms, kinship obligations, and emotional care, often at significant personal cost to migrants. The study also highlights reverse food remittances from Ghana to Qatar as strategies to overcome "culinary estrangement." This bidirectional flow reinforces identity, belonging, and solidarity across borders.

Keywords

translocality, food remittances, food security, Ghana-Qatar migration corridor, culinary estrangement

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Cover Image

Banku, fufu, Jollof rice, waakye, rice and stew, Omotuo, peanut butter soup and chicken, light soup and other Ghanaian dishes. Photo credit: Alexander Mychko/Alamy

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Introduction

The growing volume of international remittance flows continues to generate a large body of literature, with a particular focus on cash remittances and their role in improving household welfare in the Global South (Adams, 2011; Aguayo-Téllez et al., 2021; Ajaero et al., 2018; Barkat et al., 2024; Chitambara, 2019; Cuong et al., 2018; Nanziri et al., 2023). Remittances are associated with a wide range of benefits, including poverty reduction and access to education, healthcare, and housing (Amega, 2018; Askaraov & Doucouliago, 2020; Azizi et al., 2021; Cui et al., 2023; Mishra et al., 2022). The role of cash remittances in strengthening household food security has also been increasingly recognized (Mabrouk & Mekni, 2018; Mora-Rivera & van Gameren, 2021; Smith & Floro, 2020; Sulemana et al., 2018, 2023). Many migrant-sending households rely heavily on these remittances to obtain sufficient high-quality food, which positively affects food consumption patterns, dietary diversity, and nutritional outcomes. Detailed research also shows that households with migrant members tend to have higher levels of food security compared to non-migrant households in the same community (Choithani, 2017, 2022; McFarlane et al., 2022; Moniruzzaman & Walton Roberts, 2022).

In contrast to the amount of research on cash remittances, the transfer of non-monetary remittances such as food has received much less scholarly attention (Crush & Caesar, 2018). There are several reasons for this. First, the remittances literature has traditionally been dominated by economists whose emphasis on quantitative methods and economic modelling prioritizes forms of remittance that can be easily converted into numeric data (Carling, 2014). Economists also have access to big data on formal monetary remittances collected by central banks in many countries. In-kind remittances often move through informal personal channels, and researchers have fewer points of contact with these networks, which makes them far less visible. Comparable data on non-monetary remittances would require time-consuming and resource-intensive tracking on the ground. Second, economists and institutions such as the World Bank and IMF have traditionally prioritized cash remittances because they have direct and measurable macroeconomic significance (IMF, 2009). Some economists assume that cash is preferable and more economically rational than goods because it allows the receiving household to choose what they need most. Third, although remittances of food, clothing, medicine, or consumer goods are vital to household welfare, they are often motivated by cultural ties, family care, and social obligations rather than purely economic considerations (McCallum, 2022). Finally, assigning value to in-kind transfers is a complex challenge as there are no uniform standards for accounting for these contributions (Ullah et al., 2022).

Food remitting includes both the transfer of food items from migrants to their home areas and vice versa. Thus, the practice can have a meaningful impact on household food security at both ends of the migration spectrum. For example, in Southern Africa, rural producers transfer a wide variety of foods to mitigate the food insecurity of migrant family members in urban areas (Frayne, 2010). In other parts of Africa, farmers remit cereals to family members in urban areas, but there is also evidence of rural-rural food remitting (Andersson Djurfeldt, 2022). In rural northern Nigeria, Barnabas et al. (2024) found that households receiving food remittances were more food secure. Similarly, in Ghana, food remittances were shown to improve household welfare (Apatinga et al., 2022; Kuuire et al., 2013). Food transfers in some international migration corridors, such as between South Africa and neighbouring Zimbabwe, are known to be significant despite being largely informal and difficult to quantify (Sithole et al., 2024).

In recent decades, there has been an upsurge in migration from Africa for work in low-wage jobs in domestic work, construction, services, trades, and security in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Atong et al., 2018; Valenta & Jakobsen, 2018). Researchers have focused on several key aspects of this migration regime, including the exploitative nature of the kafala (or sponsorship) system, recruiting abuses, human rights violations, and job exploitation (Akpomera, 2022; Asiimwe & Musinguzi, 2024; Fernandez, 2020; Mlambo & Zubane, 2021; Ngeh, 2022, 2024; Pelican, 2014). In the case of Ghana, attention has focused on a similar set of challenges facing migrants. The poor treatment of Ghanaian migrants on the way to and in the Gulf is increasingly well-documented (Apekey et al., 2018; Awumbila et al., 2019a, 2019b; Deshingkar et al., 2019; Kandilige et al., 2023; Rahman & Salisu, 2023). However, little or no attention has been paid to the translocal connections and remitting practices of Ghanaian migrants in the Gulf (Owusu & Crush, 2024).

In a critique of economistic approaches to cash remittances, Guermond (2021, p. 375) comments that "it is almost as if remittances are placeless flows that are not contingent upon anything; they are detached from the cumbersome and complex realities of not only their production but also their circulation, reception, utilization and transformation." Given the even more cumbersome and complex realities of remittances in-kind, several debates in the migration literature are of relevance to this paper. One concerns how best to conceptualize what Burrell (2017) calls the "recalcitrance of distance" or the spatial separation of migrants from those they leave behind. Remittances are typically analyzed through an economic or developmental lens, focusing on their measurable impact on poverty alleviation, household consumption, or human capital. Yet, this framing overlooks the profoundly social, emotional, and moral dimensions of remittance practices, and the associated interplay between culture, kinship, and family obligations and expectations (Akanle & Adesina, 2017; Mata-Codesal & Abranches, 2017).

This paper expands our ongoing work on the contemporary Ghana-Qatar migration corridor by examining the food-related remittance practices of Ghanaians in Qatar and members of their translocal households in Ghana (Owusu & Crush, 2024, 2025). The first section of the paper provides a review of the literature on translocality and proposes a conceptual framework which pulls together different strands in the anthropological and sociological literature on the culture

of remitting. The following section describes the methodology of the case study and some of the data limitations. The paper then presents the study results on the remitting of cash for food and food itself between Qatar and Ghana, with a particular focus on migrant narratives and their experiences in Qatar.

Translocal Householding

Many migrants who migrate internally or internationally are members of households that have been described in different ways in the literature as spatially 'stretched' (Porter et al., 2018), 'transnational' (Baldassar & Merla, 2014; McCallum, 2022), 'translocal' (Andersson et al., 2025; Petrou & Connell, 2016), 'multi-local' (Andersson Djurfeldt, 2015), and 'multi -spatial' (Ayerakwa, 2018). Translocality is a preferable moniker since it better describes the dynamic connections and interactions between people and places that are geographically distant yet socially and economically intertwined. Steinbrink & Niedenführ (2017, p. 19) note that the concept offers a way of analyzing "space-spanning economic, migratory, and social interactions," as well as a means to understand the significance of translocal interactions for movers and stayers. Unlike traditional notions of migration, which often view migrants as having left one place and settled permanently in another, translocality emphasizes continuous ties between home and destination. Migration is not a one-way process of dislocation but a reciprocal practice of maintaining home across borders.

A defining characteristic of the translocal household is that it comprises members living in different places but who still act together as a single economic and social unit (Steinbrink & Niedenführ, 2017). In the context of remittances, the translocal household provides a useful framework for understanding food and money transfers as part of everyday household strategies. The translocal lens captures this back-and-forth as part of one continuous household economy rather than separate individual transactions. Food and money remittances fit into this broader system of circulating care. By viewing translocal households as the unit of analysis, scholars gain a richer understanding of remittance practices. They become visible not as isolated responses to hardship, but as a continuous, embodied strategy for household survival and cohesion across geographic and social distance.

