

# R:Ed magazine

Cuisine



# R:Ed Magazine: *Cuisine*

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# Injera and Tej - the Epitome of Communal Eating in Sub-Saharan Africa

*Hana Rajabally*

Although the common saying “*You are what you eat*” has come to symbolise a didactic warning connecting the health of the body to the health of the spirit, the phrase can be extrapolated to a macrocosmic scale relating to a society or nation. “*A nation is what it eats*”: that is, the foods and popular dishes consumed by a people is what defines them - their identity, relations with each other, politics and religious beliefs are all intertwined in the beverages they drink and meals they digest. In his work on the history of African cuisine, James McCann wrote that the practice of assembling together in order to dine as a group reflects the fact that the consummation of food is more than a means of satisfying one’s nutritional needs - in fact, the very preparation of the meal to be eaten represents in itself an important cultural exhibition. The kitchen becomes the stage on which the culinary performance unravels, with the dishes thus prepared being enjoyed by an appreciative audience in the dining area.

But it is not just in the performative aspect of culinary preparation that food represents the foundation of a nation’s cultural expression. The ingredients of the meals themselves, how they are cultivated, with what tools they are prepared and eaten, for which particular occasions they are consumed, and the specific etiquette with which one must approach such meals, all form part of a larger network of social, economic and political relations which each feed into the symbolic importance of food and cuisine within a particular society or region. To appreciate this culinary science, we need only analyse one particular example of such culturally significant dishes within sub-Saharan Africa.

The Injera of Ethiopia and Eritrea, nations which both celebrate the bread as their national dish, consists of a large and round flatbread that is made out of pure teff, an ancient grain which has been a staple for both nations for centuries. The preparation for the flatbread is fairly simple, comprising the fermentation of a batter which is then cooked on a griddle known as a mitad. The result is a thin, circular flatbread which is perfect for consuming with meat and vegetables. An indispensable addition to Injera is wat, a delicious stew that is made of slow-cooked red onions, or, in the case of Doro wat, a combination of chicken and hard-boiled eggs. Alternatively, Injera may be eaten with the Siga wat, which is made with beef. The many different variations of wat testify to the culinary creativity with which the dish of Injera has been created and developed over the years.

Beyond its simple recipe and preparation, the manner in which Injera is presented and consumed similarly highlights the role of culinary traditions in epitomising national culture. The Injera is typically

laid out straight onto the dining table, serving simultaneously as the meal's main source of carbohydrates and as its plate. Garnished with a generous serving of wat, a mixture of sauteed red onion and meat or vegetables depending on the specific variation, injera is shared between a large group who each rip off pieces of the flatbread in order to scoop up various stews of beef, chicken, lamb or vegetables. In displays of amity and friendship or love, close friends or family members may feed each other injera, thus engaging in the common practice named *Gursha* which symbolises warmth and affection between one another. The meal thus becomes more than a perfunctory event that happens every evening in order to regain the energy and strength lost throughout the day, but a special occasion in which the bonds of intimacy are bolstered.

But no meal is complete without a beverage, and one beverage which is widely consumed within both Ethiopia and Eritrea is Tej, a honey wine which is often referred to as “the national dish of Ethiopia”. The drink is made of gesho or *Rhamnus prinoides* - a type of buckthorn that grows profusely near the streams and forest margins of Ethiopia and Eritrea. Mixed with some honey and water, the three ingredients are left in a jar to ferment until the sugar from the honey converts into wine. The longer the fermentation process, the more alcohol is present in the drink. Tej is often prepared and made at home, and is consumed at the dinner table from tall glass beakers called ‘bereles’. The drink provides the perfect accompaniment to a meal of Injera, and the power of the beverage to bring people together is shown in the custom of dancing with a berele of Tej balanced on your head to the beat of music.

The dish of Injera, and the beverage of Tej, then, are the perfect examples to demonstrate the power of cuisine, and its interplay in all aspects of our lives, providing the basis for familial relationships and camaraderie when we are young, and strengthening our close relationships when we grow older. Sharing a meal with a close friend or family member goes beyond the physical intimacy of eating from the same plate; instead, this practice represents the exchange of beliefs, values and ideas, all communicated and understood through the medium of cuisine. Only when we take a moment to pay attention at the dinner table, and observe the dishes and dining traditions around us, can we fully understand the complex interplay of socio-economic and political forces that join to create the meals and beverages that we consume every day.



