

HISTORICIZING THE INDIGENOUS CULTURE OF LEFTOVER FOOD AMONG THE IGBOMINA OF NORTH-EASTERN YORUBALAND, NIGERIA

Aboyeji, A. Justus, and Aboyeji, O. Solomon

University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria.

aboyeji.aj@unilorin.edu.ng

Doi: <https://doi.org/10.69713/uoaaj2026v04i02.18>

Abstract

The nexus of this paper centers on the rationale for the historical, traditional, and cultural significance of leftover-food practices among the Igbomina people of North-eastern Yorubaland, Nigeria. Despite efforts by successive governments to improve food production and ensure food security in the country, food wastage, among other factors, has been a major clog in the wheels of progress. This study primarily adopts the historical research method, which employs the use of primary and secondary sources, combining oral traditions, ethnographic, and archival data with the perusal of available published and unpublished literature to compare the food preservation techniques, consumption patterns, and waste management practices among the Igbomina people in pre-colonial times with the food wastage, shortage, and insecurity in modern times. Findings reveal that leftover food practices were deeply embedded in Igbomina's communal values, social hierarchies, and economic systems. Among the factors identified for this unique culture are hospitality, etiquette, spirituality, and propitiation/appeasement of the hovering nocturnal terrestrial world, as well as nutritional value and medicinal purposes. By historicizing the leftover food culture, this research provides insights into the resilience, resourcefulness, and cultural identity of the Igbomina, contributing to an in-depth understanding of food culture in Yorubaland and broader discussions on food sustainability and waste reduction.

Keywords: Leftover food, Culture/Cultural identity, Igbomina, North-eastern Yorubaland, Nigeria, Food sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

The dynamics of culture clearly reveals that one man's food is another man's poison. In the animal kingdom, lions, as generally believed, do not eat leftovers. But hyenas do, despite being great hunters, with their long, sabre-like canine teeth and powerful jaws for tearing raw meat, like lions. What is therefore disgusting to lions is delicacy for others. What lions waste, hyenas value. In human society, one man's desire is disgust to another. Pathless

Pilgrim (2022) avers that men are more of necrovores (that is, creatures that feed upon the dead) like hyenas or jackals, than carnivores like lions that would naturally pounce down upon their prey, shredding the flesh when it is still fresh and hot. They do this with their powerful jaws, retractable, exceptionally sharp claws, and massive canine teeth, while the blood still runs. As such, although humans eat flesh, most do not until it is dead and processed.

Of a truth, when the purpose of a thing is incomprehensible, gross abuse becomes inevitable. When the culture of a people is not properly understood, display of myopic parochialism stemming from one's depth of ignorance, advertently or inadvertently, becomes inexorable. Consequently, the copious description of African culture as 'primitive', 'savage', 'atheistic', 'heathen', 'pagan', 'idolatrous', 'deusremotus', 'deusincertus' or 'deusabconditus' (Aboyeji, 2019, 48-60) is considered far more than mere errors of terminology and descriptions outside their etymological context. Indigenous African culture has, therefore, been engulfed in the throes of Eurocentric bigotry over the years. It was in the light of this racial-cum-cultural heresy that African (Gold Coast) Nationalist, J. E. Casely-Hayford, made bold to categorically declare that: *'Before even the British came into relations with our people, we were a developed people, having our own institutions, having our own ideas of government'* (Rodney, 1972, 33). Hayford's statement above presents a bold demystification of what Mazrui (1977) depicted as "Eurocentric cultural arrogance". Consequently, contrary to Eurocentric claims by early European explorers, travelers, and anthropologists who reported that Africans had no history or culture, Africans were rich in all aspects of culture. In fact, exhaustive ethnographic findings, extant archaeological excavations, and in-depth scientific research have not only confirmed the richness of African culture but have affirmed that Africa was the cradle of all humanity and civilization.

Consequently, this paper focuses on the Igbomina people of Northeastern Yorubaland to demonstrate the rich cultural heritage of African societies, which extends so deeply into every aspect of their livelihood, including their food practices. Food, for the Igbomina, was not merely sustenance; it embodied more intricate idiosyncrasies such as their food

preservation techniques, consumption patterns, hospitality, spirituality, etiquette, medicinal and waste management practices. This is in sharp juxtaposition with the food shortage, wastage, and insecurity in modern times. It is on this backdrop that this paper seeks to interrogate the rationale behind the historical, traditional, and cultural significance of leftover food practices among the Igbomina people of North-eastern Yorubaland, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Recent statistics on global food waste reveal that 931 million tonnes of food, translating to 17 percent of total food available to consumers in 2019, went into household, retailer, restaurant, and other food services' waste bins (UNEP, 2021). Food wastage has, therefore, become a major structural challenge in Nigeria despite increasing agricultural production and policy interventions aimed at food security. While contemporary discourse frames leftovers primarily as waste and inefficiency, precolonial African societies, such as the Igbomina of Northeastern Yorubaland, maintained culturally regulated systems in which leftover food was socially functional, spiritually meaningful, nutritionally adaptive, and economically rational. However, there is little historical scholarship interrogating how these indigenous leftover practices operated, what values sustained them, and how they contrast with modern patterns of food waste and insecurity. Without systematic historicization, this culturally embedded practice risks misinterpretation or disappearance under modern consumerist pressures. This study, therefore, examines the historical, social, spiritual, and nutritional logic of leftover food culture among the Igbomina and situates it within broader debates on sustainability and indigenous knowledge systems.

Research Objectives

This study aims to:

- i. Historicize the culture of leftover food among the Igbomina of Northeastern Yorubaland, situating it within precolonial socio-economic and cultural contexts;
- ii. Examine the social, institutional, and cosmological foundations of leftover food practices, particularly their role in shaping hospitality norms, communal solidarity, and intergenerational hierarchy and beliefs concerning ancestors, reincarnation, and ritual observances;
- iii. Investigate the indigenous knowledge systems embedded in leftover food preservation and transformation, with attention to fermentation, reheating techniques, and nutritional or medicinal implications; and
- iv. Interrogate the relevance of Igbomina leftover food culture to contemporary debates on food waste, sustainability, and food security in Nigeria.

