

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Food (In)Security: The ‘Ragging War’ of Jollof Rice in West Africa

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#### Abstract

This chapter uses the popular parlance “jollof wars to describe how West African countries fight for supremacy in the jollof battle. The chapter argues that Jollof rice is not just food; it is also ‘a war,’ and a raging war to be precise, among West African neighbours. It carries a similar food sentiment among West Africans in the same way paella is to Spanish, risotto to Italians, biryani to South Asian diaspora and fried rice to East Asian and South Asian. The chapter argues that no African dish has created rivalries, friendships, and “enmity” among West Africans — particularly, Nigerians and Ghanaians and occasionally, Senegal, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cameroon — than jollof rice. The food critic Eden Hagos describes the conflict over jollof rice as “one of the most interesting and heated food debates amongst the diasporas.” The chapter draws on online publications and other literature sources to push the discussion of jollof rice beyond canonization of food to raise critical awareness of food's significance as a marker of cultural identity, especially its epistemic power to bring people together to nurture communal relations. The arguments presented in the chapter provide a valuable model for understanding the importance of food as a progressive genre in understanding Black identity politics. The chapter asserts that through food, one can claim a sense of subjectivity and agency and prescribe meanings to others based on their dietary habits. Suggesting that our mouths, tongues, and stomachs are targets of teaching and learning about ourselves and others. Thus, the war over jollof rice is also a war linked to the heritagization of food and the building of national identity and a sense of belonging. Thus, a plate of jollof signifies something more profound than satisfying one's hunger or cravings. It is a mode of communication to invoke deep attachment, sentiments, and memories of people and places they call home.

**Keyword:** Jollof rice, Ghana, Nigeria, colonization, Jollof war, colour rice

#### Introduction

In June 2014, British celebrity Chef Jamie Oliver published his version of the West African jollof rice recipe on his website. The recipe stayed unnoticed for months until a West African posted a comment in late October 2014. Within 24 hours of the first posting, the recipe attracted over 4500 comments, mainly from West Africans who were enraged by Jamie Oliver's changes to

the jollof rice recipe. However, it is not the volume but the content of comments that are interesting to read. For example, reacting to Jamie Oliver's recipe, an individual calling themselves *Jollof Warrior* writes:

"Eh, this man has no fear oh. 'Charlie' [a colloquial term for a "friend"], let me tell you this: you can take slaves away from the coast, colonize us, give us aid and take our oil and mineral, refuse us a visa, look down on us but if touch our jollof rice, *walaiyi* [I swear by Allah], there would be war, brimstone, fire and pestilence deadlier than Ebola! So Jamie, next time think hard before you touch a West African's food!

Sugzshay also writes, "No no no this is joll-NOT rice. For shame. My ancestors did not die for this nonsense. First Marco Pierre white with his nonsense 'rice and peas' now this? What next, pounded yam made with SMASH."

Another person named Steve Biko also writes,

"I'm Namibian, and even I can see that this sorry excuse for a dish doesn't even LOOK like Jollof Rice! How dare you sully the name of this very TASTY dish that my African brethren have perfected over the years? Total shame. Look at the chicken bone, there isn't even any meat on it! This is heresy! My ancestors didn't die for this!

Another blogger writes:

"It was deep, guys. We almost called in Iyanla Vanzant to bully-yell everybody into tranquility. There was basically a Twitter village square meeting, and the Nigerians and Ghanaians were not having it. And for good reason. How can you gentrify Jollof rice to the extent that it starts looking like paella? Sacrilege! We can share our children (Hi Brangelina, Madonna, or whichever latest Hollywood star just ordered their very own collectible in the form of an African child), our animals (for your life-changing, perspective-moulding Safaris), and our head-ties that you re-fashion into "urban head wraps," but we will not share our Jollof rice \*bangs gavel\*" (Rant-y African't, 2014)

So, what is jollof rice that West Africans are willing to forgive the crimes of enslavement, colonization, and other historical and ongoing violence against Africa but will not tolerate any (mis)appropriation of a dish?

Jollof rice is a fragrant, unique-taste, and subtlety spicy rice dish that is heavily patronized among Senegalese, Ghanaians, Nigerians, Gambians, Sierra Leonians, Liberians, and Cameroonians. It is usually cooked in a flavourful sauce of tomato paste, onion, ginger, thyme, chili pepper, cooking oil, spices, and vegetables and meat, fish or seafood (depending on preference), and the cooked jollof rice either an orangish or a reddish colour. Jollof originated from Wolof's traditional one-pot rice dish *ceebu jën* (rice and fish) or "*thieboudienne*" (rice, fish, and vegetables cooked together) among French Senegalese. As the dish travels throughout West Africa, the name jollof was coined, possibly after the Great Jolof state of the Wolof empire that ruled parts of Senegal, Mali, Gambia and Mauritania from 12 century to 1549. Senegal still treats *ceebu jën* as its national dish, and in 2021, UNESCO included Senegal *ceebu jën* on the Intangible Heritage of Humanity list.