The IMF and World Bank define remittances as "personal transfers (that) include all current transfers in cash or kind between resident and non-resident individuals, independent of the source of income of the sender (and regardless of whether the sender receives income from labor, entrepreneurial or property income, social benefits, and any other types of transfers; or disposes assets) and the relationship between the households (regardless of whether they are related or unrelated individuals)" (World Bank, n.d.). Migrants worldwide send substantial amounts of money back home each year, helping their relatives pay for education, healthcare, housing, and food. In 2024, the World Bank estimated that total financial remittances to the Global South reached USD600 billion. There is now a significant international literature on the positive food security implications of cash remittances for recipient countries, communities, and households (McFarlane et al., 2022; Moniruzzaman, 2022; Mora-Rivera & van Gameren, 2021; Smith & Floro, 2020). The financial remittances literature has also explored the impact of migrant remittances on food security in two other types of migration corridors. First, migration flows from country to country within the Global South have prompted a concomitant emphasis on the positive impact of South-South remittance flows (Crush & Chikanda, 2018). Second, rapid urbanization in recent decades has prompted a major focus on internal migration and remittances within individual African countries, primarily from urban to rural areas.

Recent studies emphasize the role of remittances in improving food availability as well as the quality and diversity of the diets of recipients. In Bangladesh, for example, Moniruzzaman (2022) found that remittances are positively correlated with household food-related consumption expenditures. Remittances also reduce food-related uncertainties, counterbalance food-related shocks, and improve the quality of the diet of remittance-receiving households. Similarly, positive impacts have been reported in several other studies in Asia (Romano & Traverso, 2020; Sarma et al., 2023; Szabo et al., 2022). Dietary improvement is especially important where malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies persist despite overall food availability. In India, Sangwan & Tasciotti (2023) found that remittances increase total food expenditure, including on protein-rich food such as meats, eggs, pulses, vegetables, and fruits. However, Batra & Sharma (2025) note that remittances can also increase expenditure on unhealthy ultra-processed foods. In Sri Lanka, remittances have also been associated with less healthy food consumption (Jayaweera & Verma, 2024).

Studies from Sub-Saharan Africa have consistently shown that remittance-receiving households are better equipped to cope with adverse events such as droughts, floods, or market disruptions. Furthermore, remittances potentially allow households to avoid selling assets or taking ruinous loans in times of crisis, thereby preserving long-term livelihood security and food access. Research in Nigeria has also found that compared to non-receiving households, remittance-receiving households were better off in terms of calorie supply, micronutrient supply, child nutritional status, and overall food security (Babatunde & Qaim, 2010; Obi et al., 2020). Similar findings have been documented in other African countries, including Ethiopia (Abadi et al., 2018; Weldemariam et al., 2022), Ghana (Armah et al., 2025), Malawi (Dhakal, 2023; Kangmennaang et al., 2018; Zingwe et al., 2023), and Zimbabwe (Dafuleya, 2024; Tevera et al., 2010). Much less attention has been paid in the remittances and food security literature to the impact of remitting on migrants themselves, who may have to curb their own food expenditure to free up funds to remit (Crush & Ramachandran, 2024).

The remittances literature has begun to pay attention to the phenomenon of reverse remitting (Ampah, 2023), defined as the financial or material support that migrants receive from their families or communities back in their home countries,

often in the form of money or goods flowing in the opposite direction of traditional remittances. To date, most of the focus has been on reverse cash remittances, particularly during the initial stages of migration to a new destination (Das et al., 2021; Palash & Baby-Collin, 2019; Ran & Liu, 2023). In the Ghanaian case, several studies have shown that reverse remitting from Ghana to Europe also involves the transfer of goods (Adiku, 2018; Caarls et al., 2018; Mazzucato, 2009, 2011). In their analysis of remitting to the United Kingdom, Yeboah et al. (2021, p. 52) argue that reverse remittances are "embedded within social relations, which (re)produce reciprocity and relational ties within and across migrants and their families back home." Thus, reverse remittances can be seen as a form of gifting that strengthens social bonds through acts of reciprocity.

There is now growing interest in what Hayden (2024, p. 5) calls "culinary estrangement" among migrants in transit or at their destination. She notes that "research around the world has shown that even in conditions of extreme deprivation and need, people are never indifferent to what they eat but make decisions based on preferences and cultural criteria." Estrangement occurs when migrants living and working in another country cannot access "the taste of home" (Brown et al., 2019). In their study of Zimbabwean migrants in the UK, Datta et al. (2024, p. 1) argue that migration "results in physical, emotional and sensorial dislocations which are dramatically heightened if migrants cannot access culturally recognisable food as they journey and settle. Familiar foods, and the preparation, cooking and eating of these, are vital in remaking place. Taste and smell evoke connections with home, and the social and emotional relations located therein." In another study, Brown et al. (2019) report that for Nigerians studying in the UK, local foods were bland and fattening, and they quickly adopted a home country diet using ingredients bought locally or sent and brought from Nigeria to recreate Nigerian dishes. As these and other studies suggest, African migrants in countries far removed geographically from their own develop various strategies to access familiar foods and, where possible, to eat with other migrants, a social activity commonly known as commensality (Kudejira, 2021; Naidu & Nzuza, 2014; Nyamnjoh, 2018; Osei-Kwasi et al., 2017, 2019). Among the various methods for accessing cultural foods is food remitting from family at home.

One of the most under-studied forms of in-kind remitting is the transfer of food items by migrants to their family members elsewhere. These transfers help address food insecurity, support cultural ties, and ensure that vulnerable relatives receive the nutrition they need (Crush & Caesar, 2018). For example, migrants working in richer agricultural areas in Ghana remit food to their families in more marginal environments (Kuuire et al., 2013). However, most food remittances are sent to rather than by migrants. An AFSUN study showed that around one-third of all poor urban households in Southern African cities received farm produce from relatives outside the area (Frayne, 2010). In some cities, the figure was over 40%. Three-quarters of food remittances were sent to mitigate the food insecurity of migrant family members, and another 20% was sent as gifts. Another multi-country study of rural households in nine African countries found that 35% of households remitted maize to relatives in large and small urban centres and other rural areas (Andersson Djurfeldt, 2015). Another study in Ghana discovered that both urban and rural households receive food remittances, suggesting that food remitting can be bi-directional in character (Baako-Amponsah et al., 2024). More common is the reciprocal remitting of cash, clothing, building materials, and household goods from town to countryside and the remitting of food from countryside to town (Frayne, 2010; Onyango et al., 2021; Owuor, 2010; Tawodzera, 2013).

Food remitting from and to migrants is certainly not confined to internal migration, although international food remittances go well beyond the simple act of shipping a box or barrel of food across a border. Some migrants physically send food, shipping staples or specialty items that may not be readily available in their home countries. A SAMP survey of 4,765 migrant-sending households in five countries found that 28% of migrant-sending households across five African countries had received food remittances in the previous year, with a high of 60% in Mozambique (Pendleton et al., 2006). In North America, immigrants from the Caribbean regularly send food to their "barrel children" left behind in the care of elderly relatives (Taylor et al., 2015; Thomas-Brown, 2023). Similarly, Filipino migrants send or take boxes of food (balikbayan) as gifts for family members in the Philippines (Camposano, 2012; de Mata, 2022). In Africa, food remitting across borders has conventionally been handled by transporters and bus companies. However, recent research on informal shipments to Zimbabwe has shown that platforms like Mukuru and Malaicha.com, as well as social networks like WhatsApp and Facebook, play an important role in facilitating food remitting (Sithole et al., 2022, 2024).

Crucially, food remittances are not always unidirectional. In many cases, relatives in countries of origin send food to family members who have migrated. As Yeboah et al. (2021) note, "this reverse flow of material and non-material resources to migrants, which involves significant and mostly unpaid time and labour costs, is embedded within social relations, which (re)produce reciprocity and relational ties within and across migrants and their families back home." This is especially true for migrants who struggle to access traditional or culturally significant foods in their destination countries or cannot afford them. Family members back home often prepare food parcels containing homemade items and even agricultural produce. These parcels can make an immense difference for migrants who cannot easily replicate traditional recipes with ingredients available abroad. In a recent collection of essays on food parcels, Mata-Codesal & Abranches (2017, p. 8) observe that "food parcels act as strong markers of belonging and continuity in the geographical and social fragmentation introduced by international migration."

