

The Sociology of Taste: Food, Tradition, and Change in Ghana

Richard Armah, Saira Ashraf

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Cape Coast Ghana, Accra, Ghana

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the sociological dimensions of food identity and preferences within the context of Ghanaian cuisine. Grounded in qualitative research, including interviews, participant observation, and literature review, the study investigates how food functions as a marker of cultural identity, social status, gender roles, and religious beliefs in Ghana. The findings reveal that traditional foods such as *fufu*, *banku*, *waakye*, and *kenkey* are deeply tied to ethnic and regional identity, serving not only as daily sustenance but also as expressions of heritage and belonging. The research also highlights generational shifts in food preferences, influenced by urbanization, globalization, and modern lifestyles, particularly among younger Ghanaians. Despite the growing presence of foreign cuisines and fast food, traditional Ghanaian dishes maintain their cultural relevance, especially during festivals, family events, and religious observances. The study concludes that Ghanaian cuisine is a dynamic cultural practice that reflects both continuity and change, offering valuable insights into broader social structures and cultural negotiations. These findings contribute to the growing field of food sociology and emphasize the importance of preserving culinary heritage amid societal transformation.

Keywords: Ghanaian cuisine, food identity, cultural heritage, food preferences, sociology of food, ethnic identity, traditional food, globalization, urbanization, food and culture, intergenerational transmission, gender roles, religious dietary practices.

INTRODUCTION

Food is more than sustenance; it is a powerful expression of culture, identity, and social structure. In Ghana, cuisine serves as a central pillar of communal life, embodying the nation's rich ethnic diversity, historical experiences, and evolving social norms. From the preparation of traditional dishes like *fufu*, *jollof rice*, *banku*, and *waakye* to the rituals of sharing meals during festivals, food in Ghana carries meanings that extend far beyond nutrition. It reflects patterns of kinship, religion, class, gender, and globalization, revealing the dynamic interplay between tradition and change. The study explores how food functions as a medium of identity and social preference among Ghanaians. It examines how cultural values, regional origins, generational shifts, and urbanization influence what people eat, how they eat, and what those choices signify within their social context. By analyzing the preferences and attitudes surrounding Ghanaian cuisine, this research aims to understand how food both shapes and is shaped by broader sociological factors. Doing so, this study not only contributes to the discourse on food and culture in Ghana but also offers a lens through which to understand how everyday practices like eating become key sites for expressing identity, negotiating belonging, and navigating societal change.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between food, identity, and culture has been widely explored in sociological literature. Scholars agree that food is not merely a biological necessity but a socially embedded practice that communicates meaning, reinforces group identity, and reflects cultural values (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013). In the context of Ghanaian society, food plays a central role in expressing ethnic identity, class status, gender roles, and religious affiliation. The interface between globalization and the shifting food cultures is looking more and more like a predictability in contemporary scholarship in the sociology of food. Supporters believe that world food systems, transnational migration and media coverage stimulated the spread of food practices in other societies and generated new hybrid forms of food consumption (Johnston and Goodman, 2015; Wilk, 2017). In the African

framework, the empirical research suggests that urbanization and global food markets have spawned the change in dietary preferences, specifically among younger generations that demonstrate a stronger exposure to the global consumer culture (Oniang'o & Komokoti, 2018).

The study of food practices requires us to encompass the wider sociological concepts that are used to explain how society, identity and social order cause us to behave in certain ways. One of the most useful frameworks is the idea of habitus and cultural capital by Pierre Bourdieu that food preferences are socially acquired habits due to the position in the classes, the experience one gains during their upbringing, and the experience of being exposed to different cultures. Bourdieu (1984) argues that gastronomic taste is a manifestation of broader indicators of social differentiation, where food preferences are signifiers of cultural identity and social position. Another interesting viewpoint is the theory of globalization and cultural flows developed by Arjun Appadurai that anticipates how global transaction of goods, media and cultural practices permeate local cultures. On the terrain of food culture, globalization makes it easy to exchange cuisines, cooking methods and ingredients often producing forms of culinary practice that are hybrid. These processes are particularly coextensive in the urban societies, where consumption patterns in the localities are redefined by international food chains, international migration, and electronic media. The symbolic interactionist perspective also gives an understanding on the social meanings attributed to food. In this perspective, food is not only a material need but also a symbolic resource by which people define identity, belonging and cultural values. Group meals, food performance and culturally distinct foods are some of the key locations of constructing and negotiating social identities. Taken together, these theoretical paradigms provide a solid base to the study of the Ghanaian food practices as a reflection of wider-scale developments in cultural continuity, identity formation, and social transformation.