# Between Climate Change and Food Security in West Africa

*Eric Ojo*

## What is climate change?

Climate change is a phenomenon that is scientifically attributed to greenhouse gases emitted by human activities that are warming the Earth and causing changes in the global temperature. Due to its widespread environmental, social and economic consequences, the international community has been making frantic efforts over the years, to limit greenhouse gas emissions and prevent global warming from reaching alarming proportions. It is a major global challenge to mankind.

## The correlation between climate change and food security

The relationship between climate change and food security is widely acknowledged by experts and stakeholders in the agricultural sector globally. By their reckoning, climate change is inextricably linked to food security due to its impact on several aspects of food production. It affects availability, accessibility, quality, utilization, and stability of food systems more generally. Moreover, climate change poses one of the biggest threats to agriculture and food production. For instance, a report presented at the Nations Climate Change Conference (COP17) in Durban, South Africa, affirmed that changes in climatic conditions are already affecting livelihood and food security in the Sahel and West Africa. Similarly, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, has observed that as a result of climate variability, the unpredictable yield for cereal crops in semi-arid regions of the world (like the Sahel region of Africa) is at least 80 per cent. Another joint study by the UNU Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), International Organization for Migration (IOM), Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel equally indicates that climate change could potentially have profound implications for food security and regional stability.



## How is climate change affecting farming activities in West Africa

From every indication, climate change is already a full-blown threat multiplier, exacerbating existing

challenges inherent in the agricultural value chain in West Africa. Climate change has taken its toll on farming activities and has had a negative impact on the livelihood and food security of people in the region. Farmers who are largely dependent on annual rain-fed crops to satisfy basic food needs are the worse hit. They are now contending haplessly with extreme weather conditions such as heat waves, water scarcity, high levels of crop and livestock diseases, droughts and greater CO<sub>2</sub> water concentration in the atmosphere and so on. Most of the major crops are already recording low yields. A number of studies predict possible crop yield losses with adverse impacts on food security in the next decades for the region. This has also triggered an increase in food prices and a decrease in income. Livestock and fishery are equally suffering similar fate.

### **Some examples of severe climatic conditions within the sub-region**

Experts and leading authorities in the science of climate change have categorized West Africa as a climate change *'hotspot'* with high possibility of recording low crop yields and production coupled with manifold implications for food security. A classic example is the scenario playing out in the Sahel region which is regarded as one of the most environmentally degraded in the world. The Sahel is constantly hit by droughts and floods. Consequently, its land and water resources are increasingly shrinking amid humanitarian crises arising from armed conflicts and violence. Lake Chad, an economic and culturally viable inland body of freshwater shared by Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria, has shrunk by as much as 90 percent since 1960, according to a recent BBC report. The scarcities of resources have further aggravated the conflict between farmers and the herdsman. The militant terrorist groups have also taken advantage of the situation to recruit idle young men in the area into their fold. In Nigeria, the magnitude of desertification, flooding, coastal erosion and changing weather patterns affecting agriculture is mind-boggling.

### **An appraisal of current mitigation and adaptive measures in the sub-region**

Since the historic Paris Agreement which entered into force in November 2016 is yet to make any meaningful impact in any of the West African nations who are a party to the Treaty, some countries in the region are taking action in their respective jurisdictions to mitigate the impact of climate change. In Niger, for instance, farmers are working to harvest the rainfall that reaches their land. They have also grown 200 million trees and rehabilitated five million hectares of degraded land. Similarly, Nigeria has adopted a process known as farmer-managed natural regeneration (FMNR). This involves regrowing trees whose stumps lay dormant in the soil.

### **Limitations on the part of farmers in West Africa**

For decades, those in the agriculture sector in the region who are largely small holder farmers have been

grappling with several challenges ranging from lack of improved crop varieties, low productivity due to poor soil fertility, poor irrigation, lack of storage facilities and a host of other limitations. Amidst all these impediments which have made it impossible for the region to produce enough food to feed its growing population, the farmers are precariously faced with an additional burden of climate change.