Study Area: The Igbomina of Northeastern Yorubaland

Yoruba's etymology is traced to "Yarba," believed to be their early African settlement, cognate with the Hausa "Yarriba" (Johnson, 1921, 6, 15). Different traditions exist across cultures regarding the origin of the world and

human civilizations. Yoruba traditions trace their origin to Oduduwa and Ile-Ife, regarded as the cradle of humanity. At his investiture as Chancellor of the University of Ife on 15 May 1967, Chief Obafemi Awolowo reiterated the popular narrative that Ile-Ife was the point where solid earth first emerged and spread to the rest of the world:

It is not generally known that Ife is more than the cradle of the Yoruba people. It is from here in Ile-Ife, so our worthy legend goes, that the solid earth first arose from the midst of the all-pervading ocean, and was then spread, by one of our gods, to all the other parts of the world, to form the six continents of Africa, Asia, Australasia, Europe, North America, and South America (Awolowo, 1967).

Oranyan, successor to Oduduwa, expanded Yoruba influence across vast territories including Ashanti (to include the Gas of Accra, who claim that their ancestors originated from Ile Ife); Popo and Dahomey (who, until very recently, paid regular tributes to Oyo as their feudal lord), as well as Benin and Itsekiri in the east, where ruling lineages retained cultural links with Ile-Ife (Johnson, 1921, 15-16). Oranyan's descendants, referred to as "Yoruba Proper," were organized into four provinces: Ekun Otun (west of Oyo), Ekun Osi (east of Oyo), Ibolu (south-east), and Epo (south and south-west), as seen in the adjoining Table I and Map I, respectively.

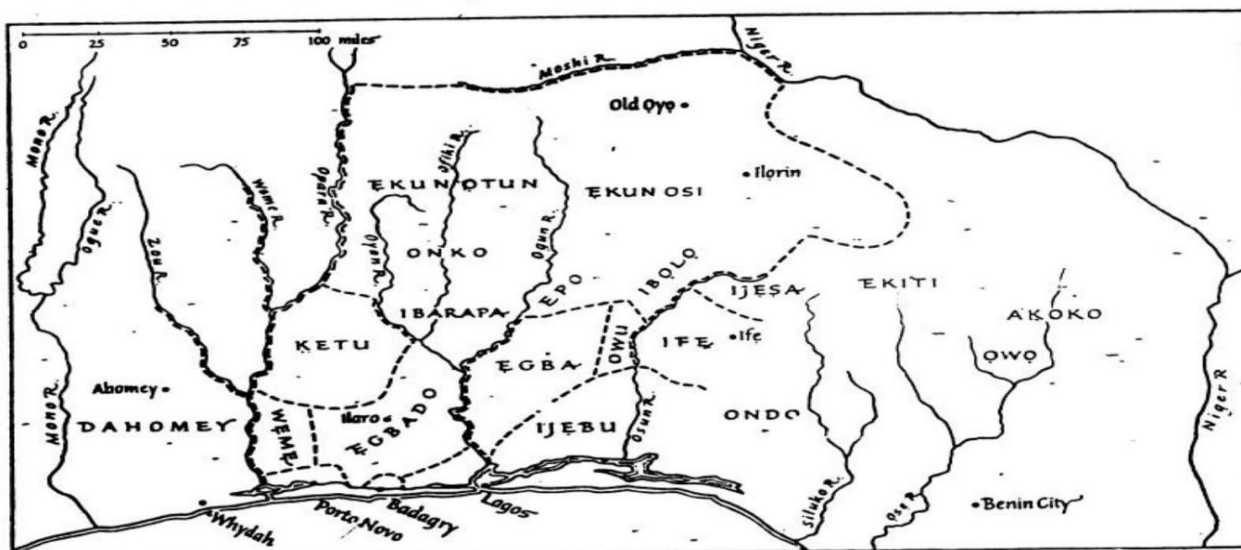
Table 1: Yoruba Provinces/Districts (*Ekun*) with Major Towns and Ethnicities

S/N	Yoruba Province	Axis	Chief and Major Towns/Ethnicities
1	Otun	The right province comprised the towns lying to the West of Oyo.	Chief Town: Igana Other important towns: Saki, Oke'ho, Iseyin, Iwawun, Eruwa, Iberekodo, and all the towns along the right bank of the River Ogun down to Iberekodo. Inhabiting the outermost borders are the people called Ibarapas, distinguished by a nasal twang in their speech.
2	Osi	The left or Metropolitan province consists of the towns lying	Chief Town: Ikoyi Other important towns: Kishi and Igboho in the north, Old Oyo, Ilorin, Irawo, Iwere, Ogbomoso etc. It includes " <u>the Igbonas (Igbomina</u> - distinguished by a peculiar dialect of their own) in the utmost limit

		to the East of Oyo.	eastwards”, and the Igbon-nas as far as Oṛo. They are regarded as speaking the purest Yoruba.
3	Ibolo	Situated to the south-east of the Ekun Osi	Chief Town: Iresa Other important towns: Ofa, Oyan, Okuku, Ikirun, Osogbo, Ido, Ilobu, Ejigbo, and towns as far down as Ede.
4	Epo	Yoruba towns lying in the remotest part of the kingdom, South and South-west of Oyo	Chief Town: Idode. Other important towns: Masifa, Ife odan, Ara. Iwo, Ilora, Akinmoirin, Fiditi, Awe, Ago Oja. They are called Epos (i.e., weeds) because they were considered rude and uncouth in manners, very deceitful, and far from being as loyal as the other tribes. Although now domiciled amongst the Egbas, the Owus were usually reckoned amongst them.

Source: Curled from Johnson (1921).

See the afore-mentioned Yoruba Provinces in Map I below.



Map 1: Map of Yorubaland in the 19th century showing the provinces

Source: Ajayi (1998, 12).

