



**PRESERVING INDIGENOUS CULINARY HERITAGE THROUGH
MULTILINGUAL DOCUMENTATION:
A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY OF CAMEROON AND NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT: *This study investigates the vital role of multilingual documentation in preserving indigenous culinary heritage, with a comparative focus on Cameroon and Nigeria, two countries that reflect Francophone and Anglophone Africa, respectively. At the intersection of food, language, and culture, the research explores how traditional recipes and food practices are being documented, translated, and transmitted across generations using both French and English. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research documents selected indigenous dishes such as Ndole and Koki in Cameroon and Ofada rice and Ekpang Nkukwo in Nigeria. Data were collected through field interviews, participant observations, and textual analysis of recipe documentation. Special attention is given to the linguistic challenges involved in translating indigenous food terms and expressions without losing their cultural and sensory meanings. The paper examines how the dominance of colonial languages in official and educational spaces influences culinary preservation, sometimes distorting or omitting native food knowledge. Findings highlight that multilingual documentation improves accessibility, global understanding, and educational application but must be carefully managed to retain authenticity. The study emphasizes the need for community participation, culturally responsive translation practices, and collaboration between linguists, translators, food scientists, and local custodians of food knowledge. Recommendations are made for developing inclusive frameworks for culinary heritage preservation that honor local languages and traditional knowledge systems.*

KEYWORDS: Indigenous food, Culinary heritage, Multilingual documentation, Cameroon, Nigeria, Translation, Language and culture, Food Science, Recipe preservation.



RÉSUMÉ: *Cette étude examine le rôle fondamental de la documentation multilingue dans la préservation du patrimoine culinaire autochtone, en s'appuyant sur une analyse comparative entre le Cameroun et le Nigéria représentant respectivement l'Afrique francophone et anglophone. A l'intersection de la nourriture, de la langue et de la culture, la recherche explore comment les recettes traditionnelles et les pratiques alimentaires sont documentées, traduites et transmises de génération en génération en français et en anglais. En adoptant une méthodologie d'étude de cas qualitative, la recherche s'appuie sur des plats emblématiques comme Ndole et le Koki au Cameroun, ainsi que Ofada et Ekpang Nkukwo au Nigéria. Les données ont été recueillies à travers des entretiens sur le terrain, des observations participatives et une analyse textuelle des recettes. Une attention particulière est accordée aux défis linguistiques liés à la traduction des termes culinaires autochtones, ainsi qu'aux risques de perte de sens culturel et sensoriel. L'étude analyse l'influence des langues coloniales dans les espaces officiels et éducatifs sur la transmission des savoirs culinaires. Les résultats montrent que la documentation multilingue améliore l'accessibilité, la compréhension mondiale et l'usage éducatif, mais nécessite une approche sensible pour garantir l'authenticité. L'importance de la participation communautaire, de traductions culturellement appropriées, et de la collaboration entre linguistes, traducteurs, scientifiques de l'alimentation et gardiens locaux du savoir culinaire est soulignée. Des recommandations sont proposées pour concevoir des cadres inclusifs qui valorisent les langues locales et les systèmes de savoirs traditionnels.*

Mots-clés : *Alimentation autochtone, patrimoine culinaire, documentation multilingue, Cameroun, Nigéria, traduction, langue et culture, science alimentaire, préservation des recettes*



INTRODUCTION

Food is more than sustenance—it is a vessel of history, culture, and identity. Across Africa, indigenous culinary heritage represents a complex tapestry of ancestral knowledge, environmental adaptation, spiritual symbolism, and social cohesion. Traditional dishes, preparation techniques, and food customs carry stories of migration, resilience, and innovation that have been passed down orally through generations. As globalization, urbanization, and cultural homogenization continue to reshape African societies, the preservation of this culinary heritage becomes increasingly urgent. Documenting these traditions is not only a means of safeguarding culture but also a tool for education, economic empowerment, and sustainable development.

Language plays a critical role in this preservation. It is through language that recipes are described, food rituals are explained, and the meanings behind ingredients and methods are conveyed. However, many indigenous African languages remain undocumented or are endangered, and food knowledge encoded within them is at risk of being lost. When culinary traditions are translated into dominant languages such as French or English without cultural sensitivity, key concepts may be distorted or omitted. Therefore, multilingual documentation, especially one that includes both indigenous and official languages, is essential for authentic and inclusive preservation.

This research presents a comparative case study of Cameroon and Nigeria, two linguistically diverse countries that exemplify the Francophone and Anglophone African experience. Cameroon, with its official use of French and deep Bantu culinary traditions, and Nigeria, with its English linguistic base and a vast array of ethnic cuisines, provide a rich landscape for examining how food knowledge is preserved and transmitted across language boundaries. Both countries face similar challenges in cultural retention, but they also offer unique perspectives on the role of language in culinary identity.

In Cameroon, dishes such as Ndole and Koki are deeply rooted in the culinary heritage of ethnic groups such as the Douala, Bakweri, and Beti, who speak indigenous languages bearing the same names. These languages contain unique vocabulary and expressions that shape how these dishes are prepared and understood within their communities. In Nigeria, Ofada rice is primarily associated with the Yoruba-speaking people of southwestern Nigeria, while Ekpang Nkukwo is native to the Efik and Ibibio peoples of Cross River and Akwa Ibom States. The names of these dishes, along with the detailed methods of their preparation, are embedded in local languages that reflect not just culinary instructions but cultural meanings, taboos, and values. These linguistic layers often present challenges in translation, especially when colonial languages lack the cultural depth to fully convey indigenous expressions.