Jollof rice is indeed personal and something sensitive among West Africans. It carries a similar food sentiment among West Africans in the same way paella is to Spanish, risotto to Italians, biryani to South Asian diaspora and fried rice to East Asian and South Asian (Sloley,

2021). If there is a public function where food is to be served, Nigerians and Ghanaians expect jollof rice to be included. A blogger, Rant-y African't (2014), captures the jollof sentiment among Nigerians this way: "In Nigeria, jollof rice is sacred. It is not just the holy grail but also the way, the truth, and the life. Jollof rice is who we are; it is woven into our social tapestry; if a Nigerian invites you to a social gathering and does not serve jollof rice, he/she hates you" (para.4). In Ghana, one can tell each food and the ethnic group that created it. However, Jollof rice is one of the few dishes that defied the odds because it has a national character and is popularly patronized by almost every Ghanaian of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. So, when an international chef, Olivier, takes a strong culturally bonding dish (jollof rice) and makes it unrecognizable while still naming it jollof rice, one should expect rage to greet his actions. The pushback is not without cause. If Olivier's version of jollof rice is allowed to stay without question, in a few years, Olivier's version will become the "official jollof rice" at the international level because it came from a white chef. For a continent that has lost much of its human capital, natural resources, historical landmarks, cultural artifacts, and others through European invasions and thefts, jollof rice is, perhaps, where the continent draws the line. In this essay, I draw on online publications and other literature sources to push the discourse beyond the canonization of jollof rice and raise critical awareness of food's significance as a marker of cultural identity, especially its epistemic power to bring people together to nurture communal relations.

### **The diss track: The beefing war on Jollof rice**

*The Wall Street Journal* tweeted on August 21, 2017, that if one "want to start an argument in [West] Africa? Offer your views on jollof rice." The tweet was in reaction to Mark Zuckerberg's comments about jollof rice when he visited Nigeria in 2017: "Yesterday, I had jollof rice and shrimp. It was delicious, fantastic. I was told not to compare Nigeria's jollof rice to that from other neighbouring countries."

Jollof rice is not just food; it is also 'a war,' and a ragging war to be precise, among West African neighbours. The food critic Eden Hagos describes the conflict over jollof rice as "one of the most interesting and heated food debates amongst the diasporas. I'd even say it's the most epic food beefs of all time. I'm talking Drake vs Meek Mill-Epic" (Hagos, 2016, para 1). Moreover, Eden Hagos is not exaggerating. A case in point, in April 2017, the Nigerian Minister of Information Lai Mohammed granted an interview to a journalist in which he was asked which country makes the best jollof rice. The Minister misheard the question to mean which country first created jollof rice, so he replied, Senegal. Despite a follow-up clarification by the journalist that the Minister misunderstood the question, not even the efforts of the Vice President of Nigeria to explain the Minister's response were enough to assuage enraged Nigerians who insisted the Minister had committed a treasonable offence and should be fired in his role (Subedar & Ahmed, 2017).

No African dish creates rivalries, friendships, and "enmity" among West Africans — particularly, Nigerians and Ghanaians and occasionally, Senegal, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cameroon — than jollof rice. The Nigerian food writer Jiji Majiri Ugboma believes that "the Jollof feud between Ghana and Nigeria is arguably the most heated food debate amongst any diaspora" (Sloley, 2021 para.8).

In July 2016, the Ghanaian singer Deborah Owusu-Bonsu released a song feeding into the Jollof feud between Ghana and Nigeria. The song titled *Ghana Jollof* took a dig at Nigeria's version of jollof rice, describing it as "snow white," about the acute tomato shortage in Nigeria in 2016 (see Prisco, 2016), and as "Dencia white," alluding to the Cameroonian Nigerian singer

Dencia (Reprudencia Sonkey), who owns a line of skin-whitening products. These are the lyrics of the song:

Ghana Jollof 2x  
Yummy!)3x  
Nigerian jollof dier e taste funny  
sister durrbee but 2day call me chef  
wen i cook dis jollof 4 u der will b nottin left  
finger licking licking  
With Chicken chicken  
Bones cracking cracking  
Lips smacking  
lockin ma door  
u will com knocking for more  
addicted to my emo korkor until u get poor  
I hesspered it  
u didnt  
Gh jollof on fleek  
Yors isnt  
(Ghana Jollof 2x  
Yummy!)3x  
Nigerian jollof dier e taste funny  
my jollof brings all the boys to the yard  
Nigerian boys are always glad  
dier jollof is extremely white  
Snow white  
Dencia white  
wen eating jollof dnt use spoon  
use yor hands to consume  
If u like u can use fork  
Jollof ready pop champagne cork  
(Ghana Jollof 2x  
Yummy!)3x  
Nigerian jollof dier e taste funny  
moral of the story learn how to cook  
cant see the truth? learn how to look  
i have d secret recipe no maggi cube  
wen yor naija boy chases me dont blame juju  
close your eyes & open yor mouth  
Now close yor mouth & open yor eyes  
Surprise  
I have put a meat inside  
now chew it n chew it n chew it  
Satisfied?!  
(Ghana Jollof 2x  
Yummy!)3x  
Nigerian jollof dier e taste funny

Deborah Owusu-Bonsu included a video where she appeared to be cooking what she described as the “proper” jollof rice while parading extras dressed as Nigerians, cooking a seemingly substandard jollof rice.

Reacting to Debora’s song, the Nigerian Chef Imoteda told BBC News, “Nigerians make the best jollof rice. I’ve been to Ghana; I’m not sure why Ghana keeps trying to start this war — they have lots of amazing food there, I love them, but jollof rice is not one of their strengths” (Subedar and Ahmed, 2017, para.21). The recently dethroned Nigerian Guinness World Record holder for the longest cooking marathon Chef Hilda Baci critiques Ghana’s jollof rice as having no flavour. Of course, Ghanaians were offended by her words and ripped her apart for her demeaning comments about Ghanaian jollof rice.

Foreign Diplomats have also been drawn into the Jollof feud. On August 22, 2018, during the celebration of World Jollof Rice Day, the British High Commissioners to Ghana, Nigeria, and Gambia were caught in a tweet war over which West African neighbours make the best jollof rice. The feud started when the British High Commissioner to Ghana, Iain Walker, wrote:

“When it comes to tea, the Brits surely do it best. When it comes to jollof, it can only be Ghana. On [#WorldJollofRiceDay](#), only the best will do. I am sure you will agree, [@PaulTArkwright](#)?”

The British High Commissioner to Nigeria, Paul TA Arkwright, replied, countering Iain’s claim:

“[@walkeraiain](#) perhaps you got your briefing wrong. [#NigeriaJollof](#) is the gold standard, acknowledged globally. A fact [@UKinNigeria](#) colleagues attest to on [#WorldJollofRiceDay](#) Apart from enjoying a super tasty plate of jollof rice on [#WorldJollofRiceDay](#), had to take time out to educate [@walkeraiain](#) & [@UKinGhana](#) that [#Nigeriajollof](#) is indeed king. [@Omojuwa](#) [@Realomosexy](#) [@bellanaija](#)”

The British High Commissioner to Gambia could not let things go without taking a jab at the two colleagues:

“Utmost respect for my esteemed colleagues in [@UKinGhana](#) [@walkeraiain](#) & [@UKinNigeria](#) [@PaulTArkwright](#) & huge credit to both for celebrating [#WorldJollofRiceDay](#) in the best possible way but surely top prize should go to [#Gambia](#) ?? jollof rice aka benachin??? <https://t.co/yzJl9f1mx8>  
— Sharon Wardle (@SharonWardleFCO) [August 22, 2018](#)

Predictably, Ghanaians and Nigerians joined the fray with tweets endorsing what their respective High Commissioners said about jollof rice. A Nigerian byname Ojooba Busolami wrote: “I m currently in Ghana, guess what? Nigeria has the best Jollof rice in the world, its not even up for argument. Because someone put flag on a plate of jollof rice, you think its the best? No!!! My jollof remain undefeated” ([@ojoobabusolami](#)). To which a Ghanaian byname Nana Pare responded, “Our Nigerian siblings know Ghana jollof rules, it’s just mouth-mouth that they’ve been doing” ([@nanapare](#)). PK Yalley, another Ghanaian, echoed Nana Pare’s sentiment, “Lol. Just realized most Jollof eaten in Nigeria were imported from Ghana...?? The real Jollof in Nigeria is just COLOR RICE!” ([@pkyalley](#)).

