

Understanding aspects of *Yoruba* gastronomic culture

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The gastronomic behaviour of the *Yoruba* people of Southwestern Nigeria is very complex in character. It evolved as a result of the tangled web of several relationships involving such phenomena as the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and Colonisation. The research findings show in a very refreshing manner the considerable antiquity of globalisation in Yorubaland. Thus for example, the *Yoruba* who were carted away as slaves from about the 15th century AD did transform the socio-cultural landscape of Brazil and Cuba among other parts of the New World. Crops like water yam (*Dioscorea alata* Linn.), cocoyam (*Colocasia esculenta* (Linn.) Schott), asian rice (*Oryza sativa* Linn.), maize (*Zea mays* Linn.) and cassava (*Manihot esculenta* Crantz) are of foreign origins (South-east Asia and the New World), but they have become a significant component of the *Yoruba* gastronomic delight. The people's abilities to successfully adapt these foreign crops to the Nigerian environment, where such indigenous food plants as oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis* Jacq.) and white yam (*Dioscorea rotundata* Poir.) exist, are a testimony to the often neglected oneness of humanity even in the face of cultural diversity.

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The *Yoruba* are mainly located in the Southwestern region of Nigeria. There are also some *Yoruba* people in the modern Republics of Benin and Togo, where they have the national identities of these geo-polities as a result of the partition of Africa in the later part of the 19th Century (Fig. 1). The population of the *Yoruba* in Nigeria is well above 10 million with over 20 sub-groups such as the *Ekiti*, *Oyo*, *Egba*, *Ijesa*, *Ikale*, *Ondo* and *Ijebu*^{1,2}. The southern section of Yorubaland is bounded by the Atlantic Ocean. This serves as the gateway to the hinterland. This singular geographical factor plays a significant role in the shaping of the history and destinies of the people (the *Yoruba*). It is also intertwined with modern *Yoruba* culture particularly gastronomy. Fieldwork has shown that no proper analysis and interpretation of the kinds of food, cooking techniques and consumption patterns among the people can be done without examining the phenomena of history and geography.

Yoruba gastronomic traditions are firmly embedded in the tangled web of relationships involving several parts of the global village, from the pre-colonial past to the ethnographic present. The evolutions of the diverse *Yoruba* culinary traditions are a reflection of the considerable antiquity of the phenomenon of flows and interconnections (globalisation). This also

reveals the unworkability of using an isolationist approach for analysing and interpreting the cultures of peoples. Yorubaland same as other parts of Nigeria was never totally cut off from the crosscurrents of global history in antiquity. As a matter of fact, all humanity is to a large degree, one. Traces of this oneness can be successfully established in the face of the application of relevant theoretical constructs and approaches³. During the pre-colonial period, evidence of inter-group as well as intercontinental relationships was discovered. For example, certain Southeast Asian crops got to Nigeria particularly Yorubaland probably from across the Indian Ocean to Malagasy and from there to the East-African coasts around the 5th Century AD. Some Indonesians were central to this spread of the Asian crops to East-Africa. It was from the East-African coast that these crops got to West Africa and Nigeria in particular. As this diffusion was taking place, so also was the hybridisation process going on, thus making the classification of certain crops like bananas very difficult to do successfully. The exact details of these movements of crops as well as peoples are still largely buried in obscurity given the present state of archaeological, botanical and linguistic knowledge. However, crops like water yam (*Dioscorea alata* Linn.), cocoyam (*Colocasia*

esculenta (Linn.) Scott), banana (*Musa balbisiana* Colla) and Asian rice (*Oryza sativa* Linn.) were undoubtedly of Southeast Asian origins.

Other important crops that were not of African origins, but have however become central to the Yoruba culinary behaviour include maize and cassava (*Manihot esculenta* Crantz). These two crops came from South America after 1500 AD. The Portuguese explorers and traders brought the crops to the West-African sub-region especially the coastal part of Nigeria from where the knowledge spread to the hinterland. However, some of the indigenous crops are African rice (*Oryza glaberrima* Steuds.), bulrush millet (*Pennisetum americanum* K. Schum.), white yam (*D. rotundata* Poir.), yellow yam (*D. cayenensis* Lam.), oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis* Jacq.) and okra (*Hibiscus esculentus*). The experience of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, though a painful one in several respects, was not without its positive side. Aspects of Yoruba culture including culinary behaviour gain some global attention and relevance. By 1852, the first set of Yoruba returnees (ex-slaves and/or descendants of former slaves) arrived in Lagos mainly from Brazil⁴. This was as a result of the abolition of slave trade by the British parliament in 1807. Apart from positively changing and adding to the colourfulness and richness of the New World religious landscape, with the evolution of Santeria (rooted in the Yoruba system of Ifa divination), parts of the Brazilian and Cuban cuisine were brought to Nigeria. Santeria is a syncretism of Yoruba religion and Catholic faith.