The objectives of this study were:

1. To explore how indigenous food practices are documented and transmitted in Cameroon and Nigeria;
2. To examine the linguistic challenges in translating traditional culinary terms and expressions;



3. To assess the impact of colonial and indigenous languages on culinary heritage preservation; and
4. To propose strategies for effective multilingual documentation of African food knowledge.

The guiding questions include:

How do communities in Cameroon and Nigeria preserve and share traditional food knowledge?

What role does language play in maintaining or transforming the meaning of recipes? What are the risks and opportunities involved in translating indigenous culinary terms into French and English?

How can collaboration between local communities, linguists/translators, and food scientists enhance the preservation of Africa's culinary heritage?

This study is anchored in the belief that the preservation of African food culture requires more than recording recipes; it requires respecting the language of the people who create them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

African Culinary Heritage and Oral Traditions.

African culinary heritage is a vital yet often undervalued dimension of the continent's intangible cultural legacy. Food is deeply woven into Africa's social fabric, serving as a marker of identity, a vessel for historical memory, and a tool for intergenerational communication. Scholars such as Osseo-Asare (2014) and Bessière (1998) have highlighted the cultural, medicinal, and ecological knowledge embedded in African food practices. This knowledge is typically transmitted orally through storytelling, apprenticeship, ritual, and communal cooking methods that resist formal documentation but ensure continuity within families and communities.

In many African societies, culinary traditions are preserved through the voices of elders and the daily routines of women, who often serve as custodians of food knowledge. Recipes are seldom written; instead, they are memorized, improvised, or demonstrated. Quantities are estimated, processes are narrated in local idioms, and ingredients are explained using culturally specific terms. While this oral system has sustained culinary knowledge for centuries, it is increasingly vulnerable in the face of modern disruptions, including migration, urbanization, industrialization of food systems, and declining use of indigenous languages.

Language and Knowledge Transmission in Postcolonial Africa

The colonial imposition of European languages in Africa, especially French and English, has had lasting effects on how indigenous knowledge, including culinary practices, is transmitted and recorded. In postcolonial societies like Cameroon and Nigeria, language policy often privileges former colonial languages in education, media, and official documentation. As a result, traditional knowledge that exists in indigenous languages becomes marginalized or



distorted when filtered through non-native linguistic frameworks (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986; Bambose, 1991).

Linguists/translators and anthropologists (e.g., Prah, 2009; Eme & Ubanagu, 2016) have emphasized the importance of mother tongues in sustaining epistemic integrity. When recipes or culinary terms are translated into French or English without adequate cultural context, they often lose nuances, both linguistic and sensory, that are essential to the dish's identity. Moreover, many indigenous food expressions carry metaphors, taboos, and symbolic associations that cannot be rendered accurately in colonial languages. These challenges underscore the necessity of multilingual documentation as a tool for inclusive cultural preservation.

Existing Efforts at Culinary Documentation in Cameroon and Nigeria

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in documenting African cuisines, though efforts remain fragmented and uneven. In Cameroon, culinary documentation has often appeared in Francophone/Anglophone publications and local NGO initiatives focused on nutrition and food security. Projects like *Cuisine camerounaise: Recettes traditionnelles* (Marie-Claire, 2008; Beyala, 2000) and nutrition-oriented cookbooks have attempted to record traditional dishes, yet they often lack linguistic analysis or indigenous language representation.

In Nigeria, several private efforts have led to the publication of cookbooks and online platforms that showcase local recipes in English. Notable examples include *My Everyday Nigerian Food* by Kemi Sogunle (2020) and the food advocacy work of culinary historians like Ozoz Sokoh (a.k.a. "Kitchen Butterfly, Matilda Inyang, Edna Akpan" 2004). However, these efforts are mostly Anglophone and urban-centered, with minimal engagement with indigenous languages or grassroots communities.

Academic studies focused specifically on the multilingual documentation of indigenous food traditions in Cameroon and Nigeria are limited. This reveals a significant gap in current literature, especially concerning the intersection of culinary documentation, indigenous languages, and food science. Where indigenous languages are mentioned, they are often treated superficially or merely as labels for dishes, without deeper exploration of their epistemological content.

Review of Previous Comparative Language/Food Studies

Comparative studies linking language and food in Africa are relatively scarce, but emerging works like "Language and Food: Verbal and Nonverbal Experiences" (Cwierka *et al.*, 2019) examine how food and language mutually shape cultural experiences, though few of such studies focus specifically on African contexts. In the African setting, research by scholars like Ekanade (2012) and Afolayan (2020) has touched on the culinary-linguistic landscape of the Yoruba and Igbo communities, especially in the context of oral traditions and sociolinguistic identity.

Cross-national studies comparing Francophone and Anglophone African food traditions and their linguistic expressions remain extremely limited. Existing research tends to focus on food security, agricultural practices, or public health, rather than cultural preservation through language. This underscores the uniqueness and significance of the present study, which bridges gaps across disciplines, combining linguistics, food science, cultural anthropology, and



translation studies to explore how indigenous culinary heritage can be meaningfully documented across language divides.