The Igbomina, located within Ekun Osi and noted for their distinctive dialect, are, today, found in Ifelodun, Irepodun, and Isin Local Government Areas (LGA) of Kwara State, as well as Ila and Ifedayo LGAs of Osun State (see Map 2), North-central and South-western Nigeria, respectively. The sobriquet, Igbomina, has become an identity used to describe the:

- i. Land (situated basically in eastern Yorubaland (Ayandele, 1983, 88) between Longitude 8^o and 9^o North and Latitude 4^o and 6^o East and on the south-

eastern side of Ilorin (Dada, 1985, Ibiloye, 1992, 27, Adeyemi, 1984, 7-8) with an area of land covering about 66,709.2 km² (Dosunmu, 1980);

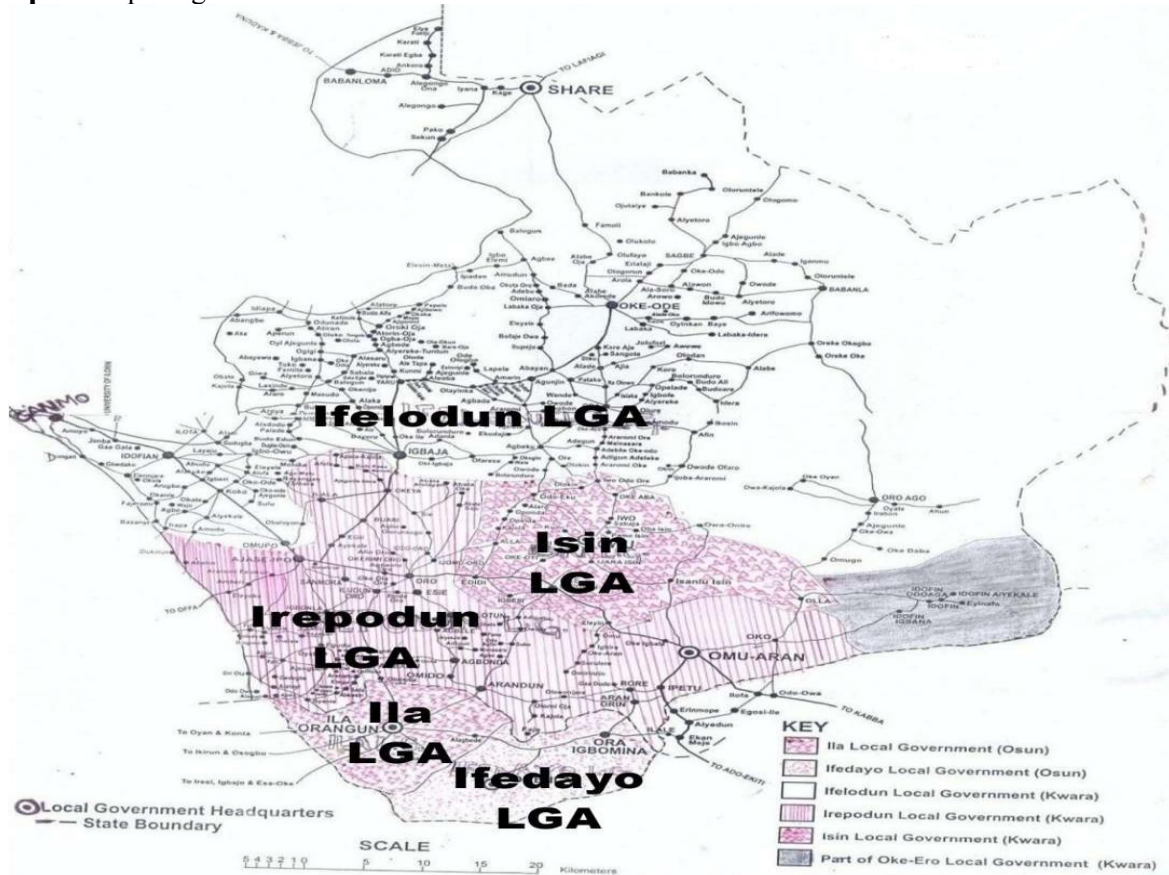
- ii. Dialect (*Mo yee* and *Mo san*); and
- iii. People of this particular Yoruba extraction (NAK ILOR PROF. NAC/30/C. 5 pp.11-18; Michie, 1957, 12-14; Elphinstone, 1921, 15; Akintoye, 1971, 3).

Like other African societies, the Igbomina possess an indivisible bond holding them

together. The collective identity of the Igbomina is anchored in shared origin, language, institutions, and socio-cultural values. The “Freedom Charter of Igbomina People” (2014, 5) emphasizes this bond as

foundational to unity and self-determination (Aboyeji, 2015, 27; Aboyeji, 2017, 92–108). The Igbomina thus possess a deeply rooted cultural heritage that permeates their social organization, religious life, and food culture.

Map 2: Map of Igbomina land



Source: Aboyeji, 2015, 31)

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative historical-ethnographic approach, combining both primary and secondary sources. Primary data are derived from oral interviews with knowledgeable elders, community leaders, and custodians of tradition across selected Igbomina communities, complemented by participant observation of food practices and cultural events. Archival materials and oral traditions are utilized to reconstruct

precolonial and colonial continuities. Secondary data include published books, journal articles, theses, and relevant reports on Yoruba cosmology, food culture, and food security. Data are analyzed using thematic and content analysis, with emphasis on identifying recurring patterns in social, spiritual, and economic dimensions of leftover food practices. Triangulation of sources is employed to enhance the validity and reliability of findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The following findings are discussed in sequence to our research objectives.

The Culture of Leftover Food among the Igbomina

The Igbomina indeed possess a rich cultural heritage that extends so deeply into every facet of their socio-cultural lifestyle, including their food culture. Winning and dining are significant *sine qua non* to man's existence. More importantly, man cannot survive without food for daily living. Indeed, food is life. While considering the ratification of "the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", popularly known as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), world leaders, during the United Nations General Assembly at the New York summit in September 2015 placed so much premium on the issue of food by putting it as top priority - SDGs 1 and 2: **No Poverty** (Eradicate poverty, ensure social protection, and promote economic growth) and **Zero Hunger** (End hunger, achieve food security, improve nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture) (Shettima, 2016, 19). This is much in consonance with the maxim among the Yoruba that when hunger is removed, poverty is heavily depleted.

Food is central to culture in many African contexts, not only for sustenance but as a bearer of identity, spirituality, relationships, and social norms. In Yoruba societies, food is deeply embedded in social relations, rituals, hierarchy, and identity. For instance, food sharing, portioning according to seniority, hospitality toward guests, and respect for elders are significant motifs in Yoruba culture. These practices reflect values such as respect, communality, reciprocity, and hospitality. Cultural meanings attached to particular foods, and how they are prepared or consumed (freshness, taste, flavor development), also contribute to social identity.

Cosmological, Institutional, and Spiritual Foundations

The notion of freshness versus reheated or repurposed food often carries symbolic weight. In many societies, freshly prepared food is preferred, but there are also valued traditions of "leftovers" or repurposed dishes, which may have unique tastes or be considered more flavorful over time. Such is the culture among the Igbomina of Northeastern Yorubaland. In Igbominaland, much like a taboo, you do not exhaust all the food cooked, for various reasons.