Methodology

Library research was one of the methods used, which was with regard to the issue of origins and diffusion of crops to Nigeria. Locations for investigations were randomly chosen to reflect, as much as possible, some of the major sub-groups of the Yoruba. These sub-groups include the *Ekiti*, *Ijesa*, *Oyo* and *Egba*. Ethnographic and oral historical surveys with emphasis on a participant-observation approach were conducted. Both rural and urban dwellers were interviewed about the local culinary delights and the factors responsible for this attitude. Such categories of people were students, mechanics, traders, food vendors, government workers, farmers and devotees of local deities like *Ogun* (god of warfare and metals) and *Yemoja* (goddess of the sea and maternity) were interviewed. Several local restaurants were visited during the research.

Photography was adopted also as a research method in this regard.

Results and discussion

Yam is the most popular staple of the Yoruba, particularly the *Ekiti* and *Ijesa* sub-groups. Yams are of different varieties, although the indigenous one known as white yam is the most prominent or most popular (Fig. 2). New yams are harvested between late June and October. The arrival of new yams every year is celebrated in most parts of Yorubaland as yam festival involving singing, dancing, eating, drinking and making sacrifices to the spirit of yams. In most Yoruba communities, nobody is expected to start eating new yams until the yam festival has been celebrated. White yam locally called *akosu* can be prepared into different kinds of meal. The most popular is *iyam* (pounded yam). This is a form of paste. The first step is to peel one or two yam tubers depending on the number of people to eat the food and their sizes. After peeling, yam is cut into pieces and then cooked. When it is well cooked, the pieces are put one by one inside a mortar and pounded. Occasionally, more than one person can do the pounding. Water is added at intervals until a consistent paste is prepared. This is normally eaten with stew or soup. It is the best delicacy among the Yoruba. Ingredients like *iru* (African locust bean, *Parkia biglobosa* (Jacq.) Benth.) and *epo pupa* (palm oil) obtained from palm fruits are used in cooking most Yoruba soup. One of the culinary delights of the Yoruba is pounded yam with melon seed soup, which Yoruba refer to it as the king of foods. Most rural Yoruba people still prefer to cook their soup in clay vessels designed for that purpose. They argue that soup inside such clay pots does not get cold or spoilt quickly.

Yams can be boiled and eaten straight away with or without palm oil. At times, Yoruba roast yam tubers as a kind of fast food. A porridge (*asaro*) is prepared by cutting into small pieces one or two yam tubers and then cooked with such ingredients as crayfish, pepper (chilli), onions, tomatoes, fish and salt. The porridge, which is a delicacy, is left in the fire for about 5 min after putting all the above materials. *Dundu* (fried yam pieces) is prepared in a frying pan. This takes about 10 min for it to be ready. Some parents give such fried yam pieces to their school going children. It is a popular snack among school children and even some adults do like it. Yam tubers sliced into pieces are dried in the sun for about 4-5

days depending on weather conditions. After drying, the pieces are taken to a mill for grinding into flour locally called *elubo isu* (Fig. 3). In rural Yorubaland some dried pieces of yam are pounded in a mortar with the aid of a pestle. After this pounding, sieving follows. Some quantities of this yam flour are put inside a pot of boiling water and stirred for almost 5 min in order to get a consistent paste called *amala isu* (Fig. 4). This paste is also eaten with a sauce. *Amala isu* is another popular cuisine among the *Yoruba* especially the *Oyo* sub-group (Figs 5 & 6). Water yam (*isu ewura*) cannot be prepared or pounded into a paste like white yam. But despite this, water yam is popular among the *Ijebu* sub-group. It is used for preparing a special delicacy (porridge) called *ikokore*. The peeled water yam is cut into small pieces and then grated. These pieces are then cooked with fish, onions (Fig.12), pepper (Fig. 11), crayfish, meat and tomatoes among other ingredients. Cocoyam can be boiled and eaten with or without palm oil or stew. It can also be prepared into porridge, although this is not a popular food except among members of the lower class of the *Yoruba* society. Cocoyam is lowly rated! Occasionally, cocoyams are sliced and dried in the sun. Some quantities are later crushed, wrapped in leaves followed by steaming for about 5-6 min. It is usually eaten with a stew. In addition, cocoyam can be pounded into a paste, although this still remains a food for the poor. Cocoyam is too tough to reach a level of consistency comparable to that of white yam, no matter the amount of efforts that goes into it in terms of pounding.