Summary of Gaps Identified

Lack of multilingual approaches to recipe documentation.

Minimal attention to indigenous language preservation in food literature.

Absence of in-depth comparative studies between Francophone and Anglophone African culinary traditions.

Insufficient collaboration between linguists/translators and food scientists in preserving traditional food knowledge.

This literature review highlights the need for a more holistic and linguistically sensitive approach to documenting African culinary heritage, an approach that values local languages not merely as accessories, but as essential vessels of knowledge, memory, and identity.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on three interrelated theoretical perspectives to interrogate how indigenous culinary heritage can be preserved through multilingual documentation: postcolonial linguistic theory, ethnolinguistics and food anthropology, and knowledge preservation and translation theory. Together, these frameworks provide a multidisciplinary lens for analyzing how language mediates the recording, transmission, and transformation of traditional food knowledge in postcolonial African societies.

Postcolonial Linguistic Theory

Postcolonial linguistic theory critiques the enduring influence of colonial languages in shaping communication, education, and cultural representation in formerly colonized societies. In the African context, theorists such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) and Prah (2009) argue that colonial languages like English and French have continued to marginalize indigenous languages, undermining local epistemologies and cultural autonomy. Language, in this view, is not merely a tool of communication but a carrier of worldviews, values, and cultural knowledge.

In Cameroon and Nigeria, both postcolonial states, the dominance of French and English in formal settings has created linguistic hierarchies that affect what knowledge is preserved, who documents it, and how it is interpreted. When culinary traditions are written exclusively in colonial languages, the deeper meanings embedded in indigenous terms, expressions, and metaphors are often lost or diluted. This theory thus frames the need for decolonizing documentation practices by repositioning indigenous languages as valid and necessary mediums for recording and transmitting food heritage.

Ethnolinguistics and Food Anthropology

Ethnolinguistics, a subfield of linguistics, examines the relationship between language and culture, particularly how language reflects and shapes the worldview of its speakers. When



combined with food anthropology, which studies food as a cultural system, the two provide powerful tools for understanding the symbolic and communicative dimensions of culinary traditions. Every language encodes culturally specific ways of describing food ingredients, preparation methods, and consumption rituals. For example, in Ibibio, the term "Nkukwo" in Ekpang Nkukwo not only refers to "leaf" but tender cocoyam leaf and signifies the protective, enclosing function of the leaf in both a culinary and symbolic sense. Similarly, Douala expressions used in Ndole preparation encapsulate ancestral beliefs and regional taste preferences that are inseparable from linguistic nuance.

This perspective allows us to see recipes not as neutral technical instructions but as cultural narratives that rely on language to convey sensory, spiritual, and communal meanings. Documenting food knowledge without attention to the linguistic contexts in which it is embedded risks erasing these deeper layers of cultural expression.

Knowledge Preservation and Translation Theory

Translation theory provides critical insight into how knowledge, especially orally transmitted indigenous knowledge, is transferred across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Eugene Nida's dynamic equivalence theory and Susan Basnett's cultural translation approach emphasize that translation is not just a linguistic act but a cultural negotiation. In the context of culinary heritage, this becomes particularly important as recipes and food concepts often contain idiomatic expressions, embedded metaphors, and sensory references that may lack direct equivalents in other languages.

In translating culinary terms from indigenous African languages into French or English, researchers face both semantic and epistemological challenges. For example, an indigenous word describing the texture of a yam paste or the technique of wrapping food in leaves may not have a precise counterpart in French or English, requiring adaptation, approximation or re-contextualization. This risks the loss of cultural specificity unless supported by annotation, audiovisual documentation, or bilingual glossaries.

The framework of knowledge preservation draws from both archival studies and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) theory. It supports the idea that preservation is most effective when the knowledge bearers themselves—local cooks, elders, and community members—are actively involved in the documentation and interpretation process. Such participatory models ensure that culinary heritage is preserved not only in words but also in spirit, intention, and context.

Synthesis of Frameworks

By weaving these three perspectives together, this study positions itself within a decolonial, culturally responsive, and linguistically inclusive paradigm. Postcolonial linguistic theory highlights the political stakes of language in documentation. Ethnolinguistics and food anthropology illuminate the cultural content of culinary discourse. Translation and preservation theory offer practical and ethical strategies for transmitting this knowledge across languages without distortion.



This theoretical foundation guides the study's analysis of how food traditions from Cameroon and Nigeria can be documented authentically and accessibly—respecting the languages that hold the memory of each dish.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a comparative qualitative case study design to examine how indigenous culinary heritage is preserved through multilingual documentation in two postcolonial African nations: Cameroon (Francophone/Anglophone Africa) and Nigeria (Anglophone Africa). The case study approach is particularly appropriate for this research because it allows for an in-depth, contextualized exploration of cultural practices within specific linguistic and culinary settings (Yin, 2014). Through purposive sampling and field engagement, the study compares the ways in which selected traditional dishes are recorded, interpreted, and transmitted across languages and generations.

Comparative Qualitative Case Study Design

The research employs a cross-cultural comparative model, analyzing parallel food traditions in Cameroon and Nigeria. Both countries offer rich linguistic diversity and culinary heritage, making them ideal for exploring how colonial and indigenous languages interact in food documentation. The study compares:

- How language influences the preservation of food knowledge.
- The role of oral traditions versus written documentation.
- The translation of culturally embedded culinary terms.