Hospitality: The Yoruba adage, "*Àlejò tó fòru wòlù, igi dá ni yóò jé*" (a late-night visitor may sleep hungry), did not apply among the Igbomina. Unannounced guests were expected and provided for. The Igbomina are lovers of and very accommodating to strangers. Hospitality was deeply embedded in Igbomina culture, as reflected in the Ifa corpus. Reference to chapter Five (5) of the sixteenth of the principal sixteen *Odu Ifa* (*Ifa* literary corpus) (i.e., *Orangun meji, ese karun-un*) by Prof. Wande Abimbola has it that:

<i>...A dia fun Òrangún Ile Ila,</i>	(Ifa divination was performed for Òrangún of Ila),
<i>Ti yoo gbalejo lati ode Idan,</i>	(Who would receive a visitor from the city of Idan),
<i>Won ni bi o ba f'oju b'alejo,</i>	(He was told that when he sees the visitor),
<i>Orin ni ki o maa ko.</i>	(He should burst into singing),
<i>A foju b'Odu,</i>	(We have seen Odu),
<i>A rire o.</i>	(We have found good fortunes). (Afolabi, 2006, 5)

Earlier studies have confirmed that they are notably accommodating (Aboyeji, 2016, 80–101). Even Ajase-Ipo, once stigmatized as inhospitable - "*Ajase kii gb'alejo*", eventually reaffirmed its cultural commitment to good neighbourliness (Iya Sawo, 2015; Aboyeji,

2016). Oral traditions, such as the account of Pastor Joseph Oniyide of Oro-Ago, further underscore the premium placed on hospitality. Oral tradition recounts that Pastor Joseph Oniyide of Okedaba ward, Oro-Ago, one of the earliest Christian converts in the area, faced severe persecution after renouncing traditional religion. Following the mysterious deaths of three children, he relocated on the advice of a sympathetic relative who warned that a cult had resolved to prevent him from having surviving offspring. Despite his relocation, an emissary was allegedly sent to kill him. However, the would-be assailant, overwhelmed by Oniyide's generosity and hospitality during his visit, abandoned the mission. Before departing, he confessed to his assignment and predicted his own death within seven days for failing to carry it out. According to tradition, news of his death came within the stated period (Terry, 2024).

Etiquette: Much like in virtually every aspect of life, the Igbomina had eating etiquette. Eating among the Igbomina was governed by strict etiquette designed to instill discipline and hierarchy. Indeed, cultural variation is an undeniable phenomenon. While eating time is seen as talk or discussion time, where breakfast, lunch, or dinner time is taken as an opportunity for relaxation and for crucial heart-to-heart tête-à-tête discussions out of the busy lifestyle of the Western culture, the Igbomina, like most other Yoruba, traditionally abhorred/forbid talking while eating. This is to guide against the food, water, or whatever is being taken from going through wrong channels, such as the pancreas, particularly when eating peppery meals. Apparently, the Yoruba are fast eaters. Talking, standing, or stooping while eating was discouraged to reinforce order and composure. Apparently, this is to inculcate the culture of settling down while eating in children. For instance, there is the superstitious make-belief that if you stoop while eating, the

food will come out directly from your anus. To convince, confuse, or even convict a defiant youngster, an elder may cleverly drop morsels from the rear underneath his anus. Furthermore, it is believed that the food you eat goes into your legs, instead of your stomach, if you eat while standing. Besides, a child eating was not to be interrupted; others would respond, “*o wa lori oba*,” signifying respect for the act.

Leftovers also reinforced hierarchy. It was a matter of etiquette for elderly persons, such as parents, to have leftover food for their younger folks. Elders deliberately left portions for the youngest present, who traditionally served during communal meals. In fact, it is a common saying among the people that “*Agba to je aje i-w'ehin-wo ni yio ru igba re dele*,” meaning an elder who defies this leftover etiquette, will himself clear off his own table/dishes. Johnson (1921, 109-110), discussing the diet of the Yoruba, has this to say:

Supper is taken in the evening, generally between 7 and 9 p.m. In ancient times, pounded yams were served out in a large bowl or earthenware vessel, and both the father and his children and grandchildren sat around it to partake of the food. Each one dips his hand into the dish and takes a morsel in strict order of seniority, the youngest present acts the part of a servant and waits on his seniors; and whether the food be sufficient or not, care was usually taken to leave some portion for him.

This practice institutionalized reward, responsibility, and respect. Children were sure that no matter how little, the one who cleared the table would have an additional portion from the leftovers. Hence, the saying, “*mo dá ọ l'òmodé*,” meaning I concede the leftover for the youngster(s). Today, rather unfortunately, the modern individualized lifestyle, including eating, has altered the communal dining pattern (Aboyeji, 2015).

Spirituality and Propitiation: Leftover food was linked to beliefs in ancestral presence, reincarnation, and spiritual reciprocity. Pregnant women, for example, observed taboos that included leaving food for protective spirits (Aboyeji, O.S. 2015, 106). When a man dies, elaborate ceremonies are performed for the soul of the deceased to be admitted by his ancestors after burial. Without the ceremony, such a corpse would, among other things, be fed with leftover foods, while being made to kneel outside the door. Generally, among the Yoruba and Igbomina, particularly, death signifies a transition to another life, from the terrestrial plane to the celestial realm, rather than extinction; a bend which is often misconstrued as an end. Funeral rites similarly reflected continued relations between the living and the dead (Aboyeji, 2015, 84). Scholars affirm that reverence for the dead underpins Yoruba cosmology (Johnson, 1921, 12; Mbiti, 1969, 44–46). In Idoba, Baba (2020) confirms the Yoruba belief in the existence of spirits and living ancestors/ancestresses who play prominent roles among the living.

Belief in reincarnation, expressed in names such as Babatunde, Yetunde, Yewande, Babajide, and Iyabode, which literally mean “father/mother has come again”, affirms cyclical or oscillating existence (Johnson, 1921, 26). As to the yet unborn, this belief is predicated upon the transmigration or reincarnation of souls. It is believed that deceased parents are born again through the cyclical birth process into the family of their surviving offspring (Johnson 1921, 26).