Plantains when ripe can be eaten in their raw form. They are a source of energy among other things. At times, plantains are sliced and dried (Fig. 10). Drying takes between 3 and 4 days. The sliced plantains are arranged on a drying rack in order to prevent the menace of domestic animals especially goats and sheep. The dried plantain chips are pounded in a mortar with the aid of one or two pestles. The flour is then prepared into a paste called *amala agbagba*. In this regard, some quantities of flour are put inside a pot of boiling water. The flour is gradually stirred inside the pot until the paste is consistent without any lumps. This is also a special delicacy in Yorubaland, although most urban dwellers cannot afford it because plantain is much more expensive than either the yam or cassava (flour). In fact, the plantain flour meal (*amala agbagba*) is now an elitist food. Plantains are occasionally used in preparing a local alcoholic drink called *agadagidi*⁵. This is a kind of elitist drink in

Yorubaland. Both Asian rice (*Oryza sativa*) and African type (*Oryza glaberrima*) are usually eaten in most parts of Yorubaland during Christmas times and at weddings. *Yoruba* usually cook rice with grains loose and not soggy. Sometimes, rice is cooked with beans and eaten with stew. Apart from this, *Yoruba* occasionally grind rice at a mill or with the aid of a mortar and pestle in order to get flour. Hausa/Fulani of northern Nigeria brought the idea of preparing rice into this kind of food into Yorubaland. But it is yet to gain widespread acceptance.

Beans can be prepared into several food types. Beans are commonly cooked with or without maize and then stirred together in a pot. Ingredients such as palm oil, onions, salt, pepper and tomatoes are needed. At times, the skin of the beans is removed after soaking in water for about ten minutes. Beans are then ground in a mill with the aid of a grinding stone. Ingredients like onions, pepper and salt are added and mixed together in a mortar or calabash. A frying pan with some palm oil or vegetable oil is put on the fire and the prepared beans substance is put inside the frying pan bit by bit. After about 2 min, the pieces are turned over with a spatula or a large spoon. Frying a set of bean loaves does not take more than 5 min so that the nutrients are not burnt off. These loaves are locally called *akara* (Fig. 14). *Akara* is one of the special delicacies of the *Yoruba* people regardless of status. *Yoruba* slaves in Brazil and other parts of the New World continued with this culinary delight despite the hardships they were going through at that time. Today, in Brazil, *akara* (or *akaraje*) continues to feature as a great delicacy. Occasionally, ground beans can be prepared into another food type called *ekuru*, which is simpler than that of *akara*. Salt is added to the ground beans, wrapped in leaves and the wrapped ground beans are then arranged carefully in a pot put on the fire to steam. This is removed from the pot after about 5 min. The leaves are also removed and the solid bean is mixed with palm oil or a stew inside a plate or calabash. *Ekuru* is a favourite food delight of the ancestors. It is generally popular for celebrating festivals like *Osun* among the *Yoruba*. *Osun* is a popular goddess of river waters, love and marriage. Apart from *Osun*, *ekuru* is part of the sacrifice for *Yemoja*— goddess of the sea and maternity⁶.

Maize grains are occasionally (thoroughly) cooked and mashed with groundnut oil. This kind of food is called *egbo*. A separate stew may be prepared to go with it. *Egbo* is for everyday consumption and also