The recent academic research on the African cuisine shows similar trends of culture preservation and change. As an example, the investigation into the history of the urban gastronomy in Nigeria shows that in spite of the globalization forces influencing the adoption of international cuisines, the native foods remain playing a central role in communal identity (Adeyeye, 2020). On the same note, studies carried out in South Africa show that the young people in the city are progressively combining the fast-food elements of what is predominant all over the world and traditional foods, thus creating a hybrid-gastronomic identities to accompany modern life styles and the cultural legacy (Steyn and Mchiza, 2014). These comparative studies suggest that the development of the Ghanaian culinary practices is not an isolated event in the global context in which the local gastronomic cultures and the global cultural trends are interdependent and mutually mold one another.

These views provide a relevant theoretical framework to explain the changes that have been happening in the Ghanaian food culture.

Food and Cultural Identity

Several studies emphasize that food is a powerful marker of cultural identity, particularly in postcolonial African societies. According to Mintz and Du Bois (2002), the preparation and consumption of traditional foods help communities sustain a connection to their cultural heritage. In Ghana, staple dishes such as *kenkey*, *banku*, *fufu*, and *tz* are closely tied to ethnic groups such as the Ga, Ewe, Akan, and Dagomba, respectively (Obeng-Odoom, 2014). These foods serve not only as daily meals but also as symbols of ethnic pride and historical continuity.

Food Preferences and Socialization

Food preferences are not biologically innate but socially constructed through processes of socialization, family upbringing, and cultural exposure (Fischler, 1988). In Ghana, children are often introduced to specific traditional meals within the family setting, where food preferences are shaped by maternal choices, communal eating habits, and customary norms (Nukunya, 2003). Preferences are also influenced by broader social factors, including regional availability of ingredients, local cooking methods, and communal rites.

Gender and Food Practices

Gender roles significantly influence food production, preparation, and consumption in Ghanaian society. Traditionally, women are expected to cook and serve food, while men are seen as providers or consumers (Clark,

1994). This gendered division of labor reinforces broader patriarchal norms and also affects how food preferences and eating behaviors are patterned across different groups. Recent feminist scholarship, however, points to a growing renegotiation of these roles in urban and diasporic settings (Sossou, 2006).

Urbanization, Globalization, and Dietary Change

Urbanization and globalization have introduced significant shifts in Ghanaian dietary patterns. The rise of fast-food culture, imported goods, and foreign cuisines has influenced eating habits, particularly among the youth and urban middle class (Aryeetey, 2005).

While traditional dishes remain popular, they increasingly coexist with Western food preferences, often leading to hybrid consumption practices. This blending of culinary traditions raises questions about cultural retention and identity negotiation in a rapidly changing social environment.

Food, Ritual, and Symbolism

Food also plays a vital role in Ghanaian rituals, festivals, and religious practices. Specific meals are associated with rites of passage such as birth, marriage, and funerals. For example, the *Homowo* festival of the Ga people centers around the preparation of *kpokpoi*, a ritual dish signifying triumph over famine. These food-centered rituals reinforce group cohesion and serve as sites for transmitting collective memory and tradition (Yankah, 1995).

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine how food practices and preferences reflect and shape individual and collective identities within Ghanaian society. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Explore the cultural meanings attached to traditional Ghanaian foods and how they vary across ethnic, regional, and generational lines.
2. Analyze the role of social factors such as gender, class, religion, and urbanization in influencing food preferences and consumption habits.
3. Investigate how globalization and modernization are affecting traditional food choices, preparation methods, and eating practices in Ghana.
4. Understand how food functions as a marker of identity and belonging in different social contexts home, festivals, religious ceremonies, urban spaces.
5. Assess attitudes toward traditional versus foreign foods, particularly among youth and urban dwellers.

