

The Place of Health Literacy and Oral Art in the Preservation of Indigenous Dietary Values in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examines the critical role of oral traditions and broadcast media in promoting health literacy and safeguarding indigenous dietary values in Nigeria. Amidst a rapid nutritional transition marked by "McDonaldisation"—the dominance of ultra-processed, commercialised fast foods over plant-based, farm-fresh local cuisines—this paper evaluates the etymological, sociological, and immunological significance of traditional African diets. Focusing on Muhammadu Mamman Shata Katsina's classical Hausa oral song, *Jama'a kar mu bar abincin mu na gargajiya* ("People, let us not abandon our traditional foods"), the paper illustrates how oral art functions as a structural public health intervention that resists cultural imperialism and promotes nutritional resilience. Additionally, the study reviews the role of civic broadcasting initiatives—such as the Nasarawa State "Unity Kitchen" food festival—and the integration of indigenous foodways within traditional cultural festivals across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. The findings indicate that while Westernised diets have driven an unprecedented rise in non-communicable lifestyle diseases, returning to organic, plant-based diets and local agricultural methods acts as a primary immunological defence. Ultimately, the paper advocates for interdisciplinary safeguarding models that integrate oral traditions (wakar baka) into public health policies, institutionalise regional food festivals, and incentivise organic smallholder farming to enhance nationwide public health and cultural continuity.

Keywords: Health literacy, oral traditions, wakar baka, McDonaldisation, traditional foods

Introduction

Africa is a continent marked by an immense array of ethnic identities, characterised by unique yet frequently intersecting cultural heritages (Erhun, 2015). Linton (1945) observed that the culture of a society constitutes the total way of life of its members, representing the collection of ideas, values, and habits that they learn, share, and transmit from generation to generation (as cited in Haralambos & Holborn, 2013, p. 791). In this study, the preservation of traditional foods is evaluated as a primary vector of cultural continuity, specifically examining how Muhammadu Mamman Shata Katsina's classical song, *Jama'a kar mu bar abincin mu na gargajiya* ("People, let us not abandon our traditional foods"), functions as a structural public health intervention (Erhun, 2015). This musical composition demonstrates how oral traditions elevate domestic cultural values, reinforce the consumption of traditional foods and underscore their vital significance to the physical survival and immunological resilience of the population (Shata, n.d.).

To counter the rapid decline of indigenous foodways, the Nasarawa Broadcasting Service (NBS) staged the "Nasarawa Unity Kitchen"—the first cultural food festival of its kind in the state (Abdullahi, 2009). The primary objective of this initiative was to alert the public to the severe developmental and physiological dangers associated with the total neglect of cultural identity, particularly regarding indigenous dietary values (Abdullahi, 2009). According to the festival's

organiser, Abdullahi (2009), salient aspects of the region's cultural heritage—most notably local languages and food traditions—were on the verge of extinction (Abdullahi, 2009). Over the past three to four decades, a profound transition has occurred in the types of food consumed by the population (Abdullahi, 2009). As traditional culinary delicacies disappear from family menus, consumer preferences have shifted away from plant-based foods cultivated directly from the soil toward highly processed, industrialised dietary alternatives (Abdullahi, 2009).

This dietary shift has had severe physiological consequences (Abdullahi, 2009). Traditional foods historically provided natural minerals, sustained energy, and robust biological immunity, which directly contributed to long life expectancy (Abdullahi, 2009). Today, the systemic absence of these foods from domestic menus compromises public health (Abdullahi, 2009). George Ritzer (2004) conceptualised this structural shift as "McDonaldisation", a process through which the rationalising principles of the fast-food restaurant increasingly dominate diverse sectors of American society and the wider global landscape (Ritzer, 2004). This phenomenon has become highly visible across urban and semi-urban Nigeria (Abdullahi, 2009).