At the same time, physical food shipments pose serious logistical challenges. Food is perishable, so there are risks of spoilage and contamination if deliveries are delayed. Even with new digital delivery systems, shortages of popular items and transaction fees can cause frustration.

Informal networks also must navigate unpredictable border regulations or courier issues, especially in times of political instability. Beyond logistics, food remittances can create dependency. If migration stops or income drops, the flow of food can dry up overnight, leaving recipient households even more vulnerable. Food remittances might also encourage less nutritious consumption habits, especially if the foods sent or purchased are ultra-processed or rich in sugar. Despite these challenges, food remittances are a vital safety net in many places and deserve more attention from researchers who often overlook them or minimize their significance, especially in comparison with financial flows (Crush & Caesar, 2018).

Conceptual Framework

Petrou & Connell (2017) note that food transfers in either direction make little formal economic sense and argue that food, as an expression of identity and locality, is a powerful and repetitive reminder of moral obligations and kinship connections. As Carling (2014) suggests, it is important to capture both the social practice of remitting as well as the embeddedness of remittances in a broader set of family responsibilities, moral rights, social obligations, and kinship networks (Andrikopoulos & Duyvendak, 2020). In this section of the paper, we develop a conceptual framework primarily based on work on the anthropology and sociology of remitting. Anthropologists studying remitting practices have suggested that they can be framed in several ways: as gift-giving, caregiving, and moral economy. We argue that triangulating these concepts in a Gifting-Caregiving-Moral Economy (GCM) framework (Table 1) helps to understand the food-related ties that bind the members of the translocal household together, as well as interpret migrant remittance narratives of their remitting motivations, behaviours, and challenges.

Remitting as Gifting

Studies of remittances as gifts are indebted to Mauss's (2002) influential account of "the gift" to highlight remitting as a symbolic act that forges and sustains social bonds. For example, Cliggett (2003, 2005) notes that gift remitting upholds ties, reduces insecurity, and facilitates return migration. Several case studies have explored how gift remitting reinforces kinship ties and social bonds (Åkesson, 2011; Appau & Crockett, 2023; Cliggett, 2003; McKenzie & Menjivar, 2011; Singh et al., 2012). However, the practice of gifting also evokes notions of reciprocity by reinforcing social structures and mutual obligations. Viewing food remitting through the lens of gifting thus draws attention to the reciprocal nature of exchanges that produce and sustain social bonds. Migrants send remittances out of material necessity, but also as symbolic gestures of belonging, responsibility, and gratitude for past material and emotional support. Recipients try to respond with continued acts of reciprocity that reaffirm kinship ties and social bonds.

While gifting theory provides a useful lens for understanding the symbolic dimensions of remittances, it also has several shortcomings. First, the concept of the gift can obscure the power asymmetries and pressures that underlie what may at first sight seem to be voluntary offerings. In the literature, gifting is rarely completely altruistic as it often entails expectations of return or delayed reciprocity, which can create tensions, resentment, or emotional debt within families. Second, in translocal contexts, there is invariably an expectation that migrants will perform the role of generous givers of money, food, or goods, while migrants themselves experience this expectation as an obligation. Third, gift-based analysis runs the danger of romanticizing remittances, glossing over the economic precarity that underpins migrant giving practices and the hardships and sacrifices that remitting can impose on them (Ehwi et al., 2021). Finally, gift theory emphasizes continuity and cohesion in social bonds, neglecting breakdowns, refusals, or contested meanings of remitting. In this sense, while gifting is a valuable conceptual tool, it must be applied with caution and attention to the ambivalence, inequality, and burdens that often accompany remittance transactions.

Remitting as Caregiving

A second common representation of remittances in the literature is what Singh et al. (2010) refer to as the "currency of care." Here, the act of remitting signifies a continued sense of responsibility and connection to the family left behind (Harper & Zubida, 2017). While the economic impacts of remittances are well documented, their significance as a form of caregiving necessitates a more nuanced understanding of their social and cultural implications (Adger et al., 2022). In essence, caregiving refers to remittances as the emotional, physical, social, and material support produced and sustained in translocal households (Lutz, 2018; Merla et al., 2020; Ramsøy, 2016; Singh et al., 2010). As with gifting, there is now a significant case study literature on remittances as the currency of care, although most studies still focus on cash rather than food remitting (Ahmad & Khor, 2024; Fouratt, 2017; Hannaford, 2016; King & Vullnetari, 2009; Khrenova & Burrell, 2021; Prati et al., 2022). However, reciprocity is not expected or integral to the conceptualization of care.

While the concept of caregiving has proven analytically productive in highlighting the emotional, material, and affectionate dimensions of translocal support, it too has its limitations. For example, not all caregiving operates smoothly or symmetrically since relationships may become strained or break down entirely. Moreover, the concept risks obscuring the structural forces that can undermine remitting as an expression of care, such as restrictive migration regimes, indebtedness, and economic precarity. The literature on gifting has also privileged monetary remittances as the main form of care, underrepresenting other material exchanges such as food that can convey deeper emotional and cultural meanings and messages.

Remitting as Moral Economy

The third concept relevant to this paper is the moral economy of remitting. This term refers to how economic practices are governed by shared values, norms, and obligations, rather than by purely rational, individualistic, or market-based logics (Götz, 2015). Moral economy, therefore, tries to capture how economic behaviours are mediated

by moral criteria such as fairness, justice, equality, and reciprocity (Atekmangoh, 2017; Paerregaard, 2015). In the context of remittances, the concept highlights how the sending of money or food is not a purely economic transaction or a voluntary act of generosity and care, but rather a moral duty rooted in kinship and translocal responsibility (Della Puppa & Ambrosini, 2022; Katigbak, 2015; Simoni & Voirol, 2020; Solari, 2018). Remittances are embedded in relational expectations that define what migrants owe to parents, siblings, and other trans-local household members and what kinds of giving constitute a "good child," "responsible spouse," or "successful migrant" (Carling, 2014). As Lacroix (2020, p. 1) notes, "migrants are accused of selfishness and moral dubiousness when they do not abide by their duty of emigrants, and, in particular, when they refrain from transferring money to the left-behind."

The moral economy framework thus encompasses a broader set of values than are present in standard economic models. In the context of migration, moral economy helps explain why remittances are often sent even when they impose hardship on migrants themselves, who feel morally bound to support family members back home. Through the moral economy lens, food remitting is part of a migrant's moral duty and a means of ensuring social recognition and avoiding criticism and blame. Yet, this concept also has limitations. There is a danger of romanticizing traditional behavioural norms and assuming a moral consensus within translocal households. In practice, moral expectations are often contested, negotiated, and even weaponized, particularly when they involve inter-generational or in-law conflict (Hunter, 2018; McCallum, 2021). Migrants can also face competing demands from multiple relatives or must navigate collective duty to remit with translocal household members in other places (Mahmud, 2021). Crucially, as well, a focus on moral expectations and obligations can obscure the structural context and constraints on migrant remitting behaviour.

Table 1: Food-Related Remittance Framework

1. Remitting as Gifting

* Core Claim: Remittances, including food, function symbolically as gifts, echoing Mauss's theory that gifts create and sustain social bonds through reciprocity.

* Main Contribution: Highlights how remittances reaffirm kinship ties through mutual obligations.

* Potential Limitations:

o Risks romanticizing remittances and food security impacts.

o May obscure the economic hardships and pressures placed on migrants.

o Understates tensions or breakdowns in translocal relationships.

2. Remitting as Caregiving

* Core Claim: Remittances can be viewed as a "currency of care," reflecting ongoing emotional, material, and social responsibilities to family in the home country.

* Main Contribution: Illuminates the affective and practical dimensions of support within translocal households.

* Potential Limitations:

o Care is not always smooth or symmetric; relationships can fray or fail.

o Underrepresents non-monetary forms like food.

o May overlook structural constraints that impede caregiving.

3. Remitting as Moral Economy

* Core Claim: Remittances are governed by shared moral expectations and social norms rather than purely rational economic logic.