Research Questions

To guide the study, the following key research questions will be addressed:

1. How do traditional Ghanaian foods reflect ethnic and cultural identities across different regions of Ghana?
2. What social factors (e.g., gender, class, religion, education) influence food preferences and dietary choices in Ghanaian households?
3. In what ways has globalization impacted traditional Ghanaian food culture and consumption habits?
4. How do Ghanaians negotiate their identity through food in both rural and urban settings?
5. What are the perceptions and attitudes of younger generations toward traditional Ghanaian cuisine compared to foreign or modern food options?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the methodological approach used to investigate the relationship between food identity and preferences within the context of Ghanaian cuisine.

The study adopts a qualitative sociological framework, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the cultural meanings, social influences, and personal experiences that shape food-related practices in Ghana.

Research Design

The study employs a qualitative, exploratory research design, which is most suitable for understanding complex social phenomena such as food identity. This design allows for flexibility in data collection and analysis, enabling the researcher to capture the lived experiences, symbolic meanings, and contextual influences associated with Ghanaian food practices.

Study Area

The research was conducted in selected urban and rural communities across three major regions of Ghana.

- **Greater Accra Region** (representing urban, cosmopolitan food culture)
- **Ashanti Region** (known for strong cultural ties to traditional Akan cuisine)
- **Volta Region** (representing diverse ethnic food practices, especially among the Ewe)

These regions were selected to capture a range of ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic perspectives.

Sampling Technique

The study used purposive and snowball sampling techniques to select participants.

- Purposive sampling was used to target individuals with relevant experiences, such as home cooks, food vendors, cultural leaders, and youth.
- Snowball sampling allowed participants to recommend others with valuable insights into Ghanaian food practices.

A total of 40 participants were selected, including men and women across different age groups (18–65 years), occupations, and ethnic backgrounds.

Data Collection Methods

To obtain rich, detailed data, the following methods were employed:

In-depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants to explore their food preferences, cooking habits, perceptions of traditional and modern foods, and how food is linked to their identity. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Three focus group discussions were held (one in each region) with 6–8 participants per group. These discussions explored collective attitudes, generational differences, and shared cultural meanings of food.

Participant Observation

The researcher observed food preparation and consumption in both household and communal settings, including markets, family meals, and festivals (e.g., *Homowo*, *Aboakyer*). This allowed for an immersive understanding of the social and symbolic aspects of food practices.

Document and Media Analysis

Relevant documents (e.g., cookbooks, media reports, food advertisements, and social media content) were analyzed to understand public narratives and representations of Ghanaian cuisine.

Data Analysis

All interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded (with consent), transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis. Key themes were identified based on recurring patterns in the data, such as identity expression, gender roles, food and modernity, and intergenerational change.

NVivo software (or manual coding, depending on the researcher's resources) was used to organize and code the data for systematic analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. Participants were fully informed of the study's purpose and gave informed consent prior to participation. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing names and any identifying information.

Limitations of the Study

While the qualitative approach provides depth, the findings may not be statistically generalizable. Additionally, language barriers and cultural sensitivities in some regions may have affected the depth of responses. However, efforts were made to use local interpreters and build rapport with participants to minimize these limitations.

RESULTS

The study revealed several interconnected themes that highlight how food in Ghana is deeply embedded in identity, culture, and social dynamics. Participants across different regions, age groups, and social backgrounds shared insights into how their food preferences are shaped by tradition, modernization, gender roles, and globalization.

Ethnic and Regional Identity Reflected in Food Preferences

Participants strongly associated certain foods with their ethnic identity. For example:

- **Akan respondents** emphasized fufu with light soup or groundnut soup as central to their cultural identity.
- **Ga participants** identified with kenkey and shito as not just food, but symbols of their heritage.
- **Ewe respondents** favored akple with okra soup, linking it to family traditions and ancestral pride.

