

Traditional African Food: An Introduction

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Article Information

Received: January 26, 2022

Accepted: February 27, 2023

Published: March 28, 2023

Keywords: *food, African foods, African nations, African dishes, African cuisines*

ABSTRACT

Africa is the second largest continent in the world after Asia. Africa is the cradle of mankind with cultural diversity. It is home to incredible wildlife and all kinds of unique, healthy, and delicious foods. It is a continent rich in resources, especially food-related products. As multiple nations and cultures make up Africa, the cuisine is each nation changes considerably. Trying to capture the entirety of the continent's eating culture is next to impossible. We only use some countries as typical examples. This paper presents an overview on African foods.

INTRODUCTION

Food is essential for human survival. Food is fundamental for averting hunger and maintaining health for every human being. James McCann once said, "Food is a fascinating way of looking at the world." Food is food, across languages, cultures, continents. The foods of Africa, and the greater African diaspora (such as the Caribbean and the southern US) are becoming increasingly familiar around the world through cookbooks, cooking classes and restaurants [1]. African food is finally getting the recognition it deserves in the UK, with dishes from countries like Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Tanzania entering the mainstream. Arguably the most well-known East African cuisine, Ethiopian restaurants have popped up across the UK in recent years

Africa is a big continent consisting of 54 nations. Each nation has different ethnic groups which also influence the cuisine. From the east to west, north to south, African cuisine is all about rich, complex and deeply developed flavors. The aroma from the spices is incredible. Many dishes were invented by African people and African cuisine has influenced people from around the world. Africans use local fruit, vegetables, and basic grains to make their own food products. Figure 1 portrays African cuisines in taste atlas [2].

Agriculture is at the heart of African economies. In spite of the continent's vast agricultural resources, billions of dollars are spent annually importing food and the region faces some of the

highest food insecurity rates in the world. Some experts say that the food eaten in Africa has always been plant-based: tropical yams, okra, and greens, for example. While meat is consumed daily among many Africans today, that is due to colonial influences. Figure 2 shows a sample African food [3].

COMMON AFRICAN STAPLES

Several African meals consist of a starchy base, such as Ugali in the East and pap in the South. Other African staples include fufu, jollof rice, and suya.

- *Fufu* is a popular traditional West African dish. It is also eaten in Central Africa. Fufu is a starchy African food with a doughy, mashed potato-like consistency. It is prepared by mixing and pounding separate equal portions of cassava and green plantain flour with water. It is typically served with African soups and stews, which include ingredients such as meat, fish, vegetables, okra, peanut butter, palm oil, ground-up melon seeds or sweet potato leaves. Fufu can be made using almost any starchy ingredient, which dictates the taste of fufu. Each country in Africa has their version of fufu as they may add an extra ingredients. It is most popular in Cameroon, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, etc. Fufu is thought to originate from modern-day Ghana, spreading from there to many other West African nations. It was then brought to Caribbean countries including Haiti, Jamaica, Cuba, and Puerto Rico. A typical fufu dish is shown in Figure 3 [4].
- *Jollof Rice* is a tasty rice dish. Rice, one of the great world staples, almost certainly found its way to America through the African captives. Jollof rice is made from rice, tomatoes, spices, vegetables, and meat, all cooked in a single pot. Jollof rice is usually served with fried plantains, steamed vegetables, salad, or *moi-moi* (a type of boiled bean pudding). Jollof rice has its origins hotly contested by Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal and a few other West African countries. In the Nigerian version, the rice is added to a spicy tomato sauce and simmered until ready. This is displayed in Figure 4 [5].
- *Ugali* is a popular African porridge that originates in Kenya. The porridge consists of maize flour. It is a popular African staple, loved all across Sub-Saharan Africa. The word *ugali* derives from Swahili, and most nations also have a local name for it. Ugali is typically made of either corn flour or cassava flour. It is made of the corn (maize) flour, cooked with water, with a little bit of dried cassava flour mixed in, as well as prepared with millet dough, and then eaten together with vegetable soup. In Malawi and Zambia the dish is called *Nshima*, in which maize flour is cooked. In South Africa, the dish is called *pap* and in Nigeria, the food is called both *akamu* and *ogi*. Figure 5 shows a bowl of Ugali [6].
- *Suya* is a popular grilled spicy meat kebab flavored with peanuts and other spices. It is sold by street vendors as a tasty snack or evening meal and is typically made with beef or chicken. It is a popular African food, particularly in Northern Nigeria. It is the African equivalent of BBQ. Meat such as chicken, beef, or mutton is grilled over a BBQ or charcoal fire. The star of every bowl is the suya spice mix, which consists of peanuts, various aromatics, and ground up peppers. Often served with chunks of raw onions, spicy sauce for dipping, and extra seasoning, Suya is best enjoyed in a local eatery alongside a cold beer. The spicy meat kabab is a delectable street food. Figure 6 depicts Suya [7].