* Main Contribution: Explains why migrants remit despite personal hardship; remittances reflect moral obligations tied to identity as "good" kin or successful migrants.

* Potential Limitations:

o Risks idealizing traditional moral norms or assuming consensus within families.

o Overlooks negotiation, contestation, and conflict over moral obligations.

o May obscure structural inequalities or constraints.

4. The triangulation of these three concepts provides a robust analytical lens:

* Gifting explains the symbolic and reciprocal dimensions of remitting.

* Caregiving focuses on the emotional and material dimensions within spatially divided families.

* Moral Economy situates remittances within normative expectations of duty, fairness, and familial reputation.

Note: This summary table was created with the assistance of ChatGPT 4.1.

By triangulating the concepts of gifting, caregiving, and moral economy, this paper illuminates different facets of remittance practices. Gifting captures the nature and the meaning of remittances, foregrounding the symbolic and reciprocal nature of remittances, emphasizing how money or food forges social bonds and invokes obligations. The caregiving perspective shifts attention to remittances as acts of emotional and material support within translocal households with spatially separated membership. The moral economy approach situates remittances within shared norms of duty, fairness, and honour, revealing how remitting is actioned and judged in kinship networks. In the rest of the paper, this framework guides our examination of how Ghanaian migrants in the Gulf articulate the meanings and motivations behind their remitting practices, shedding light on the intersections of material need, emotional obligation, and cultural expectations.

The proposed framework does have some constraints that need mentioning in relation to the specific focus of the paper on food-related remitting. First, the three concepts are not always neatly separable in practice; remittances may simultaneously serve as acts of care, symbolic gifts, and moral obligations. What is framed as a gift may simultaneously be experienced as care and a moral duty, which inevitably complicates the narratives of migrants about their motivations and experiences. Second, there is a definite risk of romanticizing remittance practices as inherently relational or moral. In practice, however, they can also be characterized by blame, stress, and conflict within translocal households. Third, the framework risks overlooking the negative food security consequences of remitting for those who remit. While the triangulated framework emphasizes acts of care, solidarity, or obligation, remitting can also place significant emotional, financial, and social strain on migrants themselves, exacerbating their precarity, leading to poor diets and undernutrition, compounding feelings of guilt or inadequacy, and straining their own physical and mental health. Finally, none of these three concepts, in isolation or combined, fully captures the exploitative structural political and economic factors that provide the context and constraints on remittance behaviours from the Gulf.

Materials & Methods

The data for this study were collected in Ghana and Qatar from March to June 2023 using a mixed methodology. The first phase of the research was in Ghana, where we surveyed 200 households in Accra and the surrounding town of Kasoa. The study adopted a non-probabilistic purposive sampling strategy and identified households that fit the selection criteria. The participants were recruited through migrant networks, contacts at recruitment agencies, and the Ghana Immigration Service. The survey collected data on a wide range of information on household membership, demography, economy, and food security. The survey was administered on tablets using the *ODK Collect* application and stored in Kobo Toolbox. Data relating to food security and remittances were extracted for analysis for this report.

In the second phase of the field research, the research team conducted face-to-face, in-depth interviews with Ghanaian labour migrants living in Doha, Qatar, and surrounding communities. Participants were recruited through community networks, such as the Ghanaian Association in Qatar, and during regular church services on Fridays. The research team discussed and arranged interviews with the migrants at their labour camps, other accommodation facilities, Ghanaian restaurants, and other convenient places. A total of 58 participants were identified and interviewed at length about their migration experiences and history, migration decisions, economic activity and challenges, food and cash remittance behaviour and motivations, food consumption in Qatar, and subjective food security experiences. For the analysis, audio recordings of the in-depth interviews were transcribed in English, coded, and thematically analyzed to identify, describe, and interpret themes and patterns within the data using NVivo 12 Software.

Remitting Cash for Food Purchase

The volume of remittances from Qatar to Ghana is unknown, as they are simply absorbed into the larger statistical story about the billions remitted each year by Ghanaians worldwide (Abdulai, 2023; Gyesaw, 2025; Prempeh et al, 2023). However, migrant remitting behaviour is not reducible to economic rationality or some abstract desire to contribute to the economic development of the country. Remitting is an intimate and affective act, always with the immediate family beneficiaries in mind. As a result, it is important to examine the reasons migrants themselves articulate for engaging in remitting through the tripartite lens of gifting, care, and morality.

Members of translocal households stretched between Ghana and Qatar are connected by a range of material and non-material flows. The primary difference between cash and non-cash forms of remitting is that cash involves a one-way flow from Qatar to Ghana, whereas food is remitted in both directions (Owusu & Crush, 2024). As many as 80% of surveyed households in Ghana had received cash remittances from migrant members in Qatar in the previous year. Remittances were the most important source of household income overall (Figure 1). Migrants remit funds with the expectation that they will be used to meet the immediate basic needs of household members back in Ghana. These include school fees, clothing, healthcare, housing, debt repayment, funeral costs, savings, and investment in small enterprises. However, the most common use of cash remittances is food purchase, with almost 70% of households using the funds to buy food (Table 2).

The widespread use of cash remittances for food purchase is largely because they are the main or, in some cases, only source of income. That said, only 17% of the surveyed households could be classified as completely food secure on the HFIAP scale, with another 72% either mildly or moderately food insecure (Table 3). Only 1% of the households were suffering severe food insecurity, however, which suggests that using remittances for food purchase mitigates the worst forms of hunger and undernutrition.

Table 2: Uses of Cash Remittances by Households		
Uses	**No. of households**	**%**
Food purchase	139	69.5
School fees	92	46.0
Construction materials	64	32.0
Savings	40	20.0
Repay loans	30	15.0
Clothing	28	14.0
Transportation	24	12.0
Funeral expenses	21	10.5
Marriage	10	5.0
Other	25	12.5

Table 3: Prevalence of Household Food Insecurity		
	No. of households	**%**
Food secure	32	16.5
Mildly food insecure	105	54.1
Moderately food insecure	55	28.4
Severely food insecure	2	1.0
Total	194	100.0

Migrants in Qatar were generally willing to discourse at length on their remittance practices, motivations, and struggles. Some of these narratives clearly exemplified one of the three categories in the tripartite framework. On gifting, for example, one migrant noted that remitting was to reciprocate for past support from the family:

> *Back in Ghana, when I needed help, they supported me, so it's only fair to reciprocate and support them now. I don't get worried when I send them money because I always budget for things I need here and the rest for my family back home, which they can share among themselves* (Interview No. 29, Doha, 4 June 2023).

Here, the remittance is framed as a gift that strengthens social bonds but there is also a strong emphasis on reciprocity. There were also several examples of non-reciprocal caregiving in the form of cash for food purchase as well as immediate needs such as rent and school fees:

> *I am able to send some little money to my family, which has, to some extent, paid their rent and supported household food purchases and consumption and the family in general, though the salary is not much … all the money goes to essential household expenditures, such as sending money to feed my kids and paying the rent for them whenever it is due* (Interview No. 1, Doha, 31 May 2023).

> *I send money to my parents and kids monthly. It is a must every month. For siblings, I remit occasionally. They use the money for feeding fees at school and household food consumption* (Interview No. 3, Doha, 31 May 2023).

In caregiving, there is little expectation of reciprocity:

> *When I send the money home to my son and siblings, it also impacts me here, but I can't complain. If I don't do it, who will? I have to manage. It's not like they are using the money to do anything for me, but for their own consumption* (Interview No. 4, Doha, 31 May 2023).

Many narratives exhibited a combination of elements in the tripartite framework. For example, one migrant said he remits to his mother out of concern for the family's well-being and care for a younger brother who is still in school. While this exemplifies caregiving, there is also an implied element of moral economy since his actions are consistent with being a responsible son and sibling:

> *I send money to my mom for upkeep and to care for my little brother, who is still in senior high school. I am not financially stable; I sometimes struggle to eat, especially when sending money. I still have to think about my family's well-being, especially that of my little brother, who is still in school. It would go a long way to prevent him from indulging in certain practices to get money when he is not getting enough at home* (Interview No. 26, Doha, 6 June 2023).

