

MDST 4620: Senior Practicum

Theme: Gastrodiplomacy in West Africa: Food as Cultural
Power and Soft Power

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In a time when cultural power is just as important in determining global relations as military and economic power, gastrodiploamacy, the deliberate use of food or culinary culture to project national identity, has become a vital soft power (cultural influence or appeal) tactic. Many countries have understood early on the potential of food and used the culinary culture to promote their country and a positive image, express their cultural identity globally, and foster good ties with other countries. However, West Africa, a region rich in culinary traditions, is yet underrepresented in global cultural discourse in terms of gastrodiploamacy; its iconic dish, Jollof rice, represents untapped potential. This paper will deeply explore the concept of gastrodiploamacy and how West African cuisine, precisely through dishes like Jollof rice, has cultural power and soft power potential.

Food has always been an important aspect of human existence. Historically, humans are inherently social beings and have been engaged in feasting, the ritualized sharing of food, for a very long time (Spence, 2016). The capacity of food in fostering human bonding is undeniable. This makes it indispensable in gastrodiploamacy. The word gastrodiploamacy consists of two words, which are “diploamacy,” also referred to as public diploamacy, and “gastronomy” (Solley, 2015). Gastronomy, which is the art of food, and diploamacy, which is a tactful way of managing international relations, so gastrodiploamacy, or culinary diploamacy, is simply an emerging trend in international relations that uses food as a tool for cultural communication and soft power projection (Adesina, 2017). According to Nirwandy and Awang (2014), we talk about gastrodiploamacy when a nation-state decides to combine food with its public diploamacy strategy. Actually, food is political and plays a role in interstate relations. The connection between food, politics, and diploamacy can be explained under the concept of soft power, referring to a nation’s

ability to attract and co-opt through cultural appeal rather than coercion, which is attributed to influential IR theorist Joseph Nye (Luša & Jakešević, 2017).

Since ancient Greek times, food has served as a diplomatic lubricant, with Luša and Jakešević (2017) noting its use in ancient empires to forge alliances with a gastronomic practice, with food being served to welcome foreign ambassadors and pay them farewell. It also projects cultural identity, as a diplomat always wants to impress a guest with food from his or her country. Gastrodiploamacy is predicated on the notion that the easiest way to win hearts and minds is through the stomach (Spence, 2016).

Spence (2016) reinforces this through cognitive science, demonstrating that shared meals enhance trust and cooperation by stimulating sensory pleasure and social bonding, making it important in decision-making and innovation. It demonstrates how food also plays an important role beyond just fulfilling an empty stomach but also as a tool that can influence gastrodiploamacy activities (Solleh, 2015). These psychological effects make food an ideal medium for soft power and national branding.

A country can use Its national cuisine as a nation's brand. Nation branding is a concept that "relies on marketing and nationalism to create a strong image and to build a good reputation of a country and highlight their identity" (Solley, 2015). It has been effective in Thailand, which first introduced gastrodiploamacy. The Thai government engaged in a national branding program to establish their identity in the global scene and connect with a wide range of international audiences through their national cuisine. We have the "Global Thai" program campaign, which supplies Thai ingredients to aid Thai restaurants, provides Thai chefs, and fuels the program's expenditures, as well as a second campaign called the "Thailand: Kitchen of the World" program,

aiming to educate the global communities on Thai dishes (Solley, 2015). Thailand is one of the countries that has achieved the highest success in gastrodiploamacy.

Japan has achieved the same success with its sushi. Several countries, like Taiwan, Peru, Malaysia, and South Korea, with kimchi, have also put gastrodiploamacy into practice with successful campaigns. France has achieved a great success with the “gastronomic meal of the French” winning a place on UNESCO’s list of world-class Intangible Cultural Heritage (Luša & Jakešević, 2017). Nirwandy and Awang (2014) link all of those to increased tourism and trade.

However, such strategies implemented by those nations require aligning culinary heritage with policy—a gap West Africa has yet to bridge. African nations, including Nigeria, have yet to fully exploit this diplomatic avenue despite their rich culinary heritage (Adesina, 2017).

France and Italy have introduced the globe to their unique yet iconic foods that the global population can readily adapt to, from the well-known foie gras, soufflé, crepes, spaghetti, lasagna, and pizza to something more quirky and exotic like escargot and lampredotto. These cuisines have branded their origins, particularly Italy, where pizza is a national dish and is easily recognized as Italian (Nirwandy and Awang, 2014).

West Africans can follow the same path and brand their cuisine with an iconic dish. For instance, Jollof Rice can be a catalyst for gastrodiploamacy in West Africa. Using food to change a country’s image is always advantageous and can lead to a widespread shift in public opinion (Adesina, 2017).

West African nations can use a dish with a comparative advantage like Jollof rice to promote their global influence. It’s a dish qualified as the queen of West African kitchens (Sloley, 2021).