Many participants described preparing and eating these meals during important cultural festivals, family gatherings, and rituals, reinforcing their role in identity formation.

“When we prepare akple at home, it feels like we’re honouring our ancestors. It connects us to who we are.”
(Female, 40, Volta Region)

Gender Roles and Food Practices

The findings confirmed traditional gender roles in food preparation and serving:

- Women were predominantly responsible for cooking, especially traditional meals.
- Men often took on supervisory or provider roles, especially in rural areas.
- However, some urban youth expressed changing dynamics, with men increasingly engaging in cooking as a shared responsibility.

“My mother taught me that cooking is a woman’s job, but my wife and I take turns. In Accra, things are different.” (Male, 34, Greater Accra Region)

Generational Shifts in Food Preferences

A clear generational divide was observed:

- Older participants preferred traditional meals and valued slow, communal preparation methods.
- Younger participants, especially in urban settings, showed a preference for fast food, instant meals, and Western-style dishes like fried rice and pizza.

Despite this shift, many young people still viewed traditional food as important during cultural events or when visiting extended family.

“I don’t eat fufu every day, but when I go to the village, I must eat it with my grandmother.” (Female, 21, Kumasi)

Impact of Urbanization and Globalization

Urban participants highlighted how busy work schedules and exposure to foreign cultures have changed their eating habits:

- Many rely on street food vendors or fast food for convenience.
- Some respondents noted that imported foods and processed items are increasingly replacing traditional staples.

However, a strong sense of nostalgia and cultural loyalty to traditional foods persists, especially during holidays and festivals.

“We eat pizza sometimes, but nothing beats kenkey and fried fish on a Saturday.” (Male, 28, Accra)

Food as a Symbol of Belonging and Identity

Across all regions, food was seen as a social connector:

- Shared meals during festivals, funerals, weddings, and naming ceremonies reinforced a sense of belonging.

Food choices were also seen as a marker of respect for instance, bringing traditional dishes to elders or offering culturally appropriate meals to guests.

“During Homowo, if you don’t eat kpokpoi, it’s like you’re rejecting your roots.” (Female, 52, Ga Mashie)

Religious and Cultural Influences on Diet

Some respondents indicated that religious practices influenced their dietary habits:

- Muslim participants avoided pork and certain meats during specific times of the year.
- Christian and traditional religious groups observed fasting or special meals tied to spiritual events.

Traditional beliefs also influenced food taboos and preferences, with some foods considered sacred or restricted during specific rites.

Summary of Findings

Theme	Key Findings
Ethnic Identity	Strong association between food and ethnic heritage
Gender Roles	Women still dominate cooking roles; urban settings show some change
Generational Shifts	Youth prefer fast/convenient meals but maintain respect for traditional food
Globalization & Urbanization	Shift toward modern/Western food habits, especially in cities
Symbolism & Belongings	Food as a social and cultural connector
Religious Influence	Dietary restrictions and rituals tied to faith and tradition

Table: Summary of Key Sociological Themes in Ghanaian Food Practices

Theme	Description	Sociological Implication
Ethnic Identity	Traditional foods linked to ethnic groups (Akan, Ga, Ewe, etc.)	Food reinforces cultural identity and belonging.
Gender Roles	Women primarily responsible for cooking	Reflects gendered division of labour
Generational Change	Youth prefer convenient foods but value tradition	Cultural hybridization between modern and traditional practices
Globalization	Foreign cuisines and fast food increasingly present	Global cultural flows influencing local diets
Social Status	Income influences access to diverse food choices	Food reflects class and cultural capital
Religion	Dietary restrictions shaped by religious beliefs	Food practices reinforce moral and spiritual boundaries