Data Sources and Collection Methods

Multiple qualitative data sources were utilized to gather comprehensive insights, including: Semi-structured interviews with local cooks, elders, food artisans, and linguists who are custodians of culinary knowledge in both countries.

Audio and video recordings of oral recipe narrations and cooking processes in indigenous languages.

Cookbooks and food manuals, especially those with bilingual or multilingual content. Field notes from direct observations during community cooking sessions and food festivals. This triangulation of data collection methods allowed for validation and cross-verification of findings and interpretations.

Selection of Traditional Dishes

To ensure representativeness and cultural relevance, two emblematic dishes were selected from each country:

CAMEROON

Ndole – a traditional peanut/butterleaf-based stew originating from the Douala and Sawa peoples, typically prepared with groundnuts, crayfish, meat or fish etc.



Koki – a steamed pudding prepared using fresh corn or black-eyed peas/cowpeas, red palm oil, banana leaves etc, traditionally associated with the Mbo, Beti-Fang and South-west communities.

NIGERIA

Ofada Rice – an indigenous rice variety cultivated in Yoruba-speaking areas of southwestern Nigeria, typically served with a spicy pepper sauce (Ayamase).

Ekpang Nkukwo – a grated cocoyam and water yam blend, with vegetable pottage indigenous to the Efik and Ibibio peoples of southern Nigeria, known for its elaborate preparation and symbolic significance.

These dishes were selected due to their widespread cultural relevance, oral-based transmission history, and representation of regional identity.

DOCUMENTATION FORMAT AND ANALYSIS

To reflect the multilingual nature of the study and the transmission of culinary knowledge, a three-layered documentation format was adopted for each selected dish:

- a. Indigenous Language Version:** Recipes and food practices were transcribed in the original language of the host community (e.g., Douala, Yoruba, Ibibio).
- b. French or English Translation:** Depending on the national linguistic context, the indigenous content was translated into either French (for Cameroon) or English (for Nigeria).
- c. Scientific Description:** A formal version using food science terminology was constructed to analyse the nutritional, technical, and processing aspects of the recipe.

This layered approach allows for the preservation of cultural authenticity while also facilitating broader accessibility and academic analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the interviews and recordings. Community members were engaged respectfully, and indigenous knowledge was treated as intellectual property belonging to the host communities. Names were anonymized where necessary to protect privacy.

This methodology ensures a culturally grounded, linguistically rich, and ethically sound investigation into how African culinary traditions can be preserved through sensitive and inclusive documentation strategies.



Case Study 1:

Cameroon (Francophone/Anglophone Africa)

Linguistic and Culinary Background

Cameroon is one of Africa's most linguistically diverse countries, with over 250 indigenous languages spoken alongside its two official languages French and English. The Francophone regions, particularly in the Littoral and Centre provinces, are home to ethnic groups such as the Douala, Bakweri, Beti, and Bassa, each with distinct culinary traditions (Echu, 2004). These groups rely on oral transmission to preserve food knowledge, and meals often carry historical and ceremonial significance.

Among the most iconic dishes are *Ndole*, a butterleaf and peanut-based stew, and *Koki*, a steamed corn/bean pudding prepared with red palm oil and wrapped in banana leaves. These dishes are not just nutritional recipes but cultural texts encoded in local languages and idiomatic expressions. For instance, the Beti term for "crushed beans" carries metaphorical implications of transformation, patience, and domestic skill meanings often lost when generalized in French as "purée de haricots".

Field Findings: Recipe Documentation and Language Challenges

Field interviews and recordings with cooks in Douala and Yaoundé revealed that traditional recipes are largely passed down orally from mother to daughter, with minimal written records. Descriptions of ingredients, proportions, and techniques rely heavily on contextual knowledge and metaphorical language, such as "le feu doit parler" (the fire must speak), meaning the dish must simmer until its aroma is released, a phrase whose depth diminishes in translation. One elderly Beti woman described *Koki* as "un repas de respect pour les ancêtres," but the indigenous term she used conveyed a deeper spiritual connotation linked to ancestral appeasement and ritual purity. Attempts to capture such richness in French often resulted in reductive translations, e.g., "traditional bean dish," which strips the meal of its ceremonial value and communal function.

French Translation: Effects on Meaning and Usage

French, while enabling broader communication, introduces layers of semantic flattening in culinary documentation. Terms such as "épinard africain" (used for bitterleaf or *ndole*) are generic and sometimes scientifically inaccurate, leading to confusion about the ingredient's identity in cross-cultural or diasporic contexts. Additionally, French culinary registers often prioritize technique and formal structure over communal or spiritual dimensions embedded in indigenous food language (Calvet, 1999).

The act of translating *Ndole* into French not only simplifies its complex preparation but also removes the performative and poetic elements present in the indigenous explanation. This has implications for both intergenerational transmission and academic preservation, as younger Francophone Cameroonians often relate to their food culture through second-hand, linguistically diluted interpretations.



Case Study 2:

Nigeria (Anglophone Africa)

Linguistic and Culinary Background

Nigeria is home to over 500 indigenous languages, making it one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world (Bamgbose, 1991). English, the official language, serves as the medium for education, governance, and most formal communication. Yet, everyday culinary discourse is still dominated by ethnic languages such as Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Efik, and Ibibio, each reflecting a unique food worldview.