Notably, Jollof rice is a vibrant, tomato-infused one-pot dish claimed and customized by Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, Liberia, and beyond. Tomatoes, tomato paste, onions, Scotch bonnet peppers, salt, spices, and vegetable oil remain the main ingredients despite the wide range of this dish's variation (Adesina, 2017).

Sloley (2021) traces its origins to the Wolof Empire and its evolution into national variations, reflecting historical migrations and local innovations. The cultural diversity of West Africa is embodied by Jollof rice, a delicacy that unites but also divides the region. Few foods can rival Jollof Rice in terms of both cultural relevance and appeal among traditional West African cuisines (Alden, B). It's important to note that every West African country has at least one variation of Jollof rice, and it both divides and unites the region (Sloley, 2021). This aspect gives it a transnational advantage.

This shared culinary heritage fosters a sense of regional belonging while allowing individual nations to assert their distinct identities through subtle recipe variations. Jollof's recipe is highly flexible. Jollof rice is to West Africa what paella is to Spain, risotto to Italy, biriyani to India, and fried rice to China (Alden, B).

The dish recipes or ingredients can be modified to suit personal or a wide range of palates (e.g., vegan versions, fusion dishes), spicy or less spicy, palm oil or groundnut oil, Meat or fish, smoky or not, veggies or not, fresh ingredients in Ghana vs. dried in Nigeria; Nigeria has a variety called "Party Jollof," allowing it to appeal to diverse audiences and modern food trends. Jollof rice traveled and adapted as it reached different regions of West Africa, with each country embracing Jollof rice and adding its own twist, resulting in variations that showcase the diverse flavors, spices, and cooking techniques of the respective regions (Alden, B, n.d).

Additionally, Jollof is made of “rice,” a global staple; every country gets a rice dish. Rice is more widely consumed, which might contribute to Jollof’s popularity, making it a better asset for gastrodiploamacy. It can adapt to everyone’s taste buds.

However, this diversity also sparks “Jollof Wars”—playful yet intense debates over supremacy, amplified by social media (Nani, 2023). Jollof rice generates playful debates, often trending on social media aka “Jollof wars” over which country makes the best Jollof, highlighting Jollof’s role as a cultural unifier. The Jollof feud between Ghana and Nigeria is arguably the most intense food debate amongst any diaspora (Alden,B, n.d.). These “wars” generate cross-border engagement, turning food into a platform for dialogue and mutual recognition. Jollof wars can be considered an ongoing matter of local pride and contention (Sloley, 2021). Jollof clearly serves as a common culinary language for the region, fostering both unity and friendly rivalry. These debates about which Jollof is the best, while divisive, inadvertently project West Africa’s culinary vibrancy globally, showcasing soft power through organic, public engagement.

According to Nani (2023), the viral “Jollof Wars” are a prime example of unintended gastrodiploamacy, in which online competition raises the dish’s image internationally. Jollof becomes a cultural ambassador on social media sites like Instagram and Twitter, drawing interest from around the world and presenting West Africa as a vibrant culinary destination, which is a good asset.

Subsequently, Jollof as a unifier has achieved a national and regional dish rank. In the West African region, every country has diverse ethnic groups that have their own main dishes. Promoting one particular ethnic group’s dish over the other could create conflict, which makes Jollof rice the perfect option. According to Alden B. (n.d.), Jollof is a symbol of national pride because its variants represent regional ingredients and histories.

Everyone, no matter their ethnic group, enjoys Jollof. People consume it at least once a week. In countries like Ghana or Nigeria, Jollof rice is consumed as an everyday fast food for ceremonial purposes (birthdays, all kinds of parties, funerals, etc.). It symbolizes hospitality, unity, and a sense of communal feasting (Alden B., n.d.). It's mostly accompanied with grilled or fried chicken and fish. It's always present at every gathering; it's a common dish at social events. Jollof rice is the main course at weddings, festivals, and family get-togethers in many West African nations, where it unites people and represents a common identity and legacy (Alden B., n.d.).

Besides, Jollof rice has a huge asset due to its cultural presence in media, social media, and music and its popularity across West African nations, its diaspora, and internationally.

Its popularity in diaspora communities, social media, and international pop culture makes it a “ready-made soft power tool” for projecting West African identity globally. It has been proven that the Jollof debate has been positive and has increased awareness of and interest in West African food (Alden B., n.d.).

Jollof rice can become a global ambassador for West African culture thanks to its adoption and adaptation by diaspora communities and international pop culture.

Many artists talk about it, which cements its status as a cultural icon. Such visibility positions West Africa as a dynamic, modern region. Musicians have joined in the Jollof banter too, with Akon, who is from Senegal, asserting that Liberian Jollof is the best, and Ghanaian musician Sister Deborah qualifying “Ghana Jollof, yummy; Nigerian Jollof, it is funny” in her released song in 2016 called Ghana Jollof (Alden B., n.d.).