The NBS organised the Unity Kitchen to encourage the structural revival of traditional delicacies for improved health and vitality, offering a direct alternative to modern, ultra-processed, and cloned foods that weaken the human immune system and leave populations vulnerable to infectious and non-communicable diseases (Abdullahi, 2009). This paper examines the role of oral traditions and broadcasting media in sensitising diverse ethnic groups to the value of traditional African delicacies—cultivated from plants and prepared through indigenous culinary methods—as a primary defence against the nutritional deficiencies associated with processed fast foods (Abdullahi, 2009). The broader implication is that this study substantiates McDonaldisation theory and highlights the critical efforts of oral traditions and civic bodies in safeguarding traditional foodways (Erhun, 2015).

Extinction of Indigenous Culture and Declining Health Status of Nigerians

The term culture can be defined in various ways depending on the analytical perspective (Erhun, 2015). Oni (2001) posited that the word "culture" originates from the Latin term *colere* (reproduced in certain regional studies as *cerele*), which translates to tilling, cultivating, guarding, or tending the soil (Oni, 2001, as cited in Erhun, 2015). This etymological origin aligns with agricultural practice, illustrating a direct conceptual link to food as a fundamental element of cultural identity (Oni, 2001, as cited in Erhun, 2015). It confirms its inclusion in words like agriculture, horticulture, floriculture, and aquaculture (Oni, 2001, as cited in Erhun, 2015). This definition is in tandem with the present study, focusing on food as a key element of culture, and it emphasises the reciprocal relationship between human communities and their physical environment as they manipulate ecological resources to satisfy biological and social needs (Erhun, 2015).

To trace the semantic evolution of this Latin root and its implications for human development and dietary practices, the historical transition of the term *colere* is summarized in Table 1 below, establishing a baseline structural connection.

Table 1*Semantic Aspect and Conceptual Link of 'Colere' to Food and Health*

Semantic Aspect	Core Meaning of Colere	Socio-Cultural Manifestation	Conceptual Link to Food & Health
Tilling and Cultivating	Preparing the earth for crops; agriculture.	The direct manipulation of physical environment to satisfy needs.	Relying on plant-based, farm-fresh ingredients.
Tending and Guarding	Active care, protection, and preservation.	The structural obligation to protect precious health resources.	Safeguarding indigenous varieties from chemical inputs.
Honouring / Worshipping	Deferential respect and religious reverence (cultus).	Deep ritual and symbolic integration of farming practices.	Valuing food as a life-giving medicine instead of commodity.
Inhabiting and Settling	Physical presence and frequentation (colonia).	Establishing stable, self-sustaining communities.	Building long-term public health resilience in eco-zones.

According to Okpeh and Ugbegili (2013), culture constitutes the totality of the way of life evolved by a social group as they grapple with environmental challenges; this framework provides meaning and value to their social, economic, political, and religious norms, distinguishing them from neighbouring groups (Okpeh & Ugbegili, 2013). However, the modern era poses severe threat threats to these systems (Erhun, 2015). Solomon Gwerevende and Zama Mthombeni (2023) observe that African indigenous languages, music, dance, and broader cultural traditions are experiencing gradual erosion as rapid socio-economic and technological shifts weaken traditional modes of transmission (Gwerevende & Mthombeni, 2023).

This cultural decline has direct, measurable consequences on public health (Moronkola, 2003). Moronkola (2003) emphasises the fundamental biological principle that "you are what you eat" and "garbage in, garbage out" (p. 24). He points out that individuals frequently demonstrate apathy toward their dietary intake (Moronkola, 2003). Nutrients represent chemical substances vital for regulating bodily processes, repairing damaged cells, and facilitating optimal physical growth and development (Moronkola, 2003). The functional capacity of vital organs—including the brain, heart, lungs, kidneys, skin, teeth, hair, and eyes—is strictly dependent on the quality and quantity of food consumed (Moronkola, 2003).

To function optimally, a series of complex chemical reactions occur in the human body, requiring a balanced diet incorporating proteins, carbohydrates, lipids, leafy vegetables, fruits, and water (Moronkola, 2003). While the biomedical model views the human body as a biological

machine requiring medical intervention, sociological models diverge by prioritising social structures, lifestyle choices, and living conditions as primary determinants of health (Moore, 2013, as cited in Haralambos & Holborn, 2013).