Ofada rice, named after the town of Ofada in Ogun State, is central to Yoruba cuisine. Similarly, *Ekpang Nkukwo*, a dish made from grated cocoyam and wateryam blend, wrapped with *nkukwo* (tender cocoyam leaves), and cooked with leafy vegetables, is a culinary emblem of the Efik and Ibibio peoples of southern Nigeria. These dishes are steeped in rituals, metaphors, and sensory cues that are deeply language-specific.

Local Names and English Renderings

In English-language cookbooks and food blogs, local dishes are often presented with either direct transliterations (e.g., *Ekpang Nkukwo*), or generalized labels such as "Nigerian cocoyam porridge." However, this translation often leads to semantic erosion. The term "Nkukwo" means "tender leaf or shoot" in Ibibio, signifying both the ingredient and the spiritual practice of enclosing or protecting the food, a nuance absent in its English rendering.

Ofada rice is frequently labeled "unpolished local rice" or "brown Nigerian rice," yet these descriptors fail to capture the dish's cultural weight, which includes its traditional serving in *uma* leaves, association with celebrations, and distinct aroma from local processing methods (Sogunle, 2020).

Documentation Trends and Gaps

Nigeria has witnessed a surge in culinary documentation through blogs, YouTube channels, and cookbooks, mostly written in English. While these platforms have increased visibility for indigenous dishes, they rarely include bilingual or multilingual formats and seldom consult community elders or traditional cooks. This trend contributes to the individualization and commodification of what are inherently communal and orally inherited food practices.

Unlike in Cameroon where French dominates formal spaces, English in Nigeria often coexists with local languages in informal contexts. However, code-switching in culinary discourse tends to prioritize English as the "standard" while local languages are used selectively for colour or authenticity. This creates a hierarchical documentation structure in which indigenous terms are seen as add-ons rather than as full carriers of knowledge.

Furthermore, while academic studies on Nigerian cuisine exist (Akinyemi, 2015; Okoye, 2019), few focus on the intersection of language and food documentation, especially in terms of translation challenges and cultural loss. This gap underscores the importance of developing indigenous-to-English documentation methods that are both linguistically respectful and scientifically sound.



Comparative Insight

Both Cameroon and Nigeria illustrate the central role of language in culinary preservation, but from different angles: Cameroon struggles with the dominance of French and the under documentation of local food lexicons, while Nigeria's challenge lies in the Anglophone framing of local dishes that often strips them of indigenous depth. In both contexts, indigenous languages house food memories, spiritual meanings, and ecological knowledge that cannot be fully transferred through colonial languages alone.

COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis of Cameroon and Nigeria reveals a complex interplay between language, colonial legacy, cultural preservation, and food identity. While both countries exhibit rich culinary traditions shaped by oral transmission and local languages, the influence of colonial languages, roles of communities, and the continuity of food knowledge differ in significant ways. This section discusses the key similarities and differences across four thematic axes: multilingual documentation challenges, authenticity and accessibility, community involvement, and intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Similarities and Differences in the Challenges of Multilingual Documentation

Both Cameroon and Nigeria face the central challenge of translating deeply embedded culinary knowledge from indigenous languages into colonial languages (French and English). In both cases, this translation process is more than linguistic, it is epistemic, cultural, and sometimes political (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986; Eme & Ubanagu, 2016).

A shared challenge is the loss of culturally specific metaphors, measurements, and expressions that carry meaning beyond the mere description of food. For example, Cameroonian expressions like "le feu doit parler" or Nigerian metaphors such as "ònà tí iresi ñ tú" ("the way rice softens") often get flattened in translation, depriving the recipe of its poetic and didactic richness.

However, a notable difference lies in the degree of documentation infrastructure. In Nigeria, the growing presence of digital platforms (e.g., food blogs and YouTube channels) has led to more widespread culinary documentation in English, though with limited linguistic depth (Sogunle, 2020). Cameroon, on the other hand, has fewer such platforms and a stronger reliance on oral traditions and family cookbooks in French or indigenous languages (Mballa, 2008), which remain mostly unpublished or informal.

Moreover, while Nigeria's multilingualism often leads to code-switching in urban culinary spaces, Cameroonian contexts display language compartmentalization, where French dominates formal settings and indigenous languages are confined to domestic spheres.

How Colonial Languages Affect Authenticity and Accessibility

In both countries, colonial languages serve a double-edged role: they provide broader accessibility to national and global audiences, yet often at the cost of cultural authenticity. French and English, as languages of modern education, formal publishing, and online media, are often seen as the "default" mediums for preserving and disseminating culinary knowledge.



However, this dominance displaces indigenous terms, practices, and philosophies, reducing the cultural density of recipes (Calvet, 1999; Bamgbose, 1991).

In Cameroon, for instance, dishes like Koki are often labeled as “gâteau de haricot” (bean cake), a term that fails to convey the ritual context or preparation philosophy within Beti communities. In Nigeria, *Ekpang Nkukwo* may be translated as “cocoyam porridge,” which omits the symbolic value of the “Nkukwo” (cocoyam tender leaf) and the significance of wrapping food in enfolding protection, often linked to fertility and blessing in Ibibio and Efik cosmology. (Udo, 2010). However, it is pertinent to add here that the blending of the cocoyam with water yam is equally symbolic, showing the involvement of two, male and female, in reproduction.