Similarly, there is a strong moral economy element in caregiving narratives that convey a strong sense of responsibility for the well-being of family members in Ghana:

> *I send money to the family in Ghana every month. I send 900 Cedis purposely for their food. They use the money to buy foodstuffs, including rice, beans, yam, chicken, etc. Rice is the most essential food in my household because of my kids. They like rice a lot. I want to give them a good life; it is my responsibility, and I fully embrace it* (Interview No. 5, Doha, 31 May 2023).

> *I send money every month to my family, about 1,500 Cedis, to support their education. If it means sending the last amount of money on me, I will do whatever it takes to give them a better education and dreams. My kids and wife are why I am working, and I must take good care of them* (Interview No. 30, Doha, 8 June 2023).

Care giving emerged very strongly in another narrative that saw remitting as an act of protective caregiving for a younger sibling. There was also an element of moral economy as the respondent acts out of a felt duty despite the personal hardship:

> *I send money to my mom for upkeep and to care for my little brother, who is still in senior high school. I am not financially stable; I sometimes struggle to eat, especially when sending money. I still have to*

> *think about my family's well-being, especially that of my little brother* (Interview No. 26, 6 June 2023).

Another narrative combined elements of gifting, caregiving, and moral economy:

> *I don't send money to my family often. This is because my sister has her own business, which I helped to set up. She benefits and gets her income for food from the returns, so I don't have to work to support household food consumption – helping her monthly as well as my son would put a huge burden on me. Instead, I send my son 300 Riyals monthly. Sometimes, when I don't remit, my sister supports my son too, because she has the business. She takes money from me for food purchases and other household needs until I can remit to them* (Interview No. 22, Doha, 4 June 2023).

Here, there is a foundational gift in the form of setting up the sister's business, which, in turn, has the reciprocal benefit of reducing pressure to remit. There is also a bi-directional flow of care from the migrant to the sister to the son that indicates a redistribution of care responsibilities within the trans-local household. Finally, as part of a redefined moral economy, responsibility is negotiated with the sister so that there is no longer a one-way obligation. The migrant still fulfills their duty but adapts to what is feasible given their own challenges as a migrant worker in Qatar.

The terms of the moral economy are also imbued with the gender roles of men and women within the family. Sikweyiya et al. (2020, p. 2) argue that Ghanaian society is "deeply patriarchal and that men construct and perform masculinities, which express their identities, aspirations and values, in their social relationships with other men as well as with women." A man's failure to provide "would reflect badly on him as a man, in so doing call into question his masculinity" (Sikweviva et al., 2020, p. 4). Men who can remit regularly view themselves as a 'success' by fulfilling their assigned and internalized gender role as fathers, husbands, and breadwinners.

> *I send money every month to my wife and child. Monthly, I send 800 Ghs and support my siblings when they are needed. I am the man, the breadwinner, and the father. They cannot survive without me. Besides, it is my responsibility to provide for them as the man and father of the house. The money is used for household food purchases* (Interview No. 8, Doha, 31 May 2023).

As Setrana & Kleist (2022, p. 72) note, "remittance practices might be reflecting – or be articulated as embedded in – gender ideals, such as notions of dutiful sons and daughters or good mothers and fathers." At the same time, gender roles are not impervious to change. The absence of the male 'figurehead' can lead to a redefinition of women's roles in the household, empowering some and imposing added domestic burdens on others (Kutor et al., 2025; Teye et al., 2023).

Failure to remit, even in understandable circumstances given the exploitative nature of the labour market, leads to self-recrimination and blame about violating the moral economy of remitting. For example:

> *My earnings in Qatar have been minimal after the World Cup. I haven't been able to send enough money home to benefit the family for some time now. I could not even repay all the loans I took to come to Qatar. The land I used as collateral was seized and sold. I feel so disappointed in myself* (Interview No. 34, Doha, 9 June 2023).

> *I try to remit [to] the family regularly, even though there are times when I cannot do so due to financial constraints, just like last month's ending. I pleaded with them that they will hear from me when things go well* (Interview No. 29, Doha, 4 June 2023).

Fulfilling the responsibilities of care and the moral economy can mean considerable personal hardship for migrants:

> *If I want to eat what I want, I might need 500 Riyals every month; but with my responsibilities, it is impossible. I must eat smaller and the same meals all the time* (Interview No. 4, Doha, 31 May 2023).

> *It has been seven months since I sent money to my family, but I explained to them that things have been difficult, and they understood my situation. The first 14 months in this country was peaceful and different. There was a lot of construction jobs available due to the 2022 World Cup. I survived, I had something to depend on and could consistently send every month to the family, but this whole mess started when I moved from the company to freelance before the World Cup. Life has been complicated after the World Cup* (Interview No. 17, Doha, 4 June 2023).

> *I am able to send money back home to Ghana once a month, but it sometimes delays when I am not paid. In that case, they have to adjust and find alternate ways to feed at home until I am able to remit to them when I am paid* (Interview No. 54, Doha, 17 June 2023).

As these excerpts also indicate, the ability of migrants in Qatar to remit is constrained by employment and labour market conditions outside their control. Labour reforms to the kafala system mean that it is now possible for migrants to leave the employ of their sponsor and seek alternative employment, known locally as freelancing. However, while freelancing means escape from the total control of companies, it carries with it the risk of irregular employment and non-payment of wages, which, in turn, reduces the ability to remit. This imposes additional hardship on dependents in Ghana, but it can also lead to misunderstanding and even conflict within the family, as it is still a breach of the duty of care and responsibilities of the moral economy.

> *You know, the job here is erratic, especially when you are on a free visa. Besides, you can be sacked at any time. I carefully manage how I send money to ensure that I save and support my family without leaving myself stranded here* (Interview No. 49, Doha, 15 June 2023).

Finally, there is the question of whether remitting to Ghana impinges in any way on the food security of remitters in Qatar. Studies in other contexts have suggested that remitting can negatively affect migrants' own food security, forcing them to adopt various coping strategies (Crush & Tawodzera, 2017). Some respondents said they were able to remit by adjusting their own consumption and eating simply and cheaply in cafeterias and Ghanaian restaurants:

> *Sending them money doesn't affect me here because I plan to keep some 100 Riyals on me for a month, which I use for basic expenses here. Still, even with that, I don't use all the 100 Riyals. I sometimes spend only 50 Riyals in a month. After all, I don't spend much here because I don't buy any clothing, and with food, I rarely make orders. I just go to the restaurant and eat at the work cafeteria, even though I don't like it at times* (Interview No. 48, Doha, 14 June 2023).

More common were descriptions by migrants of depriving themselves of food to save money to remit:

> *When I send the money home to my son and siblings, it also impacts me here, but I can't complain; if I don't do it, who will? I have to manage. It's not like they are using the money to do anything for me, but for their consumption. If I want to eat what I want, I might need 500 Riyals every month; but with my responsibilities, it is impossible. I must eat smaller and the same meals all the time* (Interview No. 4, Doha, 31 May 2023).

> *My family is always appreciative of the little financial support. I send them regularly every month when I am paid, which makes me happy. Sometimes, sending money home puts me in a difficult situation here, especially when we are not paid early. I sometimes take foodstuffs such as rice from my friends and pay for or replace it when I am paid* (Interview No. 51, Doha, 15 June 2023).

A single mother with three younger siblings explained that she only kept 10% of her basic monthly salary for her own needs and remitted the rest:

> *Remitting money to my family in Ghana sometimes impacts what I eat. I don't send all the money: sometimes, I leave about 150 riyals (from my basic salary of 1,500) on me for upkeep and food, which is not enough, but I "manage" it all the time. I am eating the same kind of food all the time. For instance, I eat one way: rice with no variety all the time because I want to manage the money* (Interview No. 1, Doha, 31 May 2023).

Another respondent said that he ate beans all the time to cope with the financial pressure and burden that comes with the responsibility of care:

> *Sending money impacted what I ate. Honestly, it was beans and gari that I usually like to eat because, per my calculation, it would have been difficult and lost for me to eat other foods. Someone owed me, so I relied on that to purchase food* (Interview No. 16, Doha, 4 June 2023).