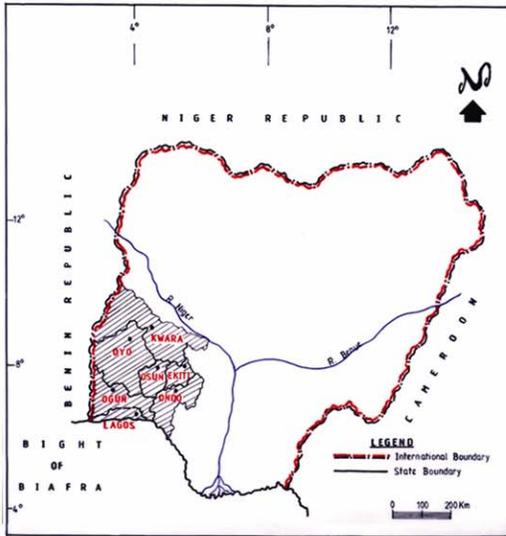


Fig. 1 Map of Nigeria showing Yorubaland

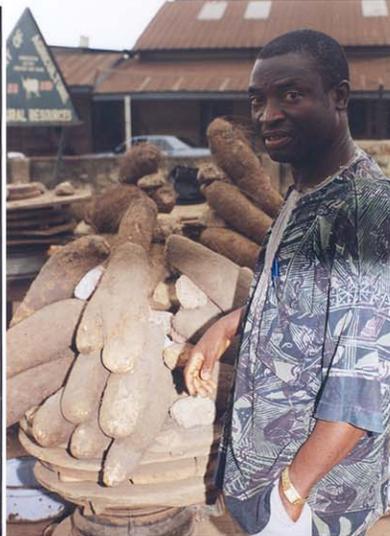


Fig.2 Yam tubers (*D. rotundata*)