Egúngún festivals across Igbomina towns further institutionalized ancestral veneration (Lasisi, 2015). Ancestors, properly propitiated, were believed to guard their descendants. Hence, the Yoruba/Igbomina prayer “*Ori baba mi lorun, ma sun*” (i.e., prayer to the heavenly father to watch over them) captures this

expectation of vigilance. Generally, the Igbomina foreclose a son/daughter who died before the parents playing the ancestor/ancestress role. Hence, the maxim, “*Ko ni buru buru, ki baba ni o di owo omo oun l’orun*” (i.e., things cannot be that bad that a father would pray to or look up to his dead child to look after him).

Reference to and due recognition of the dead by the living was a sort of symbiotic relationship that guaranteed harmony and safety from the evil world. They believe that their ancestral spirits, customarily and periodically, visit their progenies, and must not go unentertained. Hence, these important members of the family, from the unseen world, often come as invisible guests, following necessary propitiation rites. Generally, they believe that *oku olomo kii sun* (that is, there is no eternal sleep for the dead who left children on earth). This equally depicts that the unseen spirits of their forebears’ hover around as monitoring spirits, to ward off evil and protect their scions. The least they could do to reciprocate this kind gesture is to always have leftover food for their comfort.

Ancestral worship formed a central component of the religious system in the Iwo kingdom of Igbominaland in the precolonial period. Oral tradition recounts that during the reign of Oba Aminu Ibidoja (Ranni Awo I), the *Alale* (ancestral spirits) reportedly appeared to the Oniwo and identified a widow, Madam Racheal Ajiboye (Iya ‘Moniyi) of Oke-Ore compound, as a woman whose consistent practice of keeping leftover food made her home a dependable place of refreshment during their spiritual visitations. Particularly noted was the *eko* she sold, said to be their preferred food. In recognition of her hospitality, she was summoned before the Oniwo-in-Council, where ancestral blessings were pronounced upon her and her lineage (Oyelowo, 2004). Unknown to her, much like

the Holy Bible, she had, through her hospitality, entertained angels (ancestral spirits) unknown. No wonder, till today, the name ‘Aboyeji’, which the only son of the woman Chief Dr. Solomon Omoniyi Aboyeji bears, is a household name in the community, its environs, and beyond.

Yoruba also generally believed that such ancestor spirits, on their monitoring parade, customarily visit on specific days and at specific times, usually in the night on

Thursdays, known as *Ojo Alamisi* or *Ojo bo*. It would therefore be a deliberate assault not to have their welfare adequately prepared and arranged for. *Ojo bo*, as was then believed, was a day on which ancestors paid customary courtesy visits. An informant relates that while growing up, it was customary to have leftover food overnight, particularly on Thursday nights. Indeed, each day of the week has its spiritual significance among the Yoruba. See Table 2.

Table 2: Names of the Week-Days in English, Yoruba & Arabic and Cultural Significance in Yoruba Belief

English	Yoruba	Arabic	Cultural significance in Yoruba Belief
Sunday	Aiku/ Isinmi	–	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It was on this day that Orunmila reportedly buried Imi, the mother of Esu Odara. Hence, Ojo Isinmi. This, undoubtedly, predates the incursion of Christianity, which reverses Sunday as a day of rest.
Monday	Aje	–	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is the day money descended to join Orisa on earth. Hence, it is the day of prosperity or money. Aje itself is the deity of prosperity, money, or wealth
Tuesday	Iṣegun	Atalata	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Sea is believed to observe its Rest Day on Tuesday. This is the day of victory
Wednesday	Ojoru	Alaruba	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is a day of confusion. The Yoruba believe it is a day of problems, calamities, confusion, disruptions, and catastrophes that loom.
Thursday	Ojọbo	Alamisi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sango: Yoruba Deity is worshipped on the 5th day of the week The day on which the names of the days arrived. Ancestors come a-visiting their families. Every important festival begins on this day Some communities believe the earth rests on Friday, others believe it does on Thursday.
Friday	Ẹti	Jimoh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Eti</i> means failure. The day is therefore deemed a day of failure, or better still, a day synonymous with postponement. It was believed that whatever someone had to do on this day was bound to fail. As such, it should be postponed.
Saturday	Abameta	–	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Yoruba believe that the day belongs to Esu. It therefore shares similar attributes with Ojoru. Yoruba do not customarily bury their dead on this day to avoid three repeated incidences of negative occurrences. Like Ojoru, it was considered a bad day to undertake a major project, and for the use of most charms, it was considered a day of evil resolution.

Source: Researchers’ compilation

The Igbomina, like the wider Yoruba society, uphold a strong belief in reincarnation and life

after death. The belief that the spirit or ghost of departed ancestors/ancestresses hover

around to provide protection or watch over their progenies is one major premise upon which ancestor worship is predicated. It is believed that the soul remains near the physical realm for forty days after death before departing fully, and sacrifices are performed to ensure peace and prevent misfortune. Scholars note that reverence for the dead is central to Yoruba cosmology (Johnson, 1921, 12).

Ancestral spirits may also appear in dreams or visions, in the image of a trusted person, though such encounters are subject to verification through divination, particularly the Ifa oracle, to guard against deception (Ogunrinola, 2012). The Igbomina people do not throw caution to the wind by just believing every Tom, Dick, and Harry that comes in such apparitions or familiar spirits, as there were cases of malevolent forces manipulating/reincarnating the image(s) of such trusted people. Egúngún festivals across Igbomina towns institutionalize this ancestral reverence. Even everyday practices such as leaving food overnight to appease unseen forces reflect the pervasive spirituality attached to food and the continued presence of the ancestral world in Igbomina life. Egúngún festival was prominent in Igbomina towns and villages such as Ila Orangun, Oke Ila, Otun, Epe, Erimope, Osan, Rore, Aran Orin, Ayedun, Omu-Aran, Arandun, Ipetu, Isanlu, Igbaja, and Oko, ranging from five to seventeen days (Lasisi, 2015).

The lead author also recalled a reminiscence of a childhood experience. His inquisitive mind pushed him to break the *ayo* seed to know what was actually inside. His mum, on discovering this, in a typical superstitious Yoruba manner, raised a bedlam out of it, claiming that the *ayo* seed is the eye of an *anjoonu* - gnome/goblin/fairy, who was undoubtedly furious for breaking his eyes and must be appeased. The appeasement, according to her, was to leave his supper on

the table overnight so that when the irate sprite comes around for vengeance, the food of the particular culprit would serve as an appeasement sacrifice for propitiation. Although this was a mere superstition, to curb the naughty inquisitive mind of the playboy from causing graver havoc and destruction some other day, it also helps to reveal the spirituality attached to leftover foods among the Igbomina sub-group of the Yoruba.