### Why food production is so essential in West Africa

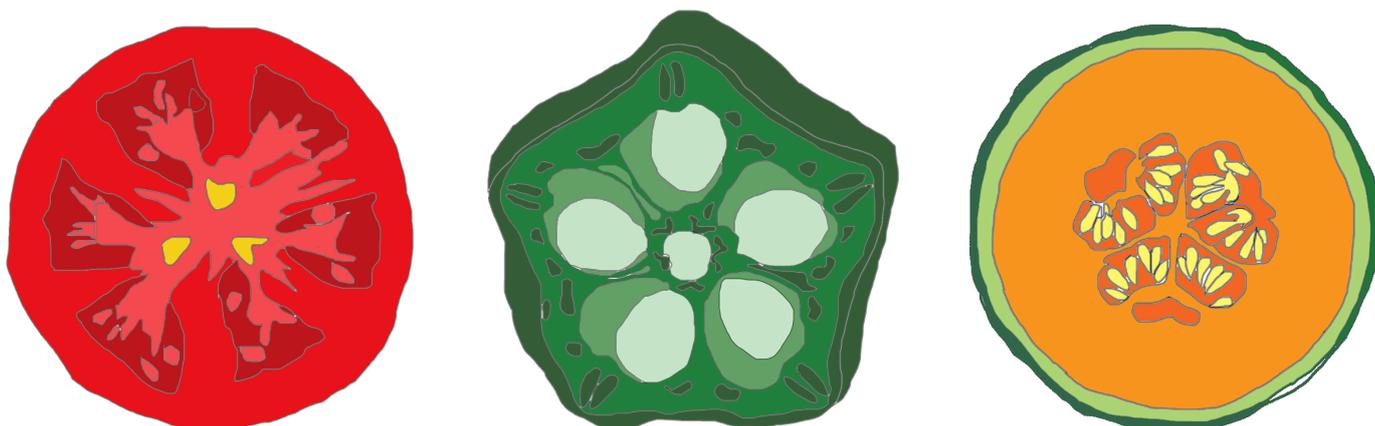
It is also pertinent to note that the population growth rates across the West African sub-region have exceeded the productive capacity of the region's current food systems. The per capita food production has been declining for the past three decades, while food imports have been on the rise in the region. The cost of relying on imported food is extremely high and unsustainable. If this trend persists, dire consequences for food security await the region in the near future.

### Future projection on issues relating to food security in the sub-region

The projections in recent studies conducted on the impact of climate change paint a very bleak future for food, livestock and fishery production in West Africa, if appropriate mitigation and adaptive measures are not taken and judiciously implemented by the authorities and policymakers in the region.

### The way forward

Apart from prioritizing mitigation and adaptation in the region in order to tackle the effects of climate change on food production in the region, efforts should be intensified in promoting climate-smart agricultural (CSA) practices with a view to effectively managing the risks associated with increased climate variability. In addition, governments should increase their investments in agriculture and create adequate and effective financial mechanisms to upscale productivity in the sector. It is also imperative for governments to focus on both medium- and long-term solutions. Farm inputs should be made more accessible and affordable to farmers and funds should be made available for research and development in the sector.



# The Essence of Existence: Culture, Cuisine, and Ceremony in Sub-Saharan Africa

*Kunal Patel*

Somewhere between our ancestors' descent from the trees and the rise of the modern Anthropocene, food underwent a shift from mere sustenance to a form of expression. The preparation, presentation and consumption of different foods became physical manifestations of culture that reveal complex social tapestries woven of religion, history, and tradition. Though this culinary thread is not unique to any individual group, food has played a particularly significant role in the societies of Sub-Saharan Africa, where cuisine is an extension of cultural practice.

On the occasion of a birth, the Kapsiki people of Cameroon and Nigeria mark the entry of new life into the community through an elaborate array of rites that are steeped in layer upon layer of elaborate culinary symbolism. The variety of rum used in specific settings, for example, has developed religious significance, with white rum being used in secular life and the red rum being reserved for ceremonies. Eleusine grains are associated with rites of passage and as such the dishes prepared in accordance with a birth echo those used in communal, clan sacrifices, reiterating the entry of the child into patrilineality. The distribution of meat from the sacrificial animal also follows a pattern, with allocation being governed by the degree of the baby's relationships with its kith and kin, underscoring that the child is a member of a broader community. The advent of a twin birth adds yet more symbolic layers as the tribe simultaneously celebrates the excess fertility and considers what the future holds for the newborns. These rites mark the first of many the children will go through as they mature into adulthood.

As a Yoruba child makes their way through life, they will partake in a litany of rituals to gain the favour of the divine. Nourishment forms a central tenet of Yoruba religion and feeding someone or something is a mechanism of serving that entity, displaying respect, and affirming its right not only to exist, but to thrive. So important is food to the Yoruba that their word for black-eyed beans is *ewa*, which means "the essence of existence". Providing nourishment, whether to a person, spirit, creature, or even an object is a sign of allyship, an offering of good faith to the spirit realm. Sacrifices of food are often made to the *orisha*, spirits of guidance sent by the supreme creator *Olodumare*. Of course, deities, like humans, are picky eaters, and specific foods are required for different gods. The Sky Father *Obatala*, as an embodiment of purity, is honoured with white foods while the goddess of wealth, *Oshun* is partial to yellow or amber delicacies. *Yemaya* of the sea and the thunder god *Shango*, meanwhile, both prefer male sheep, whereas the warrior *Ogun* enjoys roasted yams and cornmeal.