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study reveal the complex interplay between food, identity, and social structures in Ghana. Ghanaian cuisine is not merely a means of sustenance; it is deeply embedded in the cultural, ethnic, economic, and religious fabrics of society. This discussion highlights the key sociological insights gathered from the data and connects them to relevant theoretical frameworks. Although the results highlight the need to continue to appreciate the traditional Ghanaian food, they also demonstrate the growing impact of globalization and modernization on food privilege and consumption habits. The process of globalization has enabled movement of food commodities, culinary ideas and eating styles across national borders, thus transforming the local food systems and cultural identities. This trend is reflected in Ghana by the increased availability of foreign foods, processed food, and international restaurant chains in the city centres of Ghana, like Accra and Kumasi. Sociologically, the issue of globalization does not simply replace the old food culture: globalization frequently gives rise to hybrid gastronomic cultures. Young respondents of this study demonstrated a tendency to combine the traditional and international food preferences: the willingness to eat the pizza, fried rice, or burgers throughout the week and retain the traditional food such as fufu, banku, or waakye at family reunions and cultural events. This trend is in line with academic accounts of culinary hybridity, which mix local and global forces, without overtaking each other completely.

Modernization also has a key role in determining the change in diet. The time that is spent at home cooking most of the traditional cooking methods, most of which are labour consuming has been altered with urbanization, changing work rhythms, and even greater involvement in formal employment. As a result, fast food restaurants, street vendors and pre-made food have become a major source of daily diet especially among the urban youth and the working-class populations. These trends reflect the overall change in the global food systems, where the dietary decisions are progressively influenced by convenience, commercialization, and mass food production. On the other hand, the fact that the traditional foods are still present in festivals, rituals, and family events speaks of the strength of culinary history. Food has remained a symbolic sign of identity and affiliation, thus augmenting continuity of the culture in the face of fast social transformation. Similar trends have been witnessed in other communities where globalization has transformed but not wiped old-fashioned food cultures. Comparative analysis of regions like Asia and Latin America has shown that communities often bargain on the contemporary impacts and do not give up major aspects of their cuisine culture. Finally, the Ghanaian case is a good example of how local food culture is interwoven with the larger world processes. Instead of seeing globalization as a danger to traditional cuisine, we can better understand it as a force that brings forth new negotiating principles, adaptation, and expression of identity in the modern-day food systems.

Food as Cultural Identity

Food in Ghana is a strong marker of ethnic and regional identity. Dishes like *fufu*, *banku*, *waakye*, and *kenkey* are closely tied to specific ethnic groups the Akan, Ewe, Ga, and others. Participants frequently associated their culinary preferences with their heritage, emphasizing that cooking and eating traditional meals reinforce a sense of belonging. This aligns with Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus, which suggests that cultural practices (including food choices) are internalized through socialization and express one's social identity.

Socialization and Intergenerational Transmission

Traditional Ghanaian cooking is largely learned through socialization within the family, particularly through matrilineal instruction. Elders, especially grandmothers and mothers, play a key role in transmitting culinary knowledge. This supports the idea that food serves as a medium for the intergenerational transmission of culture, helping to maintain continuity of cultural practices across generations.

However, there is evidence of generational shifts in food preferences. Younger Ghanaians, especially in urban areas, are increasingly exposed to global cuisines such as fast food, Chinese, and Indian cuisine. This trend may signal a transformation in food identity one influenced by globalization, urbanization, and media. Nonetheless, even among youth, there remains a strong attachment to traditional food, particularly during festivals and family gatherings, indicating a hybridization rather than a full erosion of traditional food culture.

Gender and Culinary Roles

Gender roles are clearly reflected in food preparation and consumption patterns. The domestic kitchen remains predominantly female, with women responsible for cooking in most households. However, in commercial spaces like chop bars and restaurants, men are increasingly visible as chefs and cooks. This dichotomy supports existing research on the gendered division of labor in culinary spaces and raises important questions about how modernity and economic necessity are reshaping these traditional roles.

Socioeconomic Status and Food Choices

The study also underscores the role of class in shaping food preferences. Higher-income individuals tend to have more diverse diets, incorporating both local and international cuisines. Lower-income groups, by contrast, often consume traditional staple foods due to affordability and accessibility. This reinforces Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, whereby taste and food choices are influenced by one's social position.

Furthermore, some traditional dishes (like *waakye* or *tilapia with banku*) have been rebranded as premium meals in urban settings, creating a cultural paradox: foods once seen as "common" are now associated with prestige in

certain contexts. This reflects the commodification of culture, where traditional elements are repackaged for commercial and elite consumption.