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is not known to back away from sharing his opinion on conflicts. He has openly opposed Russia in the Ukraine war, endorsed Israel’s rights to defend

itself in the Middle East, and on many occasions has expressed his strongest opposition to some of China's diplomatic and trade decisions. He, however, refused to be drawn into the jollof feud among West Africans. When Eden Hagos, in his August 2023 show, asked Prime Minister Trudeau whether he preferred Ghana, Nigeria, or Senegal's version of jollof rice, he responded that he does not want to be drawn into the feud:

The intensity of that battle [jollof feud], which is mostly friendly – but has come to blows every now and then in certain families – means it's something that I've learned to stay away from, and I am not getting in the mix between Ghanaians and Nigerians on the jollof. (Lam, 2023, para.5)

In 2016, while the ragging war over jollof rice was at its all-time tense, Senegalese culinary expert Chef Pierre Thiam was asked to set the record straight by stating which country makes the best jollof rice. His response:

I'm going to have so many enemies, man. Food is really an art form, so it depends on preferences. Everything you judge is your own experience. You can decide Nigerian is best because you grew up eating it. Nigerians like their jollof to have a certain flavour – they like a burnt taste to it you know. Some people may find it off-putting. I like the spiciness of the Ghanaian jollof. Sierra Leone should be in that mix too. But honestly to settle that debate once and for all, as a Senegalese chef, you know Senegal is the originator of jollof – the Wolof people are the originator of jollof rice. (Sesay, 2016, para.11-12)

Chef Thiam made a safer choice by picking Senegal. It still did not stop Nigerian Chef Adetokunboh Adeniyi, who runs Little Lagos (a restaurant) in Sydney, from countering: "I wouldn't give Senegal the title at all. I would give Senegal third place. I say to my Senegalese friends, it's not who did it first, it's who did it best" (Lam, 2023, para.18).

No one knows when the jollof rice war will end, but one thing is sure: the feud brings West Africans together. The feud has resulted in major pan-African festivals, with Jollof-themed competitions appearing in major cities such as Toronto, Sydney, London, Washington DC, and New York. Jollof rice has also brought a new awakening in the diaspora, with diasporic African restaurants featuring jollof rice on their menu. August 22 is now World Jollof Day and has been celebrated every year since 2015 (Sloley, 2021). For West Africans, jollof rice symbolizes our rich cultural heritage and brings communities together, especially in the diaspora.

### **You are what you eat: The politics of food**

We are what we eat. Food is not only an object of learning but also a vehicle for learning (Flowers and Swan, 2012). Food tells stories about who we are — our history, culture, values, beliefs, worldviews, and identity. Impressions and perceptions can be formed about an individual, a group, or a community based on the food they eat or refuse to eat. Bodies of research such as Opie (2008) and Rouse and Hoskin (2004) have shown how food can serve as an avenue through which power, privilege, and identities can be negotiated, (re)produced, or/and resisted (also see, Jones, 2019). For example, Sidney Mintz's (1997) work on food and its relationship to power shows how Caribbeans, during their enslavement, used food as an avenue to insert their agencies, ingenuity, and resistance by taking discarded animal parts from their masters' kitchen to create cuisine for their family. Their action helped food security but also avoided hunger among slaves. Interestingly, the recipes created out of adversity became the soul food in the 1960s and 1970s.

In their studies among African American Sunni Islam in Los Angeles County, Carolyn Rouse and Janet Hoskins (2004) note how food became central to ways African American Sunni Muslims express their religious commitments in the United States. Referring to the works of Elijah Muhammad, the founder of the Nation of Islam, Doris Witt (1999) argues that Elijah Muhammed utilized food as a weapon of resistance to formulate a model of blackness in which abstinence from certain food such as pork alongside following certain dietary restrictions, Black people can reclaim their purified souls, intellect, and physical wellbeing which have been contaminated by certain food (p.104). Elijah Mohammed also used his regular feature column “How to Eat to Live” to direct Black people to reject the traditional Black southern cuisine, which he believes, was Whites’ weapon to weaken Black people physically, intellectually, spiritually, and morally in the United States. Elijah Muhammed also expressed his disdain for Black people who eat certain animals associated with filth:

Allah taught me that this grafted animal [pork] was made for medical purposes — not for a food for the people — and that this animal destroys the beautiful appearance of its eaters. It takes away the shyness of those who eat this brazen flesh. Nature did not give the hog anything like shyness. Take a look at their immoral dress and actions; their worship of filthy songs and dances that an uncivilized animal or savage human being of the jungle cannot even imitate. Yet average black people who want to be loved by their enemies, regardless of what God thinks of them, have gone to the extreme in trying to imitate the children of their slave masters in all of their wickedness, filthiness and evil. (Muhammad 1967, p.14)