Moreover, several restaurants abroad serve Jollof rice. From London to New York, West African restaurants and chefs use Jollof to connect with global audiences. The dish acts as a cultural anchor for diaspora communities, fostering nostalgia and pride. Jollof has unexpectedly spread throughout the diaspora, and there have been Jollof competitions in Nigeria and Jollof culinary festivals in Toronto and Washington, DC, with World Jollof Day being celebrated every year, on 22 August, since 2015 (Alden B, n.d.).

There are more and more food bloggers and travelers flocking to West Africa to experience “authentic” Jollof, boosting tourism and dispelling stereotypes about the continent. Cardi B traveled to Ghana and Nigeria in December 2019 to have a taste of Jollof.

On top of that, Jollof rice is more than a cultural asset; it’s an economic one. Entrepreneurs and governments are increasingly taking advantage of its appeal. The export market is one. Global sales of pre-packaged Jollof spice mixes, instant mixes like “Gino, Tasty Tom, and Sankofa,” or ready-to-cook kits are examples of Jollof’s commercialization opportunities, which facilitate financial gains linked to cultural branding, advancing West African brands. Jollof has contributed to job creation, from street food known as “Check Check” in Ghana to upscale restaurants; Jollof undoubtedly sustains livelihoods across the region.

Another point is that Jollof is the go-to meal by local chefs and food bloggers to showcase and promote their culture during Ghana Month (Independence).

The “flagship” meal for regional unity and international recognition is obviously Jollof Rice, which can be perfect for advertising campaigns aimed at large audiences. Jollof is a symbol of wide popularity. Jollof rice is a symbol of West African culinary vibrancy and transnational soft power in international debate.

All those make Jollof rice suitable for diplomacy building bridges. It has the potential to improve relations inside Africa. Jollof can be served at ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) conferences or cultural exchanges, highlighting common heritage above political divisions.

Nonetheless, the Jollof Wars as well as the global jollof discourse constitute an “accidental gastrodiploamacy.” Nani (2023) warns about it and asserts that depending too much on grassroots initiatives runs the risk of having inconsistent communications. Hence, it’s necessary to pair Jollof rice popularity with proper policies.

It’s a widely known fact that West African governments have underinvested in culinary diplomacy despite Jollof’s global fame. Adesina (2017) denounces Nigeria’s neglect of its cuisine in foreign policy, which is the same regionally. No West African nation has a dedicated gastrodiploamacy office. Nirwandy and Awang (2014) emphasize the fact that strategic gastrodiploamacy requires aligning culinary heritage with economic and political goals, as seen in Peru or South Korea.

It’s important to fully take advantage of those assets that Jollof rice offers and formalize Jollof as a gastrodiploamacy tool with state-driven actions and policy. How can we achieve it?

In order to fully realize the potential of Jollof rice, West African countries could apply for UNESCO recognition: Jollof’s international standing would be enhanced by a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage designation, which Senegal’s success with Thieboudienne demonstrated. Investing in agriTech to increase rice and tomato production to strengthen supply chains and lessen reliance on imports, as most of the rice used for Jollof rice is imported from Asia, will be a big step.

Establishing Jollof as a diplomatic asset through supporting chef exchanges, promoting culinary tourism, or incorporating it into cultural attaché programs is a potential for West Africa.

Combining food with national values through gastrodiploamacy broadens a country's appeal to the global community and benefits the country in many ways (Nirwandy and Awang, 2014).

West African policymakers could similarly adopt some strategies that have been proven effective by certain countries from Nirwandy and Awang's (2014). For example, create "Jollof Trails" that highlight Jollof regional differences, similar to Thailand's food tours, support, sponsor, and encourage West African cooks to participate in international expos, serve Jollof at state dinners and embassies, as Japan does with sushi, and fund culinary schools to teach, spread, and preserve West African dishes authentically. Adesina (2017) suggests that the Nigerian government can also provide support for Nigerians who are willing to open restaurants abroad. West African embassies worldwide could also host Jollof-themed events to engage foreign audiences.

All in all, food is an essential part of human history and is gaining power as a soft power tool through gastrodiploamacy, as it offers countries the chance to build their brands and promote intercultural understanding. Jollof rice marks an unparalleled tool for gastrodiploamacy in West Africa and represents a dual-edged tool. It is a powerful emblem of regional identity and unity that fosters regional rivalry while simultaneously establishing a common cultural currency for global influence. The West African government must institutionalize its culinary legacy through cooperation, education, and legislation to turn Jollof from a social media fad into a foundation of soft power. West Africa would be able to enjoy its cultural pride and gain a place at the global diplomatic table by doing so.

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