Medicinal: The Igbomina equally demonstrate their unwavering conviction in the belief that those who would not make food their medicine often end up making medicine their food. Generally, the Yoruba eat breakfast like a pauper, lunch like a commoner, and supper like a king. The Igbomina of northeastern Yorubaland do not consider some meals taken by others as food; at best, appetizers. As such, the Yoruba generally believe that *Iyan lounje*, *oka loogun*, *airiiri ni ti eko*, (i.e., pounded yam is food; *Àmàlà* is but medicine, solid pap only suffices in the absence of nothing). Pounded yams are not only considered the king of all foods, but perhaps the only food. *Àmàlà/Òkà*, to them, is medicine, especially for the sick. When a child is to be introduced to solid food beyond the breast milk and liquids, mothers start with very light *Òkà/Àmàlà*. *Àmàlà/Òkà* is also the food for someone just recovering from sickness, not *iyán* (pounded yam), which is considered heavy.

The overnight fermentation of food is considered not only tasty but also medicinal. E.g., *ogi* prepared and used the same day does not taste well in the mouth, but when left for a few days, to produce a sour taste. Note that *omikan/omidun* is not only often recommended in the preparation of herbal mixtures, but it is also herbal in itself. Ditto for many foods such as ground cassava or corn for producing *gari*, *fufu*, *eko*, or *burukutu*. Many boiled herbal mixtures are to be left overnight or for days to harness their potency. Hence,

deliberate efforts were made to leave them to ferment overnight or for a few days to produce the desired taste. Probably, the ancestral forces have a role to play overnight, while leaves are considered to be asleep, in releasing spiritual potency into the leftover food, herbs, or medicine. Remember that food itself is medicine.

Preservation and Nutritional Flavor: This sub-section reflects on the Igbomina leftover food culture vis-à-vis the contemporary

debates on food waste, sustainability, and food security in Nigeria. Although Africa is one of the least, alongside Latin America and the Caribbean, with a total food waste of 74 million tons, amounting to 8 % of total global food wastage in 2019, it is worrisome that Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, has a per capita waste of 189 kilograms and an annual estimated total food waste of 37.9 million (37,941,470) tons, nearly 51% of Africa's total per citizen (Agbetiloye, 2024). See Tables 3 and 4 for details.

Table 3: Estimated Annual Food Waste by Region (Million Tons, 2019 Baseline)

Region	Total Food Waste (million Tons)	Global Waste Share (%)	Notes
Africa	74	8%	Nigeria is the single largest contributor in Africa (\approx 37.9 million tons, \sim 51% of Africa's total).
Latin America & Caribbean	74	8%	Brazil and Mexico lead.
North America & Oceania	85	9%	The USA and Australia major contributors.
Europe	143	15%	High per-capita waste, especially in EU states.
Asia	466	50%	Highest regional contribution; includes China, India, and Indonesia.
Global Total	931	100%	Equivalent to 17% of the food available to consumers.

Source: Adapted from UNEP (2021).

Table 4: The Top 10 African countries with the highest food waste (2024)

Rank	Country	Waste per capita (KG)	Annual Waste (Tons)	Global Rank
1	Nigeria	189	37.9M	1st
2	Tanzania	119	6.9M	7th
3	DR. Congo	103	8.9M	12th
4	Uganda	103	4.5M	13th
5	Mozambique	103	3.1M	14th
6	Madagascar	103	2.8M	15th
7	Niger	103	2.4M	16th
8	Mali	103	2.0M	17th
9	Burkina Faso	103	2.1M	18th

10	Malawi	103	1.9M	19th
----	--------	-----	------	------

Source: Adapted from Agbetiloye (2024).

Note that sequel to the above data, the ranking was determined by the amount of food waste generated per capita (kg), not by the total annual tonnage. For instance, despite having a higher total (8.9M tons), the DRC ranks 12th due to a lower per capita rate of 103 kg, whereas Tanzania is ranked 7th because its individuals generate 119 kg of food waste per year. Each country's population determines the annual waste in tons.

Table 4 reveals that an average Nigerian wastes approximately 189 kilograms of food annually (United Nations Environment

Programme, 2024a). Little wonder, despite efforts by successive governments to improve food production and guarantee food security in the country, food wastage, among other factors, has been a major clog in the wheel. Food insecurity in Nigeria not only catalyzes the overall general insecurity; insecurity, in a developing country like Nigeria, also poses a grave concern and sombre threat to the corporate existence of humanity. A hungry man is not just an angry man, but a societal hazard. In contrast, rather than equating leftovers with waste or poverty, as in the modern Western culture (as depicted in Table 3), the precolonial Igbomina culturally revalued them as socially meaningful and nutritionally beneficial. While Western culture and modernity often equate leftovers with waste or poverty, to the Igbomina, it was a different ball game as leftover food practices were deeply rooted in the Igbomina's communal values, social hierarchies, economic systems, and cultural identity with spiritual implications for both the living and ancestral worlds. Igbomina leftover food culture is part of a wider pattern in Yoruba and other African societies that treat food as more than alimentary. Without a systematic study, there is a danger that the culture of leftover food, rich in social, spiritual, and medicinal meanings, will either be misconstrued or fade away in the face of modern pressures.

Across Igbominaland, the habit of eating reheated leftover *réchauffé* pounded yam (*iyán*) and yam/cassava flour paste (*Àmàlà/Òkà/Èkà*) remade into *Ewu-iyán* and *Ikasin oka* or *oka/eka alagbona/adagbona*, was a household, almost daily, phenomenon.

These leftovers become delicacies that add refreshing flavors and aromas to them. The “new” taste is highly cherished and particularly preferred in a place like Omu-Aran, where its inhabitants have coined this refrain “*Ewu-iyán d’omu o d’otun, a seese gun Iyan d’omu o d’otu bante*” (a remake of the overnight pounded yam leftovers got to Omu and became fresh, while fresh pounded yam got to Omu and became undesirable (Lasisi, 2015). *Ewu iyan* is the reheated pounded yam paste. It leaves at the bottom of the pot (preferably, *isasun*), a flake-like cracker that may be eaten raw or mixed with draw soup. This, for many, is the icing on the cake.