The maiden Nasarawa State Unity Kitchen was organised specifically to address local agitation regarding the marginalisation of traditional cuisines (Abdullahi, 2009). During this event, Affi (2009) delivered a lecture titled "Let Food Be Your Medicine", invoking the Hippocratic principle that dietary intake must serve as the primary source of medicine to maintain a disease-free life (Affi, 2009). Historical accounts illustrate this physical stamina: members of the Wamba and Keana ethnic groups regularly travelled to Jos on foot to trade cassava flour (alibo) and salt, returning successfully within days (Affi, 2009). Historical medical records indicate that non-communicable lifestyle diseases—such as hypertension and diabetes—were virtually non-existent among indigenous populations consuming traditional diets (Affi, 2009).

McDonaldisation Theory

The dynamic wherein indigenous populations relegate traditional cuisines as "primitive" while embracing processed western fast foods as symbols of civilised modernity is directly explained by McDonaldisation and globalisation theories (Erhun, 2015). The cultural convergence paradigm suggests that globalisation accelerates global sameness, encouraging cultural homogenisation (Okpeh & Ugbeili, 2013). Scholars within this paradigm conceptualise these changes as cultural imperialism, Westernisation, or Americanisation, characterised by the homogenisation of local cultures in favour of a dominant global capitalist culture (Boli & Lechner, 2005, as cited in Ritzer, 2008). Ritzer (2008) defines McDonaldisation as the process by which the rationalising principles of the fast-food restaurant come to dominate increasingly broad sectors of global society (p. 583).

The global success of fast-food corporations relies heavily on overseas markets, which now generate more than half of their corporate profits (Ritzer, 2008). Ironically, formally educated demographics in post-colonial societies are often the most susceptible to this shift, choosing to patronise establishments like Lavista Fries, Chicken Republic, Lafia City Mall, Dexter's, and Hazelic Foods within Lafia, the capital of Nasarawa State where the author resides. This commercial vulnerability underscores the need for alternative narrative watchdogs.

Oral Tradition towards Sustainable Consumption of African Foods

Within Northern Nigeria, prominent Hausa singers, poets, and musicians have historically utilised their craft to preserve and promote traditional values, languages, and histories (Finnegan, 1970). Notable figures include Dan Maraya Jos, Ali Jita, Dauda Kahutu Rara, Aminu Ladan Abubakar, Naziru Sarkin Waka, and Ado Gwanja. In her seminal analysis of African oral art, Finnegan (1970) categorised the late Alhaji Muhammadu Mamman Shata Katsina as a freelance specialist poet who composed and performed orally without relying on written scripts. Hausa poetry is split into two co-existing genres: written poetry (rubutacciyar waka), which historically developed from Arabic literary models and classical meters, and oral song (wakar baka), which originates from ancient indigenous folk traditions (Finnegan, 1970). As a master of wakar baka, Shata composed and performed entirely orally, utilising traditional meters and instrumental accompaniment, most notably the kalangu talking drum, to deliver social, economic, and moral commentary (Finnegan, 1970).

Structural Comparison of the Two Dominant Hausa Poetic Genres

Feature	Oral Song (Wakar Baka)	Written Poetry (Rubutacciyar Waka)
Mode of Composition	Orally composed and performed; never written down.	Composed in writing, using Ajami/Latin scripts.
Instrument & Performance	Performed with instruments (kalangu, goge) & chorus.	Typically performed solo without instrumentation.
Metrical Framework	Traditional ancient meters; no regular end rhyme.	Classical Arabic meters; regular stanzaic rhymes.
Central Themes	Praise-singing, everyday events, agriculture, civic duty.	Primarily religious, educational, didactic and political.