FOOD FROM DIFFERENT NATIONS

Africa is home to some of the most beautiful nations in the world. The huge continent is divided up into five sub-sections: Northern Africa, Eastern Africa, Central Africa, Southern Africa and Western Africa. These subdivisions include the following countries [8]:

- ✓ *Northern Africa countries* (7) :Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia, and Western Sahara
- ✓ *Central or Middle African countries* (9): Angola, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo Republic - Brazzaville, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and São Tomé & Príncipe
- ✓ *Southern Africa countries* (5): Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa, and Swaziland
- ✓ *East African countries* (19): Burundi, Comoros, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Réunion, Rwanda, Seychelles, Somalia, Somaliland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe
- ✓ *Western Africa* (17): Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Côte D'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo.

Figure 7 shows the map of Africa with the five sections [9]. Each part of Africa has its own unique culture and cuisine. For example, the types of foods produced in Western Africa are very different from those produced in Eastern Africa. The staple foods, vegetables and the drinks that go with these foods are different [10]. For each region, we select some countries as typical examples.

1. *Food from West Africa:* Each West African nation has its version of Jollof rice and fufu. As mentioned earlier, jollof rice is essentially is a one-pot rice dish made with tomatoes, spices and vegetables. Meat or fried plantain can be added to the dish. Fufu is typically made from cassava root, yam, or other starchy ingredients. Because fufu is popular in so many different places, there are plenty of regional variations.

- *Nigeria* is commonly regarded as the giant of Africa due to its large population and economy. Common staple foods in Nigeria include yams, spiced rice, cassava, plantains, beans, *eba*, and *amala*. There are traditional Nigerian selections such as *egusi* soup, *Ila Alasepo*, *ogbono*, stewed okra soup, filled with the options of meat or seafood, and a choice of swallow. *Moi-moi* is another Nigerian staple, which is made of black-eyed peas, onions and peppers, blended and steamed into a gelatin-like dish. Nigerian standbys like *suya* and fufu can be found easily in the immigrant-rich neighborhoods of New York and London. Other popular dishes to try in Nigeria include thick, spicy broths made with okra and flavored with chicken or meat, and *suya*. Soaked *Garri* eaten with *suya* is a must-try for anyone wanting to visit Nigeria. It is made with pan-fried cassava flakes. One can enjoy *Garri* in different ways [11].
- *Ghana:* Fufu is a common food in Ghana. Cassava fufu is probably the best known. The staple encompasses most starches eaten by hand with a sauce or stew.. Palm nut soup is a Ghanaian classic made from the oil-rich palm fruit, cooked with chilis, tomatoes, garlic, and other flavorful ingredients.
- *Togo's* most popular food includes dishes such as fufu, peanut stews, brochettes and cassava leaf stews too. In Togo, you will also find *Akara*, a savory fritter made from cowpea. The peas are boiled until soft and then smashed into a paste. The paste is then seasoned with salt and diced onion.

2. *Food from East Africa:* East Africa consists of Uganda, Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Tanzania, and Mozambique. Common traditional foods from eastern Africa include corn which is used to make just about everything especially porridge, Ugali, and Matoke, a much-loved dish of steamed green bananas. Ugali is East Africa's staple food. Barbecued meat and curries are also popular.