Elijah Muhammad was convinced that Black ontologies — the construction of Black body as filthy, polluted or/and dangerous — resides not in Black bodies but in the food that nourish those bodies (Witt, 1999, p.81). Thus, by rejecting those foods intended to pollute the Black soul, members of the Nation of Islam can cleanse their minds of any ideological poison that has reduced the self-esteem, self-respect, and general well-being of Black people. Alternatively, Elijah Mohammed encouraged Black people to consume food such as brown rice, white and red navy beans, milk, butter, fish weighing between eight ounces to ten pounds, and the best cuts beef and lamb, which he prescribes should be eaten only twice a week, and fresh vegetables like asparagus, eggplant, okra, squash, and rhubarb (Muhammad, 2008).

In their take on Elijah Muhammad’s food treatise, Rouse and Hoskins (2004) argue that the rejection of soul food among the Nation of Islam was ideologically tied to the racial empowerment of Black people. Nowhere is this assertion more accurate than in Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man*. In the novel, the protagonist (Invisible Man), who is a Black southern college educator, has grown to despise Dr. Bledsoe, whom he believes is a fraud because Dr. Bledsoe teaches students to aspire to be accepted by Whites. Determined not to walk the path of Dr. Bledsoe, the protagonist, now living in New York, vacillates between patronizing his Southern Black food, which he believes represents blackness, and rejecting this food to gain acceptance from Whites. The protagonist finally embraces his Southern Black food, but was surprised to see Dr. Bledsoe, one who aspires to be White, also patronizing Southern Black food. Enraged by Dr. Bledsoe’s double standard, the protagonist sought to embarrass Dr. Bledsoe by calling out his hypocrisy:

And I saw myself advancing upon Bledsoe, standing bare of his false humility in the crowded lobby of Men's House, and seeing him there and him seeing me and ignoring me and me enraged and suddenly whipping out a foot or two of chitterlings [boiled pig intestines], raw, uncleaned and dripping sticky circles on the floor as I shake them in

his face, shouting: "Bledsoe, you're a shameless chitterling eater! I accuse you of relishing hog bowels! Ha! And not only do you eat them, you sneak and eat them in private when you think you're unobserved! You're a sneaking chitterling lover! I accuse you of indulging in a filthy habit, Bledsoe! Lug them out of there, Bledsoe! Lug them out so we can see! I accuse you before the eyes of the world!" And he lugs them out, yards of them, with mustard greens, and racks of pigs' ears, and pork chops and black-eyed peas with dull accusing eyes. (Ellison, 1952, 265)

Here, the protagonist (Invisible Man) points out to Dr. Bledsoe the ontological reality that he cannot escape his blackness. Although Dr. Bledsoe may aspire to be White, his appetite for Southern Black food, despite the perception among middle-class Blacks that such cuisine threatened their acceptance by some White establishment, will expose his inevitable blackness. In a sense, there is an inescapable blackness for any Black body that has an insatiable appetite for Black soul food.

The arguments presented so far provide a valuable model for understanding the importance of food as a progressive genre in understanding Black identity politics. Through food, one can claim a sense of subjectivity and agency and prescribe meanings to others based on their dietary habits. In a sense, our mouths, tongues, and stomachs are targets of teaching and learning about ourselves and others. As Mintz (1986) succinctly puts it, "What we like, what we eat, how we eat it, and how we feel about it are phenomenologically interrelated matters: together they speak eloquently to the question of how we perceive ourselves in relation to others" (p.4). Food is, therefore, more than a biological function to ensure survival. It is also a vibrant cultural activity through which we learn about power, history, experiences, cultures, status, morality, health, pleasure, suffering, and our place in the world (Flowers & Swan, 2012).

Thus, the war over jollof rice is also a war linked to heritagization of food and the building of national identity and a sense of belonging. In cosmopolitan cities, it is common to see people visiting French, Chinese, Vietnamese, Italian, Thai, Mexican, Indian, Japanese, Ethiopian, and Caribbean restaurants to have meals associated with those nations. These examples illustrate how food has a character of expressing belonging and non-belonging in a nation-state project. Thus, a plate of jollof signifies something more profound than satisfying one's hunger or cravings. It is a mode of communication to invoke deep attachment, sentiments, and memories of people and places they call home. One can never tell when the war over who cooks the best jollof rice will end among West Africans, but we know the Jollof conflict nurtures an intimate bond among West African neighbours and unites the people more than it divides them.

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