Even as Africa was ravaged by the Europeans, and many Yoruba fell victim to the trade of

enslaved peoples, these traditions endured, making their way across the Atlantic and to the new world. Today, many of these Yoruba rituals endure in the Caribbean and South America where the *oshira* are still worshipped with offerings of food. To plot the spread of Yoruba cuisine on a map is to chart the African diaspora, a visualization of the rites, carried in the holds of slave ships, kept alive through the burning power of belief.

In Madagascar, the advent of European arrival was similarly met with dietary resistance, as the introduction of bread and wheat failed to replace the native grain: rice. Rice represents the dietary cornerstone of Madagascar and it composes the base of nearly every meal. In fact, the Malagasy phrase *mihinam-bary* or “to eat a meal” literally translates to “to eat rice”.

Consequently, the rice crop is a hugely important facet of traditional Malagasy life. In the past, upon the gathering of the harvest, every Malagasy family would perform a ceremony of thanksgiving, for which they would gather three of the best heads of the rice crop (representing wealth), sprigs of the Sodifana and Tatamo plants (symbolizing resilience), and a Toho fish (signifying continuation). After preparing the ingredients, the family would congregate in the northeast corner of the house, a sacred place where the spirits of the dead would linger. The offering of food would then be presented to the Gods and ancestors before being consumed by the family. In this communion with the spirit world, the family would pray for prosperity, abundance, protection from evil, and safeguard against death.

Although no amount of prayer can keep death at bay indefinitely, even the bitterness of loss may be eased through the sharing of food. The Zulu of South Africa mark a death with the sacrifice of a goat, the sound of which is believed to alert the ancestors so that they may lend their blessings to the occasion. The meat is then prepared alongside bland foods such as *ujeqe* (steamed bread) and *samp* (maize). Spices are intentionally excluded in order to underscore that the meal is a functional necessity rather than indulgence. The burial itself is often a large affair, with food served in abundance. Often, Zulu funerals draw in the entire community, even welcoming people not known to the bereaved family. The uniquely communal nature of these funerals bring together people from all walks of life and as the *ujeqe* and *samp* are served, divisions of class and wealth begin to melt away as mourners grieve in unison.

Kapsiki, Yoruba, Malagasy, Zulu— these groups represent only four of the many societies that compose the cultural mosaic of Sub-Saharan Africa. Yet even among these disparate peoples, we can see the common thread of food, and its significance in rite and ritual. From birth to grave, every stage of life is marked by ceremonial cuisine as parts of traditions that stretch back centuries, across seas, and through adversity.

