

Chapter 23

The West African Social Media “Jollof Rice War”: Unintentional Projection of West African Culinary Soft Power

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ABSTRACT

The West African sub-region shares some similar culinary cultural practices as many cuisines such as fufu (pounded yam or cassava served with varieties of soups), waakye (rice cooked and beans cooked together, and served with pepper sauce), and red red (cooked beans served with palm oil, gari, and fried ripe plantain) are eaten in many countries in the sub-region. However, jollof rice (rice cooked in spicy tomato sauce) is arguably the most popular and widely eaten cuisine across the sub-region and a subject of occasionally fierce online debates (“jollof wars”), particularly among Ghanaians and Nigerians over which of these nations prepares the best recipe of the cuisine. Even though the “jollof war” creates fierce competition and rivalry among these countries in the area of sports and music, this chapter argues that the jollof war is harnessing West African culinary soft power. In doing this, the chapter adopts the purposive sampling technique and content analysis approach to select and analyse the social media posts that relate to the objectives of the chapter.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of social media has impacted the acquisition and use of soft power in international relations. Social connections and cross-cultural communication have become much simpler and easier because of advancements in digital technologies (Inyali et al., 2022). As a result, social media has become an effective instrument for promoting cross-cultural communications and exchanges to a bigger audience (Inyali et al., 2022). It also enables people to gain firsthand information and exposure to the culinary and other cultural differences available at destinations. Because social media sites are easily accessible,

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they have become potent platforms for harnessing soft power. In response to these developments, various actors (state and nonstate) in the international system have come up with programs and policies to project their culinary culture to attract other people. All groups of people across the world have unique culinary heritage. The food they eat, the methods of preparation, the ingredients, and the serving of the food are different from those of other groups of people. Therefore, food offers people the opportunity to explore and understand foreign cultures. However, even though culinary heritage is a source of identity and pride and, it can lead to rivalry among individuals and societies. In day-to-day casual and political conversations, people often insist on the superiority of their culinary culture. For West Africans, social media conversations about food are not only about friendship. It is a source of rivalry and the quest to establish culinary cultural hegemony in the region. Taher & Elshahed (2020) established the link between food, nationalism, and power. Food is a key element of international relations because it is almost impossible for people to travel around the world without eating.

Countries have come to realise the power of attraction in local cuisines and have initiated programs and campaigns to project their culinary soft power. Ever since Thailand initiated its campaign to globalise its cuisine (Chapple-Sokol, 2013), countries such as Malaysia (Nahar et al., 2018), Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Italy (Quinale, 2016), and Peru (Wilson, 2013) among others have come out with similar programs to project their global influence through food. Japan centered its campaign on promoting the cultural richness, traditions, and nutritional value of its cuisine. Korea’s strategy emphasises a close connection to nature and the country’s ancient culinary heritage. Malaysia markets itself as a “tropical paradise” based on exoticism and tolerance to the Islam world, while Peru focuses its campaign on the country’s vast culinary cultural diversity, mysticism, and a sustainable approach (Tettner & Kalyoncu, 2016). Thailand employs extravagant and lavish cooking and food presentations to draw tourists, and Taiwan, on the other hand, presents itself as the meeting point of East and West culinary traditions (Tettner & Kalyoncu, 2016). These campaigns have yielded some positive results. Aside from the economic benefits and the globalisation of their local cuisines (Lee, 2012), South Korea and Japan, for example, have their cuisines added to UNESCO’s list of intangible cultural heritage (Demetriou, 2013; Ongkowitzjojo & Hikam, 2017).

However, African cuisines are not universally known like those of Asia, Europe, and North America, therefore, part of this study is to project West African cuisines. Therefore, the aim of the chapter is to examine how the “jollof war” is harnessing West African culinary soft power. To achieve this, the chapter sets to achieve two main objectives; the first is to trace the history of the “jollof war” and ascertain the strategies to win the war. The second is to assess how the “jollof war” is harnessing the culinary soft power of West Africa.

Soft Power and Culinary Soft Power

JOSEPH Nye propounded the concept of soft power in 1990. He defines soft power as the ability to influence other actors to attain the desired results in international relations through persuasion and attraction (Nye, 2009:160). Nye’s argument is that actors, preferably countries, are more likely to achieve their international objectives if they can use their values to influence other actors. To Nye, the soft power of a nation may come from three sources. These are culture, political values, and foreign policies (Nye, 2008). That is if State A can project its culture, it will help develop a positive public opinion about State A abroad, which will make other states or citizens develop a preference for State A’s culture. Formerly, variables such as population, size of the military and economy, land topography, and natural resources

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