While colonial languages make recipes more accessible in school curricula or cookbooks, they often truncate or distort key cultural elements, leading to the museumification of food where dishes are preserved in form, but stripped of living context.

Community Roles and Local Knowledge Holders

Across both countries, the role of community elders, women, and local cooks remains central to the survival of culinary traditions. These individuals are often the custodians of unwritten knowledge, holding recipes, techniques, and contextual meanings that are not found in any formal source (Afolayan, 2020).

In Cameroon, many women interviewed during fieldwork indicated that they had never written down a recipe, yet could replicate dishes with remarkable precision, relying on inherited memory and oral cues. In Nigeria, traditional food vendors (mama put) and home cooks play similar roles, with regional variations often marked by family or clan-specific adaptations.

However, community engagement in documentation is more pronounced in Nigeria, where food influencers and cultural activists increasingly collaborate with local cooks to capture indigenous dishes in multimedia formats. Cameroon, by contrast, shows fewer initiatives involving indigenous language speakers in formal documentation efforts.

Both contexts underline the need for participatory and community-based documentation models, where food scientists, linguists, and cultural historians work with, not just on local knowledge holders (Nabudere, 2006).

Effects on Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer

One of the most pressing concerns in both Cameroon and Nigeria is the weakening of intergenerational transmission due to language shift, urbanization, and educational priorities that privilege French or English. As younger generations increasingly rely on written sources and digital media often available only in colonial languages, they become disconnected from the oral and performative dimensions of traditional cooking.

In Cameroon, interviews revealed that many urban youths could not name ingredients in their parents' languages, nor could they identify the indigenous plants used in dishes like Ndole. In Nigeria, while some youths are enthusiastic about “reclaiming local foods,” their exposure is



often limited to Anglicized versions with simplified techniques, absent of linguistic or symbolic depth (Okoye, 2019).

This generational gap points to a deeper risk: when language dies, so does a portion of the collective food memory. If the knowledge is not transmitted in the original language, it may survive technically, but not culturally, becoming something remembered rather than lived (Fishman, 1991).

CONCLUSION OF COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS

The comparative discussion reveals that while Cameroon and Nigeria differ in their levels of documentation and media engagement, they share a common challenge: the need to preserve culinary heritage in the languages that birthed it. The pressure to conform to colonial linguistic norms continues to shape what is preserved, who preserves it, and how it is consumed literally and metaphorically. Authentic preservation of African food traditions requires more than translation; it demands a linguistically inclusive, community-led, and culturally sensitive approach that honours both the dish and the discourse.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The findings of this research carry significant implications across multiple domains including cultural policy and preservation, curriculum development and food education, and the broader promotion of indigenous foods for health, tourism, and economic development. At the intersection of language, food heritage, and identity, this study emphasizes that effective documentation of African culinary traditions must move beyond monolingual or eurocentric frameworks to embrace multilingual, community-centered, and culturally embedded approaches.

Implications for Cultural Policy and Preservation

This study underscores the urgent need for inclusive cultural policies that recognize and protect indigenous food knowledge as a form of intangible cultural heritage. Despite growing international awareness evident in UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, national policies in many African countries still fall short in addressing the linguistic and cultural dimensions of food heritage (UNESCO, 2010).

In both Cameroon and Nigeria, there exists a disconnect between government-led cultural initiatives and grassroots culinary practices. Policies tend to emphasize national identity and tourism branding, while overlooking local languages and community ownership. A shift is needed toward decentralized preservation models, where cultural documentation is conducted with local cooks and elders rather than for them. This includes recognizing indigenous culinary expressions as intellectual property and creating linguistic archives for recipes, ingredients, and food rituals.

Additionally, policymakers should support community-led oral history projects, digital storytelling, and culinary archives that document food traditions in both indigenous and



colonial languages thus preserving the integrity of culinary knowledge while enhancing its accessibility (Nabudere, 2006; Thiong'o, 1986).

Implications for Curriculum Development and Food Education

The study reveals significant potential for integrating indigenous culinary heritage into formal education curricula, especially in primary and secondary school programs focused on home economics, cultural studies, and language education. By embedding traditional food practices into the classroom taught in indigenous languages alongside French or English, students gain a richer understanding of their cultural roots while developing cross-cultural and practical life skills.

Current curricula in both Cameroon and Nigeria tend to adopt a Western-centric approach to food science and nutrition, often neglecting local food systems and traditional dietary knowledge (Akinyemi, 2015). This omission perpetuates the undervaluation of indigenous diets, despite growing evidence of their nutritional adequacy, biodiversity, and sustainability (FAO, 2013).

Incorporating ethnolinguistic culinary modules into school programs would foster greater appreciation for local heritage while strengthening intergenerational ties. These modules could include:

Bilingual recipe writing exercises

Oral storytelling from elders about food traditions;

Cooking demonstrations using indigenous measurements and metaphors;

Field trips to local markets or farms to explore traditional ingredients.

Such initiatives not only enrich cultural education but also empower students to become cultural ambassadors and agents of preservation in their own right.

Implications for Promoting Indigenous Foods in Health, Tourism, and Economic Development

The preservation and promotion of indigenous food knowledge have direct implications for national health agendas, culinary tourism, and local economies. In an era of increasing interest in functional foods, plant-based diets, and culinary experiences rooted in sustainability and authenticity, African indigenous dishes offer untapped value both nutritionally and commercially (Osseo-Asare, 2014).