# Sub-Saharan African Cuisine: The Cream of the Crop

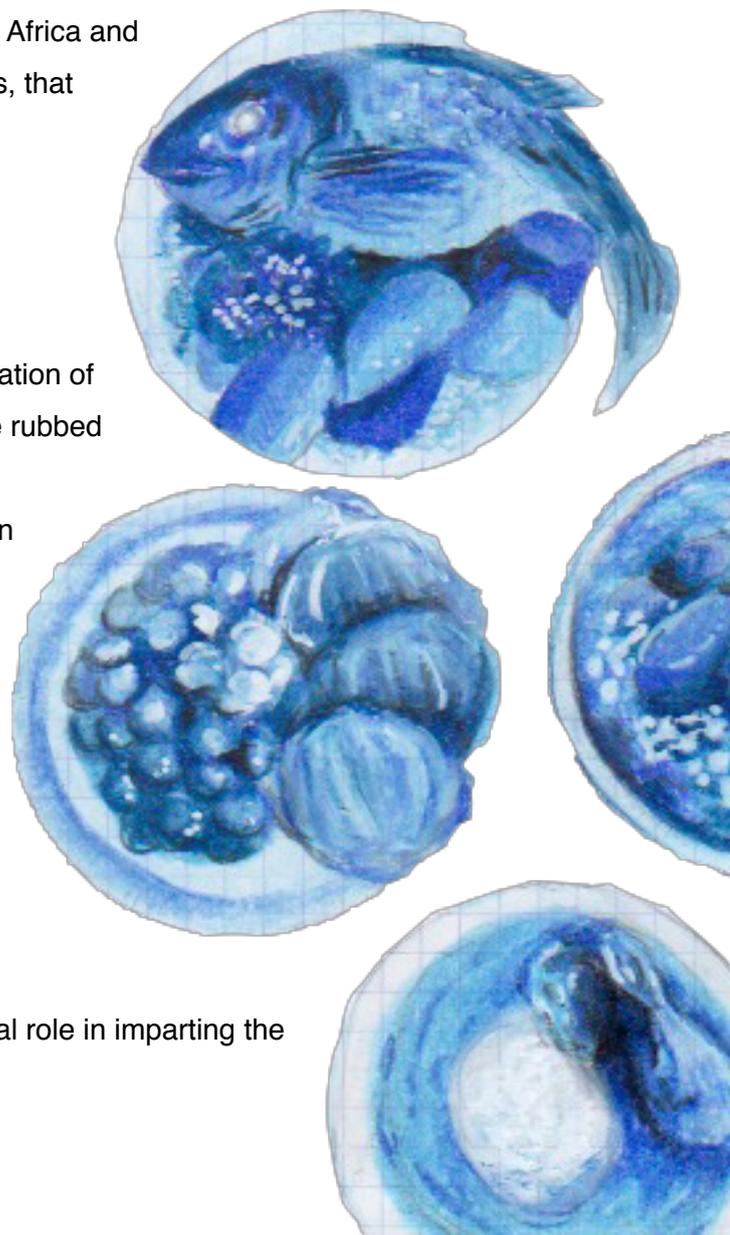
*Nandini Tanya Lallmon*

Ginette Olivesi-Lorenzias once said: “To read...about a country's cuisine isn't simply to go looking for ‘good things’ ; it is also to better know by means of the recipes - the customs and the richness or poverty of a place, and the spirit of those who inhabit it. It is, above all, to participate in the symbolic celebration of the shared repast.”

Indeed, in Sub-Saharan Africa, the significance of cuisine goes beyond the mere implication of food eaten to quell one’s hunger – it is, in fact, closely tied to the identity of each country. National dishes such as the Equatorial Guinean Succotash, Senegalese Thiéboudienne and Cape Verdean Cachupa reveal the individuality of each country on the continent. Cuisine highlights the richness of the continent, whereby the same ingredient, such as the banana, can be converted into a multitude of savoury dishes, such as the Ivorian Alloco, Ghanain Tatale and Ugandan Matoke. Likewise, cuisine transcends borders and unites Mother Africa’s children. As the Malawian proverb states: “Those who are at one regarding food are at one in life.” Thus, despite being made from distinct ingredients, the Ghanain Omo Tuo, Kenyan Ugali and Nigerian Eba have similar mouth-watering appearances. Cuisine is also a reflection of how certain countries such as Democratic Republic of Congo, South Africa and Madagascar are an amalgamation of so many ethnicities, that their multiple dishes reflect the melting pot of the many cultures that they have become.