- *Ethiopia* is popular for the wide variety of spices cuisine. It is probably the most well-known East African cuisine. Ethiopian restaurants have popped up across the UK in recent years. The iconic dish of the country is *Injera*, a fermented flatbread made with teff flour. The most popular thing to serve with *Injera* is *wat*, a thick stew of meat, vegetables or lentils. Ethiopian food is served on *Injera*, a kind of flatbread pancake. Another Ethiopian spice mix used in dishes such as *ful edames* is *mitmita*. Ethiopian restaurants can be found all over the African continent and beyond. *Shiro* is an Ethiopian stew made with chickpeas main ingredients, along with garlic, onions, ginger, tomatoes, and chili peppers.
 - *Tanzania* is greatly influenced by Indian cooking due to the migration of Indians into Tanzania. *Ugali* is considered to be the national dish of Tanzania. *Ugali* originated in Kenya, but is popular in many East African countries and known under various different names. *Ugali* is a simple dish made out of white cornmeal cooked in water. It is served alongside most traditional Tanzanian.
 - *Kenya* is famous for its long-distance runners. Its cuisine is difficult to sum up as dishes vary considerably within the country and who's cooking them. *Ugali* is an important staple like in neighboring Tanzania. Starchy, grain-based foods are the most commonly eaten. Barbecued meat is popular. Common spices used to flavor dishes include cumin, turmeric, coconut, coriander and tamarind, especially in Swahili cooking.
3. *Food from Southern Africa*: This region consists of five nations: Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa, and Swaziland. The region has a unique platter typical to particularly that part of the continent. In Southern Africa, barbecue is the thing.
- *South Africa* is a perfect destination for those who love exotic delicious food. Just walking through the streets you will find numerous tasty treats and sumptuous meals in various restaurants. South African food represents a true blend of cultures and is sometimes referred to as "rainbow cuisine." South Africans are less strictly traditional and enjoy roast lamb, beef, and chicken. They enjoy a wide range of drinks, from wine to beer. Local dishes can be described as a mixture of Afrikaner, Zulu, and Indian cuisines. *Bobotie* is a popular South African dish. It consists of minced beef meat that is spiced with slightly sweet curry and baked with an egg-based custard on top. Giraffe meat can be found in some restaurants and hotels and can only be sold by approved sellers. This is a traditional South African sausage made from beef, mixed with either pork or lamb and a mixture of spices. There is also a traditional South African vegetable relish, *Chakalaka*, tastes amazing when served with bread, stews, meat and so much more.
 - *Namibia's* colonial past leaves a mark on Namibian gastronomy, with a large amount of international variety, mostly from German and English cooking. Its gastronomy is mostly based on meat. In Namibia, they make numerous dishes with ostrich, antelope, zebra, giraffe, oryx, kudu, lamb, and beef. Meat is generally grilled and dressed with rich and tasty sauces [12].
4. *Food from North Africa*: Situated along the Mediterranean Sea, North African nations came out from ancient empires, such as Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Sudan. Basic staple foods from northern Africa olives and olive oil, couscous, preserved lemons, garlic, floral essences such as rosewater or orange blossom, harissa (chilli paste), onions, oranges, dates, and figs.
- *Egypt's* popular cuisine is *koshari*, a nourishing vegetarian dish of rice, lentils, macaroni, garlic and chickpeas, bought together by a spicy tomato sauce and topped off with fried onion. *Ful Medames* is one of the country's national dishes, comprising fava beans simmered with spices and olive oil. The dish is pre-Islamic and probably as old as the Pharaohs.

Another classic of home cooking is *mahshi*, or vegetables such as zucchini, peppers, tomatoes and vine leaves stuffed with spiced rice. A specialty dish of Egypt's Alexandria city, *kebda eskandarani* is a fried beef liver platter, having spicy seasonings of cardamom, chili pepper, and garlic. *Duqqa* is an Egyptian blend of herbs, toasted nuts, and spices such as cumin, sesame seeds, and coriander.

- *Algeria* is the largest nation in north Africa. Their French colonization and large Jewish population influence their food, which often has some hot and spicy notes. Their popular dish as *chakhchoukha*. It is a dish prepared with torn pieces of thin, flatbread known as rougag. Chakhchoukha is designed to be shared. It is a simple, affordable, and filling meal. Other meals include Harissa, cayenne, aniseed, black pepper, cumin, cloves, and wild parsley.
- *Morocco* is probably famous for its refined haute cuisine style, and subtle uses of spice. Saffron, nutmeg, cinnamon, paprika, cloves, and cumin are combined in delicate balance. Dishes often combine sweet and savory, such as lamb with prunes, or chicken with apricots or a little honey drizzled in.

5. *Food from Central Africa*: The soil in most nations in this part of the continent is fertile and a wide variety of vegetables and fruits are grown, both for domestic usage and importation.

- *Angola* has many dishes popular among nationals and foreigners. One of the most popular dishes is *funge*, which is a type of porridge made with cassava or corn flour. Staple ingredients include beans and rice, pork, and chicken. There are many influences from Portuguese cuisine like the use of olive oil. A number of beverages, alcoholic, and non-alcoholic are typical to Angola [13].
- *Cameroon's* cuisine is one of the most varied in Africa due to Cameroon's location on the crossroads between the north, west, and center of the continent. Among Cameroonian specialties are fufu corn, *koki*, *mbanga* soup, *Achu* soup, and *Egusi* soul. Curries, soups, and fish dishes abound. No good party would be complete without some traditional meals to mark the occasion [14].
- *Congo's* popular food is *Pondu*. The vegetable dish is made using washed and prepared cassava leaves that are boiled in a pot with salt. It is an easy and affordable meal to prepare. This dish is usually eaten alongside meat or fish with either bread, rice, boiled yam or fried plantain.