From a health perspective, dishes like Ndole, Ekpang Nkukwo, or Ofada rice provide nutrient-dense alternatives to processed foods, particularly rich in fiber, vitamins, and bioactive compounds. However, the erosion of traditional food practices due to urbanization and globalization contributes to rising rates of diet-related illnesses such as diabetes and hypertension (Popkin & Ng, 2007). Preserving indigenous knowledge, including its preparation methods and seasonal wisdom, is therefore essential to advancing nutrition-sensitive development policies.



Tourism-wise, the global market for authentic culinary experiences is rapidly expanding, yet Africa remains underrepresented in this sector. Multilingual documentation and promotion of local dishes could enable communities to curate food heritage trails, host cultural cooking workshops, and participate in regional or international food festivals, provided these efforts prioritize community benefit and cultural respect (Bessière, 1998).

Economically, the commercialization of indigenous foods through certified packaging, local branding, or restaurant development can drive rural entrepreneurship and women's empowerment, especially if the knowledge holders are included as stakeholders in the value chain. However, this must be accompanied by legal frameworks that protect traditional food knowledge from exploitation and misrepresentation.

Synthesis of Implications

Taken together, these implications call for a transdisciplinary and multilingual approach to culinary heritage preservation, one that bridges cultural policy, education, linguistics, and sustainable development. Effective action will require collaboration between governments, educators, researchers, local communities, and international organizations, guided by the principle that food is not just what we eat, but a language through which we live, remember, and belong.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings from this comparative study between Cameroon and Nigeria, and building on the theoretical and empirical insights around language, food heritage, and knowledge transmission, this section outlines actionable recommendations for stakeholders, governments, educators, researchers, communities, and development partners.

The recommendations emphasize community ownership, linguistic inclusivity, and interdisciplinary collaboration, offering a roadmap for sustainable and authentic preservation of indigenous culinary traditions in Africa.

Promote Community-Driven Documentation Practices

A central recommendation is the promotion of community-based documentation frameworks where traditional cooks, elders, and local food knowledge holders take the lead in recording, interpreting, and sharing their culinary heritage.

Too often, food documentation projects are externally driven and extractive, failing to account for the epistemic authority of those who live and practice the traditions daily (Nabudere, 2006). As such, documentation efforts should:

Be conducted in indigenous languages, with translation into French and English occurring after local meanings and metaphors are preserved; Use audio, video, and oral history recordings, especially in non-literate communities, to safeguard tone, rhythm, and symbolic expression; Recognize and credit local contributors as co-authors or curators of their food knowledge.



Funding agencies and cultural ministries should support grassroots culinary archives, led by community associations, women's cooperatives, or cultural heritage clubs. This participatory approach aligns with UNESCO's guidelines on safeguarding intangible heritage, which prioritize community initiative and intergenerational participation (UNESCO, 2010).

Integrate Food Heritage into School Curricula

Given the erosion of food knowledge among younger generations, there is an urgent need to embed indigenous culinary heritage into formal education systems. Schools should not only teach what to cook but also how and why traditional dishes matter culturally, nutritionally, and historically.

Educational ministries in both Cameroon and Nigeria should:

Include bilingual food heritage modules in primary and secondary school curricula, particularly in home economics, cultural studies, and language classes;

Develop textbooks and learning resources that feature local dishes, oral recipes, indigenous measurements, and the stories behind meals;

Organize inter-school food festivals or heritage days that allow students to present traditional dishes in their native languages alongside French or English.

Incorporating these practices fosters not only culinary literacy but also cultural identity and pride, while also reinforcing the value of indigenous languages in academic spaces (Bamgbose, 1991; Akinyemi, 2015).

Train Local Translators, Food Scientists, and Linguists in Culinary Preservation

A major gap identified in the study is the shortage of professionals trained at the intersection of language, culture, and food science. To address this, universities and development partners should invest in the training of local translators, food scientists, anthropologists, and linguists with specialized skills in:

Culinary translation and terminology development (to capture indigenous food metaphors and measurements in scientific or international formats);

Ethnolinguistic research methods, especially in documentation of oral knowledge systems; Nutrition analysis of indigenous dishes, in a way that respects cultural preparation methods and names.

Institutions could develop multidisciplinary certificate or diploma programs in "African Culinary Heritage and Documentation," housed in departments of languages and linguistics, food science, or African studies. These programs would create a new cadre of cultural mediators capable of translating food knowledge across languages, generations, and professional domains.

Moreover, cross-sector collaborations such as partnerships between linguists, translators and chefs, or food scientists and storytellers should be encouraged to foster holistic and culturally anchored preservation practices (Cwierka et al., 2019).



Synthesis of Recommendations

These recommendations call for a paradigm shift from documenting food as a technical exercise to curating food as a living language. By investing in community-led knowledge systems, integrating food heritage into education, and training a new generation of cultural translators, stakeholders can revitalize Africa's culinary wisdom in a way that honors both ancestry and innovation.

Such efforts will not only preserve recipes but restore relationships to the past, to the land, and to each other through the language of food.

Reflection on preserving heritage through language

Reaffirmation of the Cameroon–Nigeria comparative approach as relevant to broader African realities.

The section includes relevant academic-style citations (which can be formatted in the final reference list).