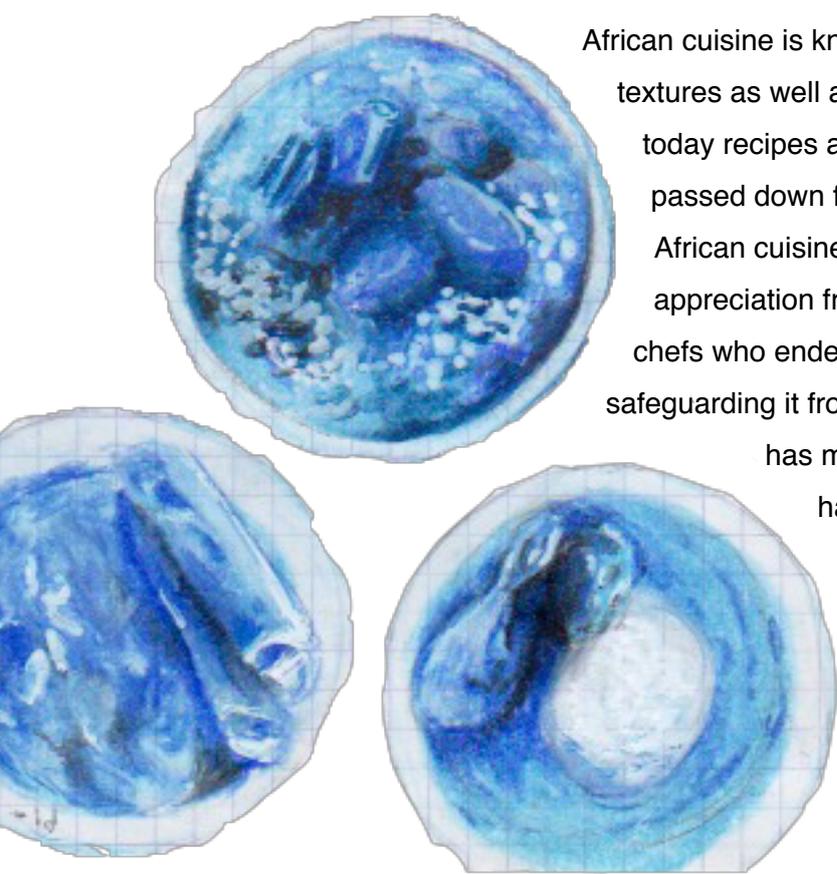
As the world transformed into a global village, Africans moved to other shores and brought along their exquisite cuisine. Gradually, through cultural assimilation and mutation of foodstuffs, the quintessence of traditional African cuisine rubbed off on others. Even celebrity chef Jamie Oliver posted a modified recipe of the famous West African Jollof Rice on his blog in 2014. However, he was met with severe backlash because he suggested the addition of ingredients that are not used in the traditional dish. The incident emphasized how cuisines should be treated with reverence and respect. Although sharing of culinary techniques fosters the conception of fusion cuisine, it is crucial not to cross the fine line between culinary appreciation and cultural appropriation.

The technological revolution has undeniably had a pivotal role in imparting the



bountifulness of Sub-Saharan African cuisine. Through their Youtube channels, African Keto Diet and the Vegan Nigerian, food enthusiasts Oby Martha and Tomi Makanjuola endeavour to twist traditional African dishes to make them accessible for those with dietary restrictions. In 2020, in his cooking adventure show, Uncharted, on National Geographic television channel, multi-Michelin-starred chef Gordon Ramsay popularized the South African Ujeqe and Ushatini. During her discussions with African chefs, food entrepreneurs, curators and bloggers on Item 13: An African Food Podcast, Yorm Tagoe introduces her listeners to new concepts about African food.

Technology has not only enabled amplification of African food on a global scale but it has also catalysed sustainable production and harvesting of the very ingredients required in African cuisine. As the specter of food insecurity looms on the African continent in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, African agri-tech start-ups are successfully leveraging technology to keep famine at bay. Dytech Limited Zambia, a social and export enterprise, operates eco-friendly honey production systems through the ZamHive beehives. Made from unwanted wood waste, the ZamHive beehives are placed near wild, naturally flowering trees in forests to produce ethically-sourced honey and prevent deforestation in Zambia. Aerobotics, a Cape Town-based company, uses high resolution drone images and multiple data monitoring methods to help farmers monitor pests and disease in their fields. The founder of Fresh Direct, epidemiologist Angel Adelaja, promotes hydroponic agriculture and vertical planting in densely-populated Abuja by repurposing old shipping containers to grow crops. Illuminum Greenhouses constructs affordable greenhouses fitted with automated drip irrigation kits and solar-powered sensors to enable smallholder farmers in Kenya to remotely regulate the environment in their greenhouses. Thus, agri-tech initiatives are qualitatively and quantitatively improving the food supply across Sub-Saharan Africa while revolutionizing the cuisine in a sustainable manner.



African cuisine is known for its delectable flavours, diverse textures as well as healthy fruit and vegetable bases. Although today recipes are more frequently downloaded instead of passed down from generation to generation, authentic African cuisine remains unparalleled. It arouses culinary appreciation from amateur food enthusiasts to seasoned chefs who endeavour to share its richness while safeguarding it from cultural appropriation. While technology has modernized food production and preparation, it has not diluted the essence of African cuisine, which remains at the crux of African nations' identities.

# Staple Crops and Symbolism: How Religion Influences Cuisine Across sub-Saharan Africa

*Emily Duchenne*

Lying south of Earth's largest hot desert and encompassing forty-six of Africa's fifty-four countries, the area known as sub-Saharan Africa is renowned across the globe for its incredible environmental landscape and urban fabric, diverse people and politics, and rich cultures and histories. With estimates of three thousand ethnic groups and over one thousand spoken languages, a somewhat overlooked but unifying aspect of these peoples and places is religion – not the specific faith itself, but the strength of conviction. Few across the sub-Sahara are religiously unaffiliated, and although the Abrahamic religions of Christianity and Islam dominate across the continent, the religious syncretism with traditional beliefs is unique across the continent. Many people thus incorporate elements of Abrahamic and traditional religion into their daily lives, which is brought to the fore and experienced in sub-Saharan cuisine. Foodstuffs are used ritualistically, eating practices are religious in tone, and the protective power of spirits and ceremonies all demonstrate the influence of faith across this diverse continent.