To cut down on living costs in Qatar and free up funds in order to remit, many migrants share the same rented housing space and kitchen with a degree of community living and solidarity. Shared cooking also cuts down the cost of food. Although some Ghanaian migrants work for companies where food is provided, they prefer to join their colleagues to cook and eat as a group:

> *In difficult times here in Qatar, my brothers in this room often help me. Even when we were all in the company and were provided food, we didn't like it because it was difficult to eat and hence, though not allowed in the company building, we still prepared food as a group and eat. Every member in the room contributed money that we used to buy foodstuffs to prepare the meals* (Interview No. 28, Doha, 7 June 2023).

Solidarity and commensality among migrants in Qatar become a way of coping with economic hardship, maintaining cultural identity, and fostering emotional support in a foreign and challenging environment. By sharing housing, cooking communally, and pooling resources, Ghanaian migrants are able to significantly reduce living costs, enabling them to remit more money back home. This collective lifestyle helps recreate a sense of home and belonging, reinforcing social bonds and offering psychological comfort in the face of isolation, restrictive labour conditions, and limited freedoms.

Overcoming Culinary Estrangement

This section of the paper moves from cash remittances to remittances in-kind in the form of food transfers. Most migrants in Qatar remit cash, not food. However, food remitting does occur, as one respondent explained:

> *Some of us here export some food home since some food items, such as white rice, are relatively cheaper. My father sitting over there is very much involved in such business. He collects the goods, including cooking oil, white rice, cookies and flour, clothes, and electronic gadgets people want to send to relatives in Ghana, charges them, and ships them on their behalf. Some of us here ship (export) food back home since some items, such as white rice, are relatively cheap here. We are careful not to send more than we earn because that might cause us to suffer* (Interview No. 52, Doha, 15 June 2023).

Rice is now Ghana's second-largest staple food with per capita consumption almost tripling in the last two decades

(Amfo et al., 2023; Onumah et al., 2022). However, 60% of the rice consumed is imported from global markets which means considerable price volatility. When rice is significantly cheaper in Qatar, care circulation means that it makes sense for migrants to ship it to their families in Ghana.

Large companies in Qatar typically contract out catering services that prioritize cost efficiency over nutritional value, leading to repetitive diets in company canteens that do not align with the culinary preferences of migrants. As Jureidini (2022) notes, "contractors and employers are always looking at the bottom line, which leads them to cut corners where they can. Some will take the lowest price menus on offer from the caterers." The food in these facilities is a major bone of contention among migrants. As one noted, "The food they serve in the camp is mostly rice with sauce, but it is not the kind of sauce we are used to back home. It is bland and not filling enough" (Interview No. 17, Doha, 10 June 2023). A second commented, "I do not like going to the cafeteria for food. The food does not taste great to me. It is always rice and some sauce. That does not mean the food is bad because some people eat it, but it is not our local food" (Interview No. 26, Doha, 4 June 2023). Another avoided company food altogether: "I do not eat the food from the company because I do not like it. They sometimes think I am not even a company staff member because I barely go to the cafeteria for food" (Interview No. 43, Doha, 12 June 2023).

One strategy to improve the quality and desirability of food is for workers to purchase and prepare their own food in the labour camps:

> *Even when we were all in the company and were provided food, we did not like it because it was difficult to eat, and hence, though it was not allowed in the company building, we still prepared food as a group and ate. Every member in the room contributed money that we used to buy foodstuffs to prepare the meals* (Interview No. 28, Doha, 7 June 2023).

However, many companies bar migrants from cooking in their accommodation. Individuals who disobey are fined and have their cooking equipment confiscated. One respondent described why he disliked eating company food and what happened when he and other Ghanaian workers tried to cook their own food:

> *The company provides us with food and accommodation. The food is served at the cafeteria. Nobody is allowed to cook in the accommodation. We tried several times to cook, but they always passed behind us to pick up the rice cooker and cooking utensils and later fined us for cooking in our room. They have the door keys, so they come around often to inspect* (Interview No. 43, Doha, 12 June 2023).

Supermarkets and grocery stores in Qatar do not stock the Ghanaian products that would enable migrants to cook familiar dishes from home. Eating traditional Ghanaian food is more satisfying, comforting, nostalgic, and a reminder of their identity and home. Food from Ghana represents comfort, community, sympathy, celebration, and tradition. Migrants even suggest that consuming traditional Ghanaian foods is the only "right way" of eating:

> *I sometimes make sure someone brings food from Ghana to me. I received palm oil, salted fish, kokonte, and others. This is because you do not get them here, and to eat right, you need to find a means to get some traditional foods* (Interview No. 13, Doha, 2 June 2023).

Food from home is also an extremely important way of mitigating culinary estrangement and coping psychologically with the rigours of living and working in such a challenging environment. Many migrants also share meals with friends or relatives in the same accommodation, which not only saves money but also allows a larger group of associates to "eat right" in an otherwise barren land. However, "eating right" is a convivial pleasure denied to many migrants working for larger companies and living in labour camps. Eating Ghanaian dishes together (the practice of commensality) by migrants outside, and clandestinely inside, the camps is a fundamental practice integral to daily survival.

To access culturally appropriate food in Qatar is a challenge, and migrants adopt various strategies to access their preferred foods. For example, as the number of Ghanaian migrants has increased, so has the demand for Ghanaian foods. There are now two Ghanaian restaurants (Mukaase and Asanka Delight) in Doha that import foods such as konkonte, local peanut butter, gari, corn dough, and dry fish and serve dishes such as waakye with fish, chicken and meat, kenkey, and fish; rice balls with peanut butter soap, fufu and light soup; palm nut soup with mutton and dried fish; and jollof rice, tuo zaafi, banku and okra stew or pepper and fish.

However, ordering from or eating at the restaurants in not cheap and the expense involved is a constraint on regular patronage by low-paid migrants:

> *I sometimes order from a Ghanaian restaurant, but not always because I know I cannot rely on that consistently with my small basic salary, especially when I have other family expenses* (Interview No 26, Doha, 7 June 2023).

> *I order food from Ghanaian restaurants which sell different Ghanaian dishes. You get to eat what you like, though very expensive and unsustainable, especially if you compare the expenditure on food at these restaurants and your monthly wage* (Interview No. 43, Doha, 12 June 2023).

A second means of accessing Ghanaian foods in Qatar is via the activities of enterprising fellow migrants who import dry foods from Ghana and run home services selling the products to other migrants as well as preparing and delivering cooked dishes to customers:

> *As you can see, I prepare food and sell it to some Ghanaians here. A lot of people know me here. Just as I sell to them, I also cook healthy foods. I know I need to eat well and get the energy to work, or else I will fall sick and not be able to work, so I make sure I eat well* (Interview No. 54, Doha, 15 June 2023).

Because they do not have licences and shops, the migrants advertise their services online on WhatsApp and the Facebook group of the Ghanaian Association and other groups, selling at prices that attract other Ghanaians:

> *I send lists of items to people travelling to Qatar so they can get me such items. I sell such items in Qatar here at a rate everyone can buy. The shipping fee does not influence the price at which I sell my items* (Interview No. 45, Doha, 12 June 2023).

The final, and most common strategy for accessing Ghanaian foods, is food remitting from Ghana. This takes several forms. The first pathway is a combination of gifting and moral economy in which the household in Ghana buys and remits food to the migrant in Qatar as an acknowledgement of their social bonds and reciprocal obligation to make life more tolerable for the migrant family member. These food remittances are often transported in person by friends or relatives travelling or returning to Qatar. Second, in order not to burden the family, some migrants send cash remittances to household members in Ghana to purchase and send the food to them in Qatar. To a lesser degree, this too is a form of gifting which acknowledges that cash remittances are not solely for the use of the recipients but can also be used to strengthen social bonds with the migrant household member in Qatar:

> *If I need help, I send money to my wife to buy food items and give to my friends returning from vacation in Ghana to bring to me. I get foods like shito (black sauce), groundnut paste, Gari and some medications like amoxicillin. That is all. People will not agree to bring over heavy foods to you here. Sometimes it comes at a cost* (Interview No. 24, Doha, 4 June 2023).