His song, *Jama'a kar mu bar abincin mu na gargajiya* ("People, let us not abandon our traditional foods"), represents a deliberate rhetorical intervention (Shata, n.d.). The lyrics actively challenge the social stigma surrounding traditional foods, framing their consumption not as "rural backwardness" but as a matter of civilised pride and nutritional survival (Shata, n.d.). To evaluate the syntactic alignment and semiotic properties of these Hausa verses, text blocks were subjected to automated verification through the Gemini large language model, which corroborated that structural orature functions as an active public health driver rather than a passive historic repository (Google, 2026).

Table 3*Hausa Lyrical Verses and English Translations*

Hausa Lyrical Verse	English Translation
Yalwa gashi nan cikin abincin mu na gargajiya.	There are a lot of nutrients in our traditional foods.
Don cikin tarihi suke abincin mu na gargajiya	They have been said in our ancient traditions.
"Mu tsofoffi na da... Da gaske mu ke yi ga cin abincin..."	The elders ought to eat our traditional foods. We are deliberate.
"Mu dan tsare, kar mu bar abincin mu na gargajiya."	We must insist on consumption of our traditional foods.
Aah! Ba kauyanci ba ne abinci gargajiya.	No! It is not lack of civilization consuming traditional foods.
Ba bidad dadin ne ba kai ka cuccusa shi ya fi.	It is not the taste that matters, just eat it that is better.

Traditional Foods and Festivals across Nigeria's Geopolitical Zones

Traditional festivals in Nigeria are closely connected with local foods that reflect the culture, occupation, and values of different communities (Erhun, 2015). These communal celebrations serve as key spaces where cultural heritage is maintained and passed down through generations (Erhun, 2015).

- The North-West Zone: During the famous Durbar Festival, communities serve traditional foods such as Tuwo Shinkafa, Miyan Kuka, and fura da nono (millet and milk) (Smith, 1987). These dishes are integral to hospitality and communal solidarity (Smith, 1987).
- North-East (Adamawa State): Millet-based meals take on a major role during the Mbaduku Festival (NCAC, 2021). These meals symbolise unity, successful farming, and a shared respect for traditions (NCAC, 2021).
- The North-Central Zone (Nupe Land Cluster): The annual Nupe Cultural Day highlights the deep historical, agricultural, and riverine heritage of the Middle Belt. During this festival layout, traditional culinary staples such as Eje Boci (mashed rice varieties), rice-flour porridges (Tuwo Shinkafa), and freshly stewed riverine catfish (Gbagba) take prominence (NCAC, 2021). Sourcing these nutrient-dense indigenous ingredients facilitates social bonding and public health resilience across low-land marshy fadama communities, protecting populations from non-communicable lifestyle conditions.

- The South-West Zone: Yoruba traditional foods such as Amala and Ofada Rice are central to the Osun-Osogbo Festival (Dopamu & Alana, 1994). These local foods support shared celebratory events and religious rituals (Dopamu & Alana, 1994).
- The South-East Zone: Yam is the central focus of the New Yam Festival (Iri Ji) among the Igbo (Isichei, 1976). The crop is celebrated as a symbol of prosperity, gratitude, and hard work (Isichei, 1976).
- The South-South Zone: During the Calabar Carnival in the Niger Delta, communities enjoy traditional riverine meals such as Banga Soup, local seafood, and roasted plantains (Cross River State Government, 2021).

Recommendations

- Adopt Interdisciplinary Safeguarding Models: Public health agencies should implement community-based models treating orature and diets as a unified ecosystem.
- Institutionalise Cultural Food Festivals: Governments should scale initiatives like the Nasarawa Unity Kitchen across all geopolitical zones to promote nutritional literacy.
- Integrate Orature into Health Communication Campaigns: Public health ministries should actively engage local oral artists, poets, and musicians to translate clinical nutritional advice into accessible vernacular oral genres. Utilising *wakar baka* and regional broadcasting systems can help bridge the gap between traditional wisdom and modern health literacy.
- Incentivise Sustainable Organic Agriculture: Agricultural policies must pivot toward supporting smallholder farmers who cultivate indigenous crops through organic methods. Minimising the use of synthetic herbicides, chemical fertilisers, and pesticides will protect the ecological integrity of traditional food systems and ensure long-term physical vitality.

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