A country where religion is of great salience in mealtimes and eating practices is the West African country of Guinea-Bissau. For many Guinea-Bissauans, religion is as much a statement about belief as it is ethnicity, with religious identity impacting heavily on cuisine. In a country where forty-five percent of the population is Muslim, practiced widely by the *Fula*, *Soninke*, *Susu* and *Mandinka* ethnic groups, Islam overcomes ethnic and linguistic differences through specifically Muslim dishes. *Kaldu di mankara* (chicken with peanut sauce), *kabeza di karnel* (sheep's head), and *kabra* (grilled goat with vegetable oil and tomato sauce) are favoured as distinguishable from *Kristons*, or non-Muslim, preferences. Adhering to religious taboos on alcohol and pork and eating halal foods purchased near the mosque further establishes Islam as a determining factor on accepted foodstuffs. In addition, engaging with specific religious food practices is considered as a way to reaffirm one's religious identity, and as a means of engaging in the *umma* (global Muslim community). Eating with one's right hand, common across Guinea-Bissau and embedded within Islamic tradition, again enacts this virtuousness, entangling eating with faith as well as ethnicity. Cuisine thus embodies the multiple identities inhabited by Guinea-Bissauans – Muslim/non-Muslim, Guinea-Bissauan, African, Black – with these identities all being mediated by the experience of food.

The influence of traditional beliefs across sub-Saharan cuisine is another aspect where religion and food interact. Many Africans actively participate in Christianity or Islam yet also believe in witchcraft, evil spirits, sacrifices to ancestors, traditional religious healers, reincarnation and other elements of traditional African religions. The co-existence of indigenous knowledge with the Abrahamic religions

and syncretism with everyday life is unique to the continent, and food is used ritualistically to designate events ranging from celebration to sacrifice. The food habits of the *Mbeere* in Kenya demonstrate how traditional beliefs surrounding human harmony and wellbeing implement food taboos within their society: pregnant women are forbidden to eat offal, gourds of milk, or drink bitter substances, highlighting the role that indigenous knowledge plays in building a healthy body. Other ethnic groups in Kenya traditionally prohibit pregnant women from eating eggs and reserve chicken meat for men and guests, drawing attention to how cuisine and traditional beliefs cross at gendered intersections within communities across the sub-Saharan, and how these beliefs are embodied by the pregnant female. Celebrations are also where tradition and cuisine marry. The ritualistic sacrificing and feasting of goat in South African *Nguni* communities when a new-born arrives stems from respect for the spirits of ancestors, ensuring the child will grow and thrive. This again reinforces a relationship between food and religion, where sacrifices and feasts serve a greater purpose than simply sustenance.

Staple crops provide a further angle through which to analyse religious influences on cuisine across the sub-Saharan. The reverence for rice across the region owes itself to many African histories and geographies including climate, colonisation and migration, yet religion here too has a grip. Across the *Diola* people of Guinea-Bissau, the Gambia and Senegal, rice symbolises ethnicity, continuity, 'all that is traditionally *Diola*', and is considered part of a promise with the supreme deity, *Emitai*. This covenant encourages *Diola* farmers to work hard, cultivate the crop, and receive the nourishing rains from *Emitai*. Rice is thus used in shrines, rituals, celebrations. The grains become deistic, anthropomorphised, embedded with religion even as communities turn to Christianity and Islam: the role of rice as integral to religious practices and celebrations is not lost. However, the impact of climate change on communities dependent on this thirsty crop has meant a shortage of African rice for these ceremonial purposes. The Asiatic rice that is now imported to sub-Saharan Africa is deemed sufficient for satiation, but insufficient for celebration. The monumentality of changing environments is influencing religious practices right down to the tiny grain of rice, thus reinforcing the entanglement of belief and food with wider phenomena across Africa.

Whilst sub-Saharan African cuisine in all its variety and contextualisation cannot be addressed in a singular short article, reflecting on the way faith unites millions of people across the African continent draws attention to the role of religion in food practices. Islamic meals and mannerisms, indigenous beliefs, and the symbolism of staple crops highlight the connection between ethnicity, gender, tradition, politics and climate change that all come to the fore on the dinner plate.