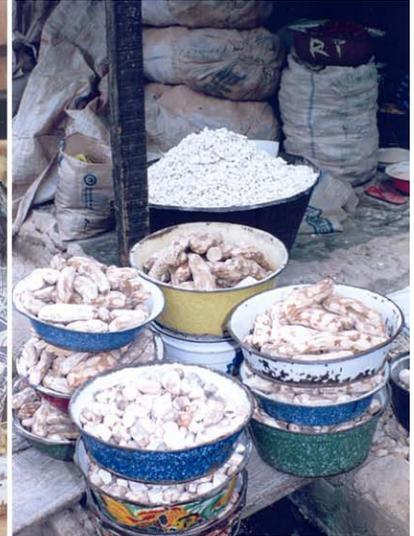


Fig.3 Dried tubers ready for milling



Fig. 4 Flour preparation into paste

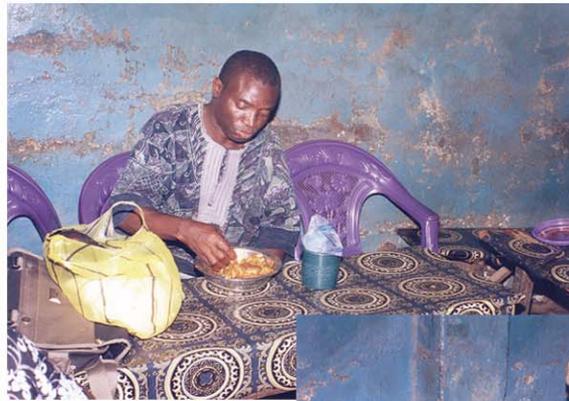


Fig.5 Aamla being eaten with soup

Fig.6 Sauce that goes with Aamla



Fig.8 A paste being prepared from Cassava flour



Fig.7 Dried Cassava ready for milling



Fig.9 Cassava flour for sale



Fig. 11 Pepper for sale

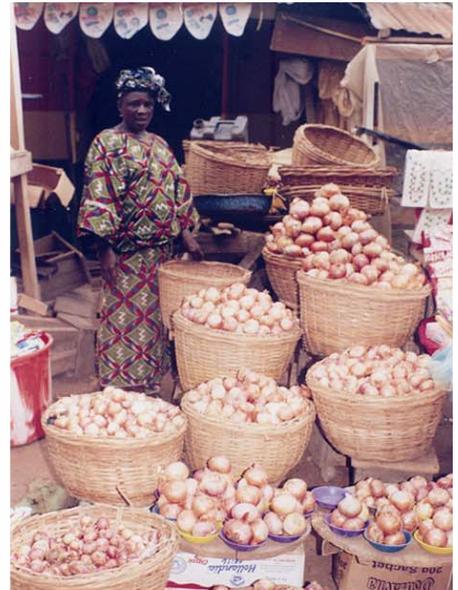


Fig.12 Onions - An ingredient for soup



Fig.10 Dried plantain chips ready for milling



Fig.14 Bean cake (Akara) being prepared

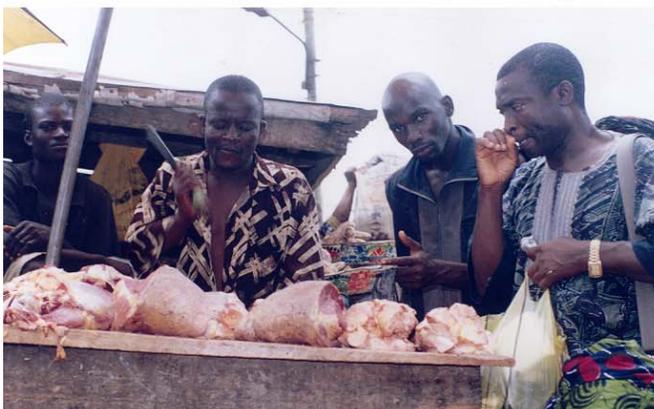


Fig.13 Cow meat A delicacy among the Yoruba

for sacrificial purposes. As a matter of fact, *egbo* is used as sacrificial food item for deities like *Yemoja* and *Osoosi* (god of hunting). This type of food is basically for members of the lower class of the *Yoruba* society. Maize is used for preparing a local alcoholic drink known as *pito* or *sekete*. This process involves fermenting, whereby the action of yeast or bacteria changes sugar into alcohol. Maize grains can also be soaked in water for 4-5 days after which they are ground. This is followed by sieving to remove the chaff. The product is allowed to settle and the sediment is used to prepare pap. Pap (*ogi*) is a popular meal for breakfast. It is prepared with hot water. *Ogi* is a soft and almost liquid food. Some sugar is added and can be taken with or without *akara* (loaves from beans) discussed above. Newly born babies (from about one or two weeks old) are usually given *ogi* (pap) in addition to breast-feeding. Maize can be roasted and eaten with or without boiled or roasted groundnuts. Many *Yoruba* women sell roasted maize at the roadsides between May and August.

Apart from yams, cassava is the most popular food crop in the study area, despite the foreignness of its origins (Fig. 7-9). Cassava came from South America and contains a high toxic content. The techniques of converting it into edible food items are necessarily rigorous. It is reported that cassava contains about 10-500 mg of hydrocyanic acid (HCN) per kg of tuber depending on the variety. Thus for example, sweet cassava types are low in HCN with most of the HCN occurring in the peels. On the other hand, the bitter varieties are high in HCN that tends to be evenly distributed throughout the tubers. It is most probable that the earliest or initial attempts by the *Yoruba* to consume cassava products must have been tragic⁷. Cassava tubers can be prepared into three major food items; *Gari* (coarse-grained flour), *Elubo lafun* (fine-grained flour), and *Fufu* (cassava sediment), *Gari* is the most popular and it occupies a significant position in the dietary habit of *Yoruba*. *Gari* is prepared by peeling, washing, grating, fermenting, pressing, sieving and frying. Portuguese having mastered the art and science of cassava processing from the American Indians started teaching *Yoruba* on reaching the coastal parts of West Africa after 1500 AD. By as early as 1700 AD, almost every *Yoruba* community learnt to prepare *gari* flour and turn it into a meal (locally called *eba*). *Yoruba* returnees from Brazil and Cuba as well as other parts of the New World played a key role in training the local *Yoruba* the art and science of *gari* production after 1852 AD. These ex-slaves otherwise known as Afro-Brazilians

or *Aguda* were already very used to *gari* as a food item during their period of servitude abroad.

Gari production is a very difficult exercise. Water containing hydrocyanic acid is removed from the grated cassava tubers. This takes 2-3 days to actualise. The spongy mass of cassava is then broken up and sieved with the aid of a wire or fibre net attached to a ring or square-like frame. In this way, the lumps are retained while the fine substance goes to the bottom of a receiver. Frying in a large clay bowl called, *ape gari* or a cast iron pan follows this. The end product of this long exercise is *gari* (a kind of flour). Some quantities of *gari* are put in the hot water in a pot and then stirred with a small pestle or a big spoon to avoid lumps. *Yoruba* people call this *eba* – a bulky paste that is eaten with a tasty sauce. Occasionally, *gari* is eaten with mashed beans. In addition, it can be soaked in water and taken directly with or without sugar. Another type of cassava flour that is very popular especially among the *Egba*, a sub-group of *Yoruba* is called *lafun*. This is a simpler process than that of *gari*. Cassava tubers are peeled and cut into pieces. They are then put in a big clay vessel and a lot of water is added. This cassava is left for about seven or eight days when the pieces to become soft. By soaking hydrocyanic acid is removed from the cassava, thereby making it safe for eating later as a paste. After soaking, cassava is sun dried for about three or four days. Dried cassava is then pounded in a mortar into flour (very fine-grained, unlike the *gari* flour).