Freshly pounded yams may also be sliced and sun-dried as another variant of *eepa* and preserved for the ‘rainy days’. This is granulated and used to prepare a jollof-like meal. The leftover *Àmàlà* may be steamed and consumed as *Efika* or cut into larger-than-normal morsels and heated on fire, mixed with choice draw soup with rich ingredients to taste, to give us *Àmàlà/Òkà alagbona/adagbona – réchauffé*.

This culture of leftover food, particularly *ewu iyan* and *Àmàlà/Òkà alagbona*, has given a unique identity to the Igbomina Yorùbás, which they are ever proud of. The **choice** hotness of pounded yams has gone into the people’s aphorism that, “*Iyan ogun odun si le jo eniyan lowo*” (twenty-year-old pounded yams may still blister the hand).

The above factors have been summarized in Table 5 below:

Table 5: Major Reasons for Leftover Food in Igbomina Culture

S/No	Reason	Description	Cultural Significance
1	Hospitality	Food kept for unexpected guests	Reinforces communal solidarity; no visitor should go hungry
2	Etiquette	Elders leave food for juniors	Upholds respect, reward, hierarchy, and communal sharing
3	Spirituality	Leftovers for ancestral spirits	Serves as appeasement and recognition of the unseen world
4	Medicinal purposes	The “Food as medicine” belief is probably due to the overnight fermentation and probable spiritual hovering	Reinforces health consciousness through fermentation for medicinal purposes.
5	Nutrition & Preservation	Leftover foods develop unique flavors (e.g., <i>Ewu Iyan</i> , <i>Ikasi</i>)	Becomes a delicacy with identity value in Igbomina society

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

Indeed, man creates the things that make up culture, and he absorbs these things by living within a cultural milieu. Hence, cultural heritage is the total of the material and non-material cultures of a particular society, transmitted across generations. This finds clear expression in his performing and non-performing arts, such as his cherished aesthetics, arts, religion, language, philosophy, customs, festivals, rituals, sacred or worship sites, norms, values, ideologies, music, drama, dance, apparel or dress, and dress patterns. It also includes their literature, film, sports, writing, foods and cuisines, traditional monuments and architectures, political organization, technology and technological sites, as well as other artifacts which are cherished and conserved for their historical, political, educational, recreational, artistic, aesthetic, and other socio-religious significance. Indeed, culture is a collective and integrated whole, encompassing all the non-biologically transmitted actions or creations of man, the heritage he possesses, the established pattern of human behaviour, as well as everything that makes man what he is (Ajala, 2023).

The culture of leftover food among the Igbomina reflects both the material and non-material aspects of culture. Materially, it appears in tangible cuisines such as *Ewu Iyan* and *Oka Ikasi* or *Àmàlà alagbona*, delicacies derived from overnight meals that are prized for their enhanced flavors. Non-materially, leftovers serve as spiritual appeasement to unseen spirits and as offerings to ancestral beings believed to watch over their descendants. Socially, leftover food demonstrates etiquette, ensuring that no junior is left without a portion. This cultural ethos highlights the Igbomina worldview that food is communal, sacred, and medicinal. On one hand, leftovers in precolonial Igbomina culture signify hospitality, spirituality, and identity, reinforcing values of sharing, respect, and food preservation. On the other hand, in spite of efforts by successive governments in contemporary times to improve food production and guarantee food security in the country, the unholy trinity/alliance of food insecurity/shortage, high cost, and food wastage, among other factors, has been a major clog in the wheel. Meanwhile, food security is *sine qua non* to the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Mollier, Seyler, Chotte & Ringler, 2017, 52; FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, & WHO, 2021). This paradox is particularly significant, given the global

challenge of food waste, which the World Food Programme estimates at one billion daily global meals lost, worth over US\$1 trillion annually (United Nations Environment Programme, 2024b). Thus, this paper compares the modern development with the food preservation techniques, consumption patterns, and waste management practices inherent in the Igbomina traditional leftover food culture.

The nexus of this paper, therefore, centers on the rationale for the historical, traditional, and cultural significance of leftover-food practices among the Igbomina people of North-eastern Yorubaland, Nigeria. By historicizing the leftover food culture, which was deeply ingrained in the communal values, social hierarchies, and economic systems of the Igbomina, this research provides insights into the resilience, resourcefulness, and cultural identity of the Igbomina, contributing to an in-depth understanding of food culture in Yorubaland and broader discourse on food sustainability and waste reduction in Nigeria and the world in general.

Recommendations

i. **Historicization of leftover food culture:**

Institutionalize systematic documentation of Igbomina foodways through interdisciplinary research (history, anthropology, archaeology) and digitized oral archives; Integrate Igbomina culinary heritage into local and national curricula to preserve precolonial socio-economic knowledge systems; Support community-based heritage projects (museums, festivals, archives) that foreground indigenous food practices within historical contexts.

ii. **Social, institutional, and cosmological foundations:**

Encourage ethnographic and ethno-historical studies that deepen understanding of the nexus between food practices, social hierarchy, and cosmology;

Promote culturally grounded public education that contextualizes ancestral beliefs and hospitality norms without eroding indigenous epistemologies; Facilitate intergenerational knowledge transmission via community forums, where elders formally transmit food-related customs and values.

iii. **Indigenous knowledge systems in preservation and transformation:**

Undertake scientific validation of indigenous techniques (fermentation, reheating, drying) to establish their nutritional and medicinal efficacy; Develop hybrid frameworks that combine indigenous preservation methods with modern food safety standards to enhance scalability; Support local innovation hubs and agro-food enterprises that commercialize traditional leftover-based products sustainably.

iv. **Contemporary relevance to food waste, sustainability, and security:**

Mainstream indigenous leftover management practices into national food security and anti-food-waste policies; Launch public awareness campaigns that reframe leftovers as resources rather than waste, drawing on Igbomina cultural models; Encourage policy synergy between environmental sustainability agendas and indigenous food systems to reduce waste and enhance resilience.