# Evolving Food Systems: How the Psychology of Globalisation is Changing What We Eat and How We Eat it.

## *Georgina Miles*

The human relationship with food extends far beyond our basic need for sustenance; instead, it is a cornerstone of human culture. Across the world, cuisine is central to cultural identity and lies at the heart of many of our social interactions, celebrations and relationships. From a biological perspective, this is not surprising. The complex brain machinery involved in appetite regulation is not only subject to homeostatic control: eating is closely linked with reward systems and thus the experience of eating is extensively influenced by our mood and emotions, and has wide-reaching impacts on physical and psychological well-being. The last few decades have seen some of the greatest changes in global food consumption since the agricultural revolution 12,000 years ago, with significant consequences on both our health and eating behaviour.

Globalisation has drastically altered agriculture and food systems, causing dietary change around the world. Frequently, this involves increased consumption of foods high in fats and sweeteners. Heavily processed food is now cheap, quick to prepare and hyperpalatable, and widely promoted in the media by transnational food companies (TFCs) that create and exploit the market for these types of food. There is a growing phenomenon of dietary convergence, with diets across the world becoming more integrated in terms of primary commodities.

It is not difficult to understand the problems that the widespread availability of highly processed foods pose for our physical health. The prevalence of obesity has doubled worldwide since 1980 with 2 billion adults now classed as overweight. In South Africa up to 70% of women are classed as overweight or obese, and in Africa as a whole the number of overweight children has increased from 5.4 million to 10.6 million between 1990 and 2014. This is particularly worrying as overweight or obese children are highly likely to be obese in adulthood.

The blatant global health problems due to food consumption are widely accepted and well researched. With this research new policies have been developed that are slowly bringing about change, such as the introduction of sugar taxes and restrictions on advertising. The very nature of these changes acknowledges the strength of psychosocial factors in our eating behaviour, highlighting the need for consideration of how the impact of globalisation of food systems extends beyond physical health, and into our psychological well-being. Similarly to the widespread concern over childhood obesity, these effects are particularly pronounced in young people.

Dietary changes are frequently associated with transition from rural to urban life and subsequent

lifestyle modifications. As the proportion of people living in cities increases, with urbanisation occurring at a rate of 2% per year and twice this in sub-Saharan Africa, there is growing demand for meals away from home as commuting distances between residence and employment increase. Larger numbers of family members are entering the workforce, leaving less free-time available to prepare food and eat as a household.

Anecdotal evidence and personal experience supports the value of eating meals together as a family, and scientific research has demonstrated that these benefits extend into many aspects of physical and mental well-being, particularly in children and adolescents. A recent systematic review on this subject found inverse associations between family meal frequency and disordered eating; alcohol and substance abuse; feelings of depression and thoughts of suicide in adolescents. Family meal frequency is positively associated with high self-esteem and academic success at school. For very young children, family dinnertime has been shown to have important educational benefits, with discussions over the dinner table providing the opportunity to acquire vocabulary and general knowledge to a greater extent than being read to in class.

The psychosocial influences on eating behaviour have effects beyond the individual level and may alter entire cultures. Decisions on what foods to buy are heavily impacted by advertising campaigns that romanticise processed foods and surround them with lifestyle ideals. Social pressures cement these ideals, as studies show that adolescents that eat differently may be subject to marginalisation, bullying or social harassment. Teenagers in England and Ecuador were found to avoid healthy foods in the fear that peers would mock their “weird” eating; others expressed concerns that choosing particular food would make them look poor, or unable to spend money. A case study in South Africa found that residents consider fried food to be a sign of modern living and wealth, whereas food that is boiled may be considered inferior or outdated.

In a recent TEDx talk, journalist turned contemplative writer Aparna Pallavi expressed her concern over how these psychosocial influences on eating behaviour may impact cultural diversity. In her work with indigenous people in India she regularly witnessed shame around traditional foods that culminated in cognitive dissonance and the eventual extinction of foods from diet. She described how mahua, a widely available edible flower, has been lost from modern Indian cuisine despite it being known to be highly nutritious in local tradition and scientific knowledge as it is regarded as a “poverty food”.

It's clear that our food choices are determined by far more than their nutritional value. Globalisation may increase variety in diet and food availability, yet it also has significant influences on eating behaviour. It seems important for countries that are experiencing these changes rapidly to consider the wide-reaching consequences for physical health; mental well-being and cultural diversity.