A third form of food remitting takes place outside the aegis of the translocal household. Here, migrants rely on other migrants to purchase the food for them when they are back in Ghana and bring it with them when they return to Qatar:

> *Whenever some of my colleagues visit or return on vacation, I send them money to buy me gari, red oil and dry fish; these are those items I cannot find here* (Interview No. 7, Doha, 1 June 2023).

> *I import food like Gari, shito, Agbeve and kooko medicine from Ghana. I give money to those returning from vacation or new guys coming here to Qatar to purchase those items for me simply because I cannot find them here* (Interview No 30, Doha, 8 June 2023).

> *I sometimes receive shito (black sauce) and other things from home. When someone comes from Ghana after vacation, I give them money to purchase items we do not have here for us. Sometimes, they bring dry fish and peanut butter because the ones they sell in the grocery stores are unsuitable for peanut butter soup* (Interview No. 40, Doha, 12 June 2023).

Combined with the practice of commensality, this suggests that migrants in Qatar are also forging new extra-household social bonds with other Ghanaians that fall outside the tripartite framing of translocal gifting, caregiving, and moral economy.

NVivo analysis of the migrant narratives showed which Ghanaian foods were most likely to be transferred to Qatar (Table 4). Among these local foods, gari (cassava flour) was most often mentioned by migrants (55.2%), followed by black sauce/shito 39.7%) and ingredients for preparing soup, such as canned palm nuts (13.8%) and groundnut paste (12.1%). Cereals such as corn flour, konkonte (dried ground cassava), and dried fish are important staple foods not available in Qatari markets or provided to them by employers in the labour camps.

Table 4: Key Food Items Transferred to Qatar

Local food items	No. of respondents	%
Gari	32	55.2
Shito/black sauce	23	39.7
Canned palm nut	8	13.8
Groundnut paste/peanut butter	7	12.1
Dried and smoked fish	7	12.1
Konkonte	7	12.1
Red oil	6	10.3
Corn flour	6	10.3
Salted tilapia fish	3	5.2
Tom Brown*	3	5.2
Spices	2	3.5
Onion	1	2.0

** Cereal for breakfast (porridge) made from roasted dried maize ground together with beans, peanuts, rice, and other cereals.*

With regard to translocal food remitting, the household survey in Accra provided additional insights into the types of foods that households send to migrant family members in Qatar. As Figure 1 shows, cereals and dried foods clearly predominate. The cereals remitted include corn dough (Accra kenkey powder and flour), cassava flour, local rice, and neat fufu (starchy dough made from boiled and pounded ingredients like cassava, yams, or plantains). Among the dried and smoked foods and fish sent are smoked herrings, catfish, shrimps, mackerel, and bush meat such as smoked grasscutter meat.

Figure 1: Types of Food Sent by Households to Migrants in Qatar

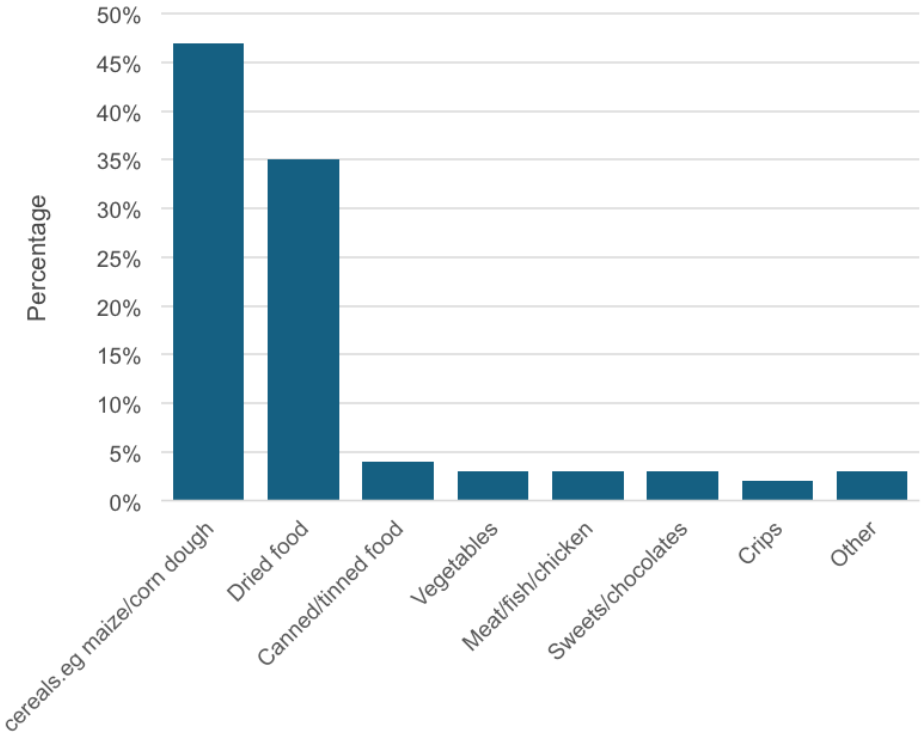

Figure 2: Frequency of Remitting Food to Qatar

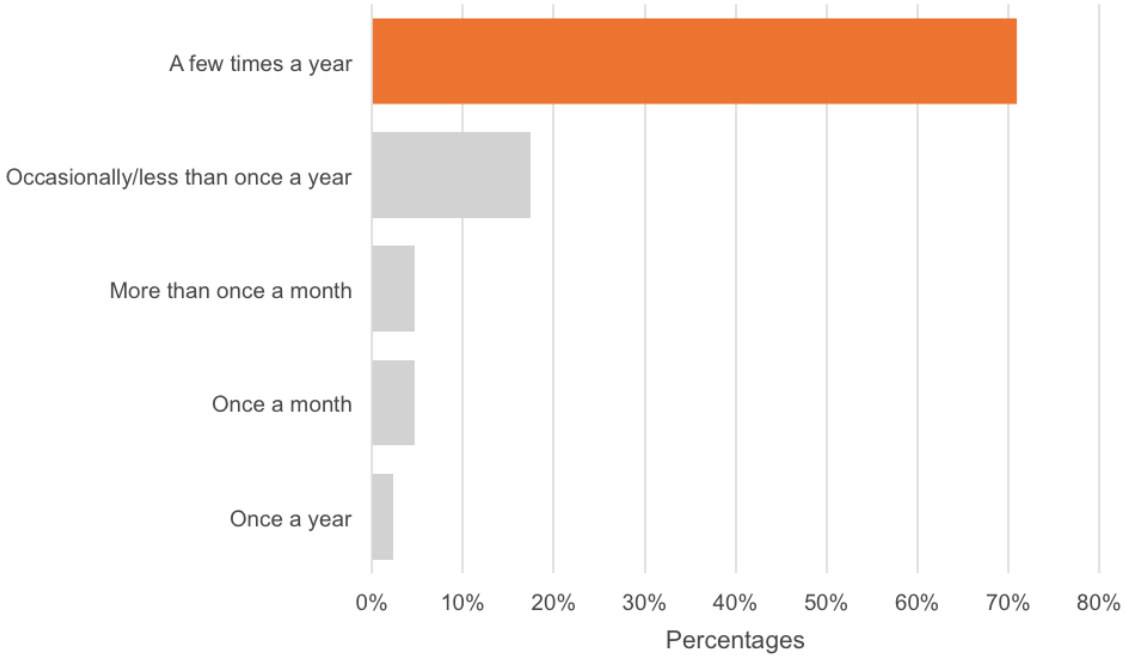

Figure 2 shows the frequency with which food is sent to migrants in Qatar by households who send food remittances. Most (about 90%) indicated that they send food to Qatar sparingly: that is, 'a few times a year', 'once a year' or 'occasionally, less than once a year.' The other 10% send food regularly (at least monthly). This irregular pattern of food remitting may be a reflection of their own lack of access to food, or the challenges involved in sending food to Qatar. However, it also suggests that ensuring that migrants have enough food to eat is not the primary motivation for food remitting, as it is for many internal translocal households (Crush & Caesar, 2018).