CONCLUSION

The preservation of African culinary heritage stands at a critical intersection of language, culture, identity, and knowledge systems. This study has demonstrated that food is not merely a biological necessity or an artistic expression; it is a linguistic vessel, a cultural archive, and a repository of ancestral wisdom. Across generations, traditional dishes such as Ndolé, Koki, Ofada rice, and Ekpang Nkukwo have been safeguarded not by written texts, but through oral traditions, communal memory, and the daily performance of cooking often in indigenous languages rich with metaphor, idiom, and sensory imagery.

In both Cameroon and Nigeria, the influence of colonial languages (French and English) has offered greater accessibility to wider audiences, formal documentation, and scientific analysis. However, this same influence poses the risk of linguistic flattening, whereby local expressions, techniques, and meanings are lost or reduced in translation (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986; Calvet, 1999). This tension between visibility and authenticity is a recurring theme in postcolonial contexts, where cultural preservation must be negotiated through multilingual and multi-layered strategies.

A central insight of this research is that language is not a neutral medium in the documentation of culinary heritage. It actively shapes what is remembered, how it is remembered, and who has the authority to transmit that memory. When food is documented exclusively in French or English, without consideration for indigenous expressions and knowledge systems, it becomes detached from the very communities it seeks to represent.

The solution, therefore, lies not in abandoning colonial languages, but in reclaiming indigenous languages as primary agents of preservation and meaning-making. As both a philosophical and practical exercise, this demands community involvement, linguistic inclusivity, and interdisciplinary collaboration between linguists, food scientists, educators, and local cooks.



Reaffirming Cameroon–Nigeria as Reflective of Broader African Realities

By focusing on Cameroon and Nigeria, this study has examined two of Africa's most linguistically diverse and culturally rich nations. Their colonial histories differ, Cameroon being predominantly Francophone and Nigeria largely Anglophone yet both embody the struggles and opportunities of culinary heritage preservation in postcolonial Africa.

The comparative insights gained here are not isolated to these two countries. Instead, they reflect broader continental dynamics: the marginalization of indigenous knowledge in favor of Western paradigms, the decline of oral traditions amidst urbanization, and the need for educational systems to reconnect with cultural roots.

Furthermore, both nations demonstrate that resilience lies in the grassroots. Despite official neglect, local communities continue to nurture and pass down food knowledge often in kitchens, markets, and festivals preserving not only recipes, but rituals, relationships, and worldviews. These insights are applicable across Africa, from the Berber-speaking regions of North Africa to the Swahili coast, where language and food intersect in similarly complex ways.

Final Thought

Preserving culinary heritage through language is not just an academic endeavour it is a moral, cultural, and intergenerational responsibility. As this study affirms, African food is not only to be consumed; it is to be spoken, sung, remembered, and honoured in the tongues that gave it life.

In embracing multilingual documentation, Africa takes a decisive step toward safeguarding its culinary identity not as static nostalgia, but as a living, evolving legacy rooted in language, community, and the soul of the continent.

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APPENDICES

The following appendices provide supporting field data, primary sources, and supplementary materials referenced in the research. They are essential for transparency, replication, and extended cultural insight.

Appendix A

Sample Recipes in Original Indigenous Language and Translations

A1. Recipe for Ekpang Nkukwo

Original transcription in Ibibio, with interlinear English and French translation.

Includes indigenous terms for ingredients and traditional preparation verbs.

A2. Recipe for Ndole

Original recipe in Douala, annotated for contextual idioms and measurements. Includes explanation of spiritual and ceremonial significance in preparation.

A3. Recipe for Ofada Rice Sauce (Ayamase)

Transcription of oral instructions in Yoruba, translated into English and French. Highlights sensory metaphors and locally unique ingredients.

A4. Recipe for Koki

Documented from the Beti-speaking community.

Includes cultural contexts (e.g., marriage rituals, community feasts).

Appendix B

Transcriptions of Field Interviews

B1. Interview with Efik-Ibibio elder cook (Calabar, Nigeria)

> Thematic focus: spiritual symbolism of wrapping food, challenges in teaching young people.

Conducted in Ibibio, with English/French translation.

B2. Interview with Beti woman in Yaoundé

> Thematic focus: generational shifts in recipe memory and food-related proverbs. Conducted in French and indigenous Beti phrases.

B3. Interview with Yoruba food vendor in Lagos

> On the commercialization of Ofada rice and recipe adaptation for urban settings. Interview in Yoruba-English code-switching.

B4. Interview with Duala-speaking community cook in Douala



> Discusses cooking Ndolé for family rituals and market preparation.

Appendix C

Sample Documentation Tables

Dish Name	Indigenous Language	Literal Translation	Colonial Language (FR/EN)	Key Ingredients	Cultural Significance
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Ekpang Nkukwo Ibibio Cocoyam-in-leaf Cocoyam pottage Cocoyam, leaves “Enfolding a blessing” Fertility, family meals

Ndolé Duala Bitterleaf stew Groundnut-leaf stew Bitterleaf, peanuts “Let the fire speak” Ancestor veneration

Ofada Rice Sauce Yoruba “Hot pepper blend” Designer stew (Ayamase) Locally fermented pepper “Awọ eye” (color like bird’s skin) Celebration, resilience

Koki Beti-Fang Bean pudding Steamed bean cake Beans, palm oil “Let it rest in silence” Women’s ritual food.