The only difference (in terms of preparation into a meal) between this type of cassava flour and *gari* is that *lafun* stays longer on the fire before becoming eatable. It is taken with sauce. At times, sauce is poured on the *lafun* paste inside a plate. Most *Yoruba* people regardless of their educational or social status enjoy eating *lafun* in this way. Cassava tubers are peeled, cut into pieces and soaked in water (just like the process of getting *lafun*) for 3-4 days. Soft cassava is then mashed and lumps or fibres are removed which is immediately followed by sieving the semi-liquid cassava in order to ensure that further lumps are removed. After this, the substance or sediment is put in a sack and the mouth tied, which is then weighted down with one or two heavy stones in order to remove moisture. This may not take more than two hours to be ready, depending on the weight of the stones. The spongy substance resulting from this process is put inside a large container from where some quantities are taken to prepare the bulky and fine-grained paste called *fufu*. The process of preparation into *fufu* on the fire is similar to that of

lafun discussed above. It goes with a tasty sauce. Indeed, all pastes (energy-giving foods) in Yorubaland go with sauces that give such nutrients as protein and vitamins.

Oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*) is an indigenous Nigerian crop same as several other parts of West Africa. Palm oil is obtained from palm fruits removed from bunches and then boiled in a large clay pot or metal vessel. After boiling, the fruits are put in a large trench specially constructed for treading upon the palm fruits. The diameters of such trenches vary from about 1.5-2.0 m, while the depths range between 80-100 cm. Water is added to fruits that have been trodden upon and extraction of oil begins through flotation. Kernels and chaff are also gradually removed. Kernels are dried and later cracked with hammer stones in order to get the nuts. These nuts are used for producing local body cream called *adi eyan*. Nuts can also be eaten with or without *gari* flour. The cracked kernels and chaff are popular fuel types both for domestic and industrial fires. For example, blacksmiths use cracked kernels for getting the needed temperatures in their furnaces usually with the aid of either foot- or hand-operated bellows. Suffice it to say that almost every type of cooking in Yorubaland involves the use of palm oil – a veritable source of protein. Palm wine (*emu ope*) tapped from the palm tree is an important alcoholic beverage in the study area. Palm wine is one of the things a bridegroom gives to his in-laws during wedding engagement. Apart from this, palm wine is used for religious purposes. For example, it is freely served to the devotees of *Ogun* (the god of warfare and metals) during the annual festival of the deity in all parts of Yorubaland. Foods such as roasted yam tubers and roasted corn are equally taken with meat (Fig. 13)⁸. This underscores the reason why classification of foods into different groups like luxury foods, elitists foods, lower class foods and food items for the gods and goddesses is very difficult to do in a neat way among the *Yoruba* of South-western Nigeria. What appears to be an elitist food in a particular community may be a common food in another locality.

Conclusion

Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria are one of the most influential peoples of West Africa. This ethnic group transformed to a great degree, the socio-cultural landscape of the New World especially Brazil, Cuba and to a lesser extent, Puerto-Rico. This experience is rooted in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade of the 15th Century that practically ended in the 19th Century AD. But before this experience and the traumatic

phenomenon of colonization, the region (Yorubaland) and other parts of Nigeria were never cut off from the cross currents of global history. Crops such as cocoyam, plantain and water yam diffused to Nigeria from South East Asia via the Indian Ocean and eastern Africa in pre-colonial times. These crops are today, a part of the foundations of culinary delights among *Yoruba*. Similarly, maize and cassava came later (after the 15th Century AD) from the New World. Some Portuguese traders and travellers were basically responsible for this diffusion. Today, *gari* (food item prepared from cassava) is second only to pounded yam in importance and popularity among the people—both in rural and urban settlements. All these experiences are a reflection of the oneness of humanity despite the obvious issue of cultural diversity of the global village. Therefore, *Yoruba* gastronomic culture, if properly studied has the capacity to engender national and trans-national/continental peace and harmony in our present-day world entangled in conflicts and mistrusts largely rooted in ignorance about those common features that bind all humanity together.

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