Religion and Dietary Practices

Religious beliefs also shape food preferences and taboos. For instance, Muslims avoid pork, while certain Christian sects and traditionalists may observe fasting or abstain from specific foods during rituals. These dietary restrictions highlight how religious identity and spiritual beliefs intersect with food consumption, enforcing communal boundaries and personal discipline.

Urbanization and Culinary Evolution

Urban living has introduced time constraints and shifted lifestyles, encouraging the growth of fast food and pre-packaged meal options. However, this has not entirely displaced traditional cooking. Many urban dwellers still prepare traditional meals during weekends or special occasions. This supports the idea that modernity does not necessarily erase tradition, but often coexists with it in dynamic, negotiated forms.

Although several times the participants stressed the importance of cultural traditions in regard to traditional foods, their accounts also reveal the social processes involved in relation to power, classes, and cultural transformation. Indicatively, gendering cooking roles do not disappear, e.g. the ways in which domestic labour is organized in Ghanaian society is patriarchal in nature. Despite the fact that some urban homes are more egalitarian, the fact that women are expected to be the main caregivers when it comes to cooking is still deeply rooted in culture. On the same note, the rising popularity of fast foods among the youthful members should not be interpreted as only a denial of the traditional culture. Instead, the trend is indicative of broader structural changes, such as urbanization, changed work patterns, and the exposure to the consumer culture in the world. In that aspect, the issue of dietary transformation cannot be entirely a subject of choice but rather a result of economic modernization and the social lifestyle changes. The implication of these findings is that food practices can be viewed as a locus through which people are negotiating the competing cultural forces whereby the forces of modernity and the need to maintain cultural continuity co-exist.

CONCLUSION

In sum, Ghanaian cuisine serves as a powerful lens through which to understand identity, social change, and cultural continuity. While globalization and modernization are reshaping food preferences, traditional food remains a resilient symbol of Ghanaian identity. This study reaffirms that food in Ghana is not merely about nutrition; it is deeply social, symbolic, and political. Sociological attention to food in Ghana thus reveals broader patterns of social organization, cultural expression, and historical continuity.

This study has explored the sociological dimensions of food identity and preferences in Ghana, revealing the multifaceted role of cuisine in shaping cultural expression, social belonging, and personal identity. Ghanaian food is far more than a nutritional necessity; it is a vibrant symbol of ethnic pride, historical continuity, and collective memory.

Through the lens of food, we observe how individuals and communities negotiate tradition, modernity, gender roles, religious beliefs, and socioeconomic status. From the deeply rooted cultural significance of traditional dishes like *fufu*, *waakye*, and *kenkey*, to the emerging influence of global food trends among younger and urban populations, Ghana's food landscape reflects a dynamic interplay between preservation and transformation.

Key findings highlight that:

- **Ethnic and regional identity** strongly influence food preferences.
- **Family and intergenerational learning** remain central to culinary knowledge.
- **Gender roles**, while evolving, still shape domestic and public food practices.

- **Socioeconomic status** affects both access to and valuation of traditional and global cuisines.
- **Religion** continues to inform dietary choices and food taboos.
- **Urbanization and globalization** are driving dietary change, yet traditional food maintains its relevance.

In conclusion, food in Ghana is not just what people eat it is who they are. Understanding the sociological underpinnings of Ghanaian cuisine provides deeper insights into broader cultural, economic, and political dynamics. As Ghana continues to modernize, its culinary traditions serve as both a foundation and a mirror of changing social realities. Further research could explore how migration, technology, and climate change may continue to shape food identity in the years ahead.

The manuscript has been revised to improve clarity, academic tone, and structural coherence. Additional theoretical frameworks have been incorporated to strengthen the sociological analysis of food culture, globalization, and identity formation. The literature review now includes more recent and comparative studies from African contexts. Furthermore, the discussion section has been expanded to provide deeper analytical interpretation of the findings. A thematic summary table has also been included to enhance the presentation of key results. Finally, the manuscript has undergone careful language editing and formatting revision to ensure consistency with academic writing standards.

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