CHALLENGES

Although African food is gradually being accepted worldwide, it faces some unique challenges. Before colonialization, Africans had always believed in God and the ancestors and had been profoundly spiritual. As colonialism and Christianity spread through Africa, colonialists built general hospitals and Christian missionaries built private ones, with the hopes of making headway against widespread diseases [15]. To some extent, colonialism, foreign religion, and Western education have negatively affected the perception of African food. The impact of the Western influence on the traditional African diet is growing rapidly and many elements of African diets have already been replaced by more convenient and conventional alternatives. Over the last decades it has been observed that significant dietary changes are taking place in African countries at an ever-increasing rate [16].

The forces of urbanization, modernization, and globalization are changing people's definition of food and how such changes affect people's diet. Bad harvests and rising prices have caused the purchasing power of some African nations to collapse. There is an on-going discussion about the use of social media to showcase food cultures from the continent.

CONCLUSION

Food is used to satisfy hunger, provide comfort and relief from boredom or anxiety, as a status symbol, as well as in the performance of various rituals and rites. Africa is a continent full of diverse languages, customs, and traditions. Its food is just as diverse as its people. More information about traditional African food can be found in the books in [17-24].

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Figure 1. African cuisines in taste atlas [2].



Figure 2. A sample of African food [3].



Figure 3. A typical fufu dish with stew [4].



Figure 4. Nigerian version of jollof rice [5].



Figure 5. A bowl of Ugali [6].



Figure 6. Suya meat [7].

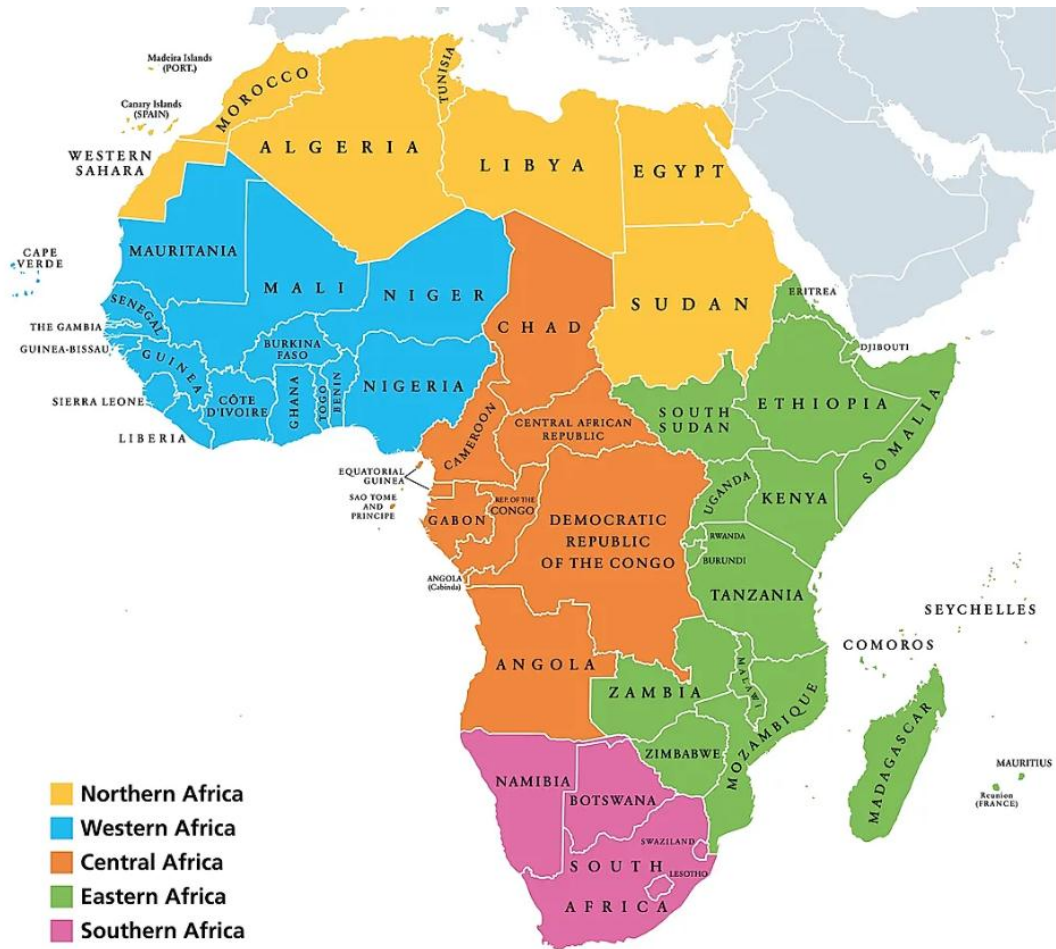


Figure 7. The map of Africa showing five subregions [9].