Crush & Caesar (2018) suggest that food remitting is less likely among international migrants compared to internal migrants due to the transportation costs, customs duties and other factors encountered in moving food across international boundaries. Bidirectional food remitting between Qatar and Ghana is therefore not without its challenges, according to the migrants interviewed. Many noted that food transfers can involve significant additional costs, and some do not receive what they sent the money home for. When migrants returning to Qatar bring food back for their friends and relatives, personal conveyance also runs the risk of confiscation by customs officials:

> *A friend of mine that I used to work with went to Ghana from here, and when he was returning, I told him to come along with malaria treatment and some foodstuffs, but he came to tell me that it was seized and thrown away. All because he put it in his handbag. So those are also some of the challenges we are likely to encounter* (Interview No. 24, Doha, 4 June 2023).

This respondent also noted that personal conveyance by other migrants comes at a cost and that "people will not agree to bring over heavy foods to you here." Others said that they had no control over when they would receive their food remittances as, in the words of one, they "have no idea when someone will be coming from Ghana; we just see them here" (Interview No. 29, Doha, 8 June 2023). Some migrants, including friends and relatives who could assist with food transfers, tend to avoid the process altogether as they do not want to be involved in the stress of carrying people's food items and possible scrutiny and confiscation at the airports. Other migrants struggle to find someone who will transport their food:

> *I do not get any food from Ghana. Sometimes, my mother wants to send some food items, but no reliable person can pick them up for me* (Interview No. 3, Doha, 31 May 2023).

Sithole et al. (2024) note that the COVID-19 pandemic's travel restrictions severely curtailed the practice and volume of food remitting elsewhere. As the number of cases continued to rise, a partial lockdown of the whole country was announced on 23rd March 2020 (Varma et al., 2021). Only essential repatriation outbound flights were allowed from Doha. Qatar implemented a complete lockdown of the Doha labour camps for over a month to try to curb the broader spread of the virus and contain the pandemic. As Ekanayake & Amirthalingam (2021, p. 2) report, "at the onset of the pandemic, the cramped labour camps where most low-wage migrant workers in the Gulf reside became breeding grounds for Covid-19 and had to be placed in isolation with entry and exit barred." From 9th March 2020, there was a travel ban on incoming flights to Qatar from fifteen countries identified as high risk for COVID-19. Similarly, in Ghana, there was a ban on incoming and outgoing flights until September 2020, which made the personal conveyance of food remittances all but impossible.

While transferring food to Qatar through friends, colleagues, and relatives was relatively effective pre-pandemic, it was almost impossible during the lockdown and travel bans:

> *COVID-19 impacted the landscape of food transfers. People were not coming for vacation during the COVID-19 pandemic, so they could not send stuff to me. We were on lockdown. COVID-19 hit us hard and dragged on for a while* (Interview No. 24, Doha, 4 June 2023).

> *COVID-19 changed the dynamics of food transfer. I had nobody to bring me food as there were lockdowns in Qatar and Ghana, as well as the closure of the Ghana airport for about five months. It was a difficult period. I just relied on and ate any food I could get, which has made me focused and not reliant on those foods again* (Interview No. 53, Doha, 16 June 2023).

Conclusion

This paper has explored the complex food-related remittance practices within translocal households that span the geographical, physical, and emotional distance between Ghana and Qatar. To date, studies of cash remittances by migrants for food purchase at home, as well as studies of food remitting by households to their migrant members elsewhere, have taken an overly narrow and economistic approach to exploring the nexus between migration, remittances, and food security (Crush & Caesar, 2018). Here, we suggest that the emerging literature on food-related remittances needs to move beyond economics to consider the cultural and social dimensions that underpin food remitting motivations and behaviours. The paper aimed to show how remittances between Ghana and Qatar extend well beyond purely economic transactions and embody social meanings, emotional bonds, and cultural obligations.

To that end, we develop a tripartite conceptual framework integrating ideas from the anthropological literature on gifting, caregiving, and moral economy. First, by recognizing cash remittances as gifts tied to addressing the food insecurity of family members, this approach captures the role of remitting in maintaining social bonds between migrants in Qatar and their families in Ghana. At the same time, reciprocity is a necessary feature of gifting to further strengthen those bonds, even though the material and affective exchange between home and away is often unequal. Second, caregiving focuses on the emotional and practical elements of remitting without expectation of reciprocity. This highlights how remittances express the ongoing commitment of migrants to the well-being of family members during their extended periods apart. Finally, the idea of moral economy demonstrates how cultural norms and social expectations shape migrant obligations and remitting behaviours, often obliging them to remit even under conditions of great personal hardship. While each concept offers important insights into different social aspects of remittances, their combination provides a more nuanced understanding of the motivations, tensions, and lived experiences underpinning translocal remittance dynamics. By considering gifting, caregiving, and moral economy individually and in combination, the paper shows the complexity and depth of migrants' familial responsibilities, cultural obligations, and personal sacrifices.

The concept of translocality provides additional insights into how migrants and their family members maintain simultaneous and meaningful connections across distant spaces (Steinbrink & Nedenführ, 2017). We argue that translocality draws attention to the ongoing social, economic, and emotional exchanges between Qatar and Ghana and provides a window on the motivations and dilemmas that are apparent in migrants' narratives of their remitting behaviour. Migrants

certainly do not see remittances in purely economic terms, instead articulating complex motivations for remitting that implicitly combine elements of gifting, caregiving, and moral economy. They send cash and, occasionally, food to their families back home, driven by moral obligation, familial responsibility, and genuine caregiving. Their narratives reveal some of the embedded social and emotional dimensions of remitting and the considerable personal sacrifices they make to maintain this support. Many who remit face reduced dietary diversity, compromised nutrition, and significant emotional stress as they prioritize family welfare over their personal well-being. Failure to remit as often (or as much or altogether) is blamed by migrants on the precarious nature of living and working in Qatar. But not being able to overcome these challenges and remit is interpreted as a personal moral failure to uphold the terms of the moral economy contract, not least by family members who are often quick to remind them.

Our household survey in Ghana and in-depth interviews in Qatar confirm that 'reverse remitting' of food from Ghana to Qatar is an important phenomenon which combines all three elements of the tripartite framework. Migrants find the food dished up in company canteens by sub-contractors bland, monotonous, and unpalatable (Owusu & Crush, 2025). Efforts to source and cook their own preferred foods are met with resistance, confiscation, and fines. Migrants outside the camps are able to exercise more choice, but familiar foods redolent of home are difficult to access. Food remittances from Ghanaian households to migrants in Qatar signify the desire of the family to help mitigate the challenges of culinary estrangement and reinforce social bonds, connections to cultural identity, and kinship ties. Gifting and caregiving practices of remitting cultural foods emphasize the role of food as not merely sustenance but as symbolic currency that reaffirms familial bonds and identity.

As we suggest, practices of food-related remitting faced logistical challenges and systemic vulnerabilities exemplified by corridor disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic disrupted bidirectional cash and food remitting practices, illustrating the vulnerability of households and migrants who are materially and emotionally dependent on these transfers. The imposed travel restrictions and lockdowns severely limited migrants' ability to send and receive both cash and food remittances, exacerbating food insecurity at both ends of the migration corridor. Migrants experienced intensified economic precarity, delayed wages, and reduced employment opportunities, forcing many to adopt alternative coping strategies. Likewise, recipient households in Ghana faced heightened food insecurity, uncertainty, and intermittent access to essential food resources. In conclusion, while cash remittances bolster household food security in Ghana, they also exact considerable nutritional and psychological costs on migrants in Qatar. Consequently, policy interventions to maximize the benefits of remitting from the Gulf need to reflect this nuanced understanding, ensuring that they address the structural constraints faced by migrants and are sensitized to the translocal realities shaping remittance practices.

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