REFERENCES

- Aboyeji, A.J. (2015). Foreign influence on Igbomina, c. 1750–1900 (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis). Department of History and International Studies, University of Ilorin.
- Aboyeji, A. J. (2016). Igbomina and the Dilemma of Promoting Good Neighbourliness: A Historical Analysis. *Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria (JHSN)*, (25), 80-101, Published by Historical Society of Nigeria. Available

- online at:
<http://uilspace.unilorin.edu.ng:8080/jspui/handle/123456789/687>
- Aboyeji, A. J. (2017). Nupe influence and linguistic variation in Igbominaland. *Ilorin Journal of History and International Studies*, 7(1), 92-108 Available online at <http://uilspace.unilorin.edu.ng:8080/jspui/handle/123456789/699>
- Aboyeji A.J. (2019). Music, Art, and Militarism in the 19th Century Yorubaland. *The Performer: Ilorin Journal of the Performing Arts*, (21), 48-60, Published by the Department of the Performing Arts, University of Ilorin, Nigeria. Available online at <https://uilspace.unilorin.edu.ng/handle/20.500.12484/8803>
- Aboyeji, O.S. (2015). Trends in the Religious Experience of Igbomina People, C.1800-2000 Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Department of History and International Studies, University of Ilorin. Nigeria.
- Adeyemi, E.A. (1984). Protest and Agitation in Igbomina, 1933-1952. Unpublished M.A. Dissertation, Department of History, University of Ilorin.
- Afolabi, F. (2006). *Igbominaland in the Context of Yoruba History*. Sceptre Prints Ltd., Ibadan.
- Agbetiloye, A. (2024, 26 September). "Top 10 African countries with the highest food waste". *Business Insider Africa* Accessed online on 29/09/2025 at <https://africa.businessinsider.com/local/markets/top-10-african-countries-with-the-highest-food-waste/98vyy1b>
- Ajala, M.O. (2023). A History of Youth Empowerment and National Integration in Nigeria, 1967-2015, Ph.D. Thesis, Department of History and International Studies, University of Ilorin, Nigeria.
- Ajayi, J. F. Ade (1998). 19th Century Wars and Yoruba Ethnicity. In I. A. Akinjogbin (Ed.), *War and peace in Yorubaland, 1793–1893*. H.E.B. (Nig.) Plc.
- Akintoye, S.A. (1971). *Revolution and power politics in Yorubaland, 1840–1893*. Longman.
- Ayandele, E.A. (1983). Ijebuland 1800–1891: Era of splendid isolation. In G. O. Olusanya (Ed.), *Studies in Yoruba history and culture*. University Press Ltd.
- Awolowo, O. (Monday, 15 May 1967). An Address delivered by Chief Obafemi Awolowo on the occasion of his installation as the first Chancellor of the University of Ife at Ile-Ife.
- Baba, S.O.Y. (2020). *The History and Heritage of Idoba Araromi Community (Ile-Ire District, Ifelodun L.G.A., Kwara State, Nigeria)*. Amazing Grace Press, Ilorin.
- Dada, P.O.A. (1985). *A brief history of the Igbomina*. Matanmi Press Ltd.
- Dosunmu, J.T. (1980). *Missionary impact on Igbomina* (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis). Michigan State University.
- Elphinstone, K.V. (1921). *Gazetteer of Ilorin Province*. Waterloo, London.
- FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP & WHO. (2021). *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2021. Transforming Food Systems for Food Security, Improved Nutrition, and Affordable Healthy Diets for All*. Rome: FAO.
- Freedom Charter of Igbomina People*, (2014). A Submission to the 2014 National Conference by the Movement for Unification and Creation of Igbomina State.
- Ibiloye, E. O. (1992). Igbominaland under Ilorin imperialism, 1830–1949. Unpublished M.A. dissertation, Department of History, University of Ilorin.

- Iya Sawo (2015). Oral interview; Ajase, aged 60+.
- Johnson, S. (1921). *The history of the Yorubas: From the earliest times to the beginning of the British Protectorate* (O. Johnson, Ed.). Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.
- Lasisi, R.A. (2015). The Impact of the Interaction between Culture and Islam on the Development of Igbominaland in the Twentieth Century, (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis). Department of History and International Studies, University of Ilorin.
- Mazrui, A.A. (Ed.) (1977). *The Warrior Tradition in Modern Africa* Leiden, E. J. Brill (Netherlands).
- Mbiti, J.S. (1969). *African Religions and Philosophy*, Frederic A Praeger, New York.
- Michie, C. W. (1957). Memoranda to the Minority Commission from the Government of the Northern Region of Nigeria (Government Printer, Kaduna).
- Mollier, L., Seyler, F., Chotte, J.L., & Ringler, C. (2017). End Hunger, Achieve Food Security, Improve Nutrition, and Promote Sustainable Agriculture. In *A Guide to SDG Interactions: From Science to Implementation. Part Two: End Hunger, Achieve Food Security and Improved Nutrition and Promote Sustainable Agriculture*, (eds.) D.J. Griggs, M. Nilsson, A. Stevance, & D. McCollum (Paris: International Council for Science).
- NAK ILORPROF. NAC/30/C.5, Report on Local Government Reform in Igbomina Area. 1954
- Ogunrinola, G. T. (22/11/2012). Oral discussion; Iwo, Late. Oyelowo, D. (Iya Fili) (18/02/2004). Oral Interview; Ijara, Late.
- Pathless Pilgrim. (2022, February 28). *Are you a lion or a hyena?* Medium. <https://pathlesspilgrim.medium.com/are-you-a-lion-or-a-hyena-7dc1883db8c1>
- Rodney, W. (1972). *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Bogle Louverture Publications.
- Shettima, K. (2016, September). Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in Africa: Call for a Paradigm Shift *African Journal of Reproductive Health* (Special Edition on SDGs); 20(3).
- Terry, V. B. (Nee Oniyide) (25/07/2024). Oral discussion; Oro Ago, aged 80.
- United Nations Environment Programme. (2021). *Food Waste Index Report 2021* <https://www.unep.org/resources/report/une-p-food-waste-index-report-2021> Accessed 28/09/2025.
- United Nations Environment Programme. (2024a). *Food Waste Index Report 2024*; Dataset: Global Per Capita Food Waste Table in Chapter 2. Accessed 29/09/2025 at. <https://www.unep.org/resources/publication/food-waste-index-report-2024>
- United Nations Environment Programme. (2024b). *Food Waste Index Report 2024L* Think. Eat. Save. – Tracking Progress to Halve Global Food Waste. Nairobi. Accessed on 29/09/2025 from https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/45230/food_waste_index_report_2024.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=y