



The Unesco Chair in World Food Systems breaks down the barriers of knowledge on food. The **En Bref!** collection presents the main conclusions drawn from our conferences, publications, and action research projects.

Revealing the dynamics of African food systems

KEY POINTS

- Africa stands out for the convergence of major global issues, including demographics, health, climate change and education, all of which profoundly shape its food systems. Yet perceptions of these systems remain marked by stereotypes.
- We need to move beyond dichotomous representations of Africa either as a region in crisis, structurally dependent on international aid, or as the 'continent of the future', potentially the ultimate frontier for global growth.
- The recognition of Africa's diverse cuisines is part of a process of heritage preservation that, combined with a dynamic of contemporary creativity and re-compositions spawned by the diaspora, highlights their richness and constant renewal.

Liza Rives, Scientific Communications Officer, CommSciences

Damien Conaré, Secretary General, UNESCO Chair in World Food Systems, L'Institut Agro Montpellier

Africa, a unique continent in many respects, is faced with several major challenges, including its demographic growth. With a young and burgeoning population (by 2050, Africa will be home to a quarter of humanity and at least a third of all 15-24-year-olds), it has to deal with hugely challenging issues in terms of public health, education, urbanisation, armed conflict management, economic inequality, governance, migration, and adaptation to climate change. The continent, tainted by stereotypical representations, has been shaped by a long and diverse history, and by multiple political, social and cultural trajectories. It has been profoundly transformed by the slave trade, colonisation, and the formation of vast diasporas around the world that have led to the circulation of knowledge, practices and products fuelling the vitality of food systems. As a result, these systems are now characterised by a remarkable capacity for innovation: the rise of small and medium-sized businesses, creative forms of catering, and rapid reconfiguration of distribution channels.

The food sector thus oscillates between economic and human potential on the one hand, and structural obstacles on the other. It is within this dynamic, between promising advances and persistent challenges, that contemporary African realities are taking shape. These realities contradict rigid binary perceptions of Africa either as a region in crisis, structurally dependent on international aid, or as the 'continent of the future', potentially the ultimate frontier for global growth. These are some of the preconceived ideas that we attempted to deconstruct at our **2025 annual conference**, dedicated to African food systems.

It is within this dynamic, between promising advances and persistent challenges, that contemporary African realities are taking shape

Africas: revisiting the history and diversity of the continent

Two constants have long shaped a misrepresentation of Africa: supposed homogeneity, and a lack of history. This view has its origins in a Eurocentric intellectual tradition grounded on a combination of literature, philosophy and science. It is found in Arthur de Gobineau's essay, *The Inequality of Human Races*, as well as the works of Balzac and Hugo, in which African figures are often caricatured and sometimes dehumanised. These representations accompanied not only colonial conquests

but also anthropological missions which, under the guise of scientific studies, participated in a project of symbolic control.¹ The exclusion of Africa from the universal historical narrative was thus characterised by a denial of the voice of African societies.

African history cannot be limited to the continental territory alone. The integration of populations from elsewhere (the Arabian Peninsula, Europe, India, etc.) and the spread of African diasporas in the Americas, the Persian Gulf, Europe and Asia place Africa at the heart of the historical and contemporary dynamics of globalisation. This historicity is often still obscured, fuelling the persistent image of Africa as a silent periphery of world history. Africa must however be thought of as a space traversed across the ages by migrations, the shaping of identities and diverse trajectories: trading, the spread of religions, dialogues with ancient Egypt and Greece, and creolisation resulting from slavery. These closely intertwined African and diasporic histories birthed the concept of 'Afropolitanism', developed in the early 2000s by Taiye Selasi in her column "Bye-Bye Babar (Or: What Is the Afropolitan?)" and further developed by Achille Mbembe—a concept that *"reflects contemporary Africa's awakening to the multiple figures making up its particular histories, its awareness of the intertwining of here and elsewhere, of the dispersion of populations and the mobility of cultures across the continent over centuries"*.

The cultural, geographical, social and political diversity of the continent and its sheer size (five times that of Europe) invite us to understand the full complexity of African realities. This heterogeneity is evident, for example, in economic dynamics and development issues, which vary widely from country to country. *"These contrasts highlight the impossibility of resorting to uniform frameworks of interpretation, whether excessively laudatory or purely alarmist"*, notes Souleymane Gassama, journalist, writer and associate researcher at the Institute for International and Strategic Relations.

Whether the narrative is one of decline or promise, the perspective remains shaped by external rationales that are rarely grounded in facts and seldom reflect the diversity of social trajectories and political will expressed on the continent. This polarisation affects representations related to food: either the emphasis is on vulnerabilities (food insecurity, dependence on external markets) or Africa is reduced to a strategic reservoir of arable land and markets to be conquered.

Changes in food systems in Africa

Africa is currently experiencing several major trends, particularly in terms of demographics and climate. With one of the youngest and fastest-growing populations in the world, the continent faces employment challenges in a context where the domestic market is also expanding rapidly. Every year, nearly 30,000 young people per million inhabitants enter the labour market, generating considerable economic potential in the food sector in the broadest

sense: agricultural production, processing, distribution, catering and trade. However, the sector remains insufficiently attractive to the younger generations, who are deterred by the precarious living conditions in rural areas and the climate vulnerability of agricultural activities. The result is a complex equation: the significant employment potential that exists is difficult to mobilise due to multiple structural impediments.

Representations of African food systems continue to distinguish between 'subsistence crops', grown for self-consumption, and 'cash crops', grown for export. *"This dichotomy does not reflect the economic reality of the territories"*, explains Nicolas Bricas, a researcher in food socio-economics at the CIRAD. Farmers in West and Central Africa actually derive most of their income from the sale of food products on local markets, not from so-called 'cash' crops.²

Furthermore, the image of an African market reduced to traditional urban stalls no longer reflects the evolution and diversity of distribution channels. A 'silent revolution' in food trade is underway, driven by the emergence of mass retail in several countries. Supermarket chains are developing in South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, and beyond. Alongside traditional markets, a structured sector is profoundly transforming consumption habits and supply chains. This trend is being reinforced by the development of e-commerce. Platforms such as Jumia, which operate in several countries on the continent, facilitate the ordering and delivery of food products, even though this channel remains marginal. The increasing digitalisation of African economies is nevertheless a lever for structuring new commercial opportunities.

Consumption patterns are also changing, confronting the continent with a dual nutritional reality. Whereas it was long associated with undernutrition, we now witness both malnutrition and overweight, particularly in North Africa. This requires us to move beyond an approach focused on increasing calorie intake, to a contextualised understanding of nutritional needs.

This gradual restructuring of food systems is however taking place in a context of high environmental vulnerability. *"The continent is one of the regions most exposed to the effects of climate change, particularly in agriculture, where production systems remain largely dependent on natural conditions"*, explained Guéladio Cissé, a researcher at the Swiss Scientific Research Centre in Côte d'Ivoire. The significant rise in temperatures over the last few decades has made agriculture increasingly vulnerable and has affected productivity. Certain staple crops, in particular, are heavily affected. For example, between 1974 and 2008, maize yields in sub-Saharan Africa fell by 5.8%.³ Faced with these challenges, significant changes are being made. The renewed interest in staple foods such as yams and cassava, or in specific crops such as millet and fonio, which are particularly well-suited to arid conditions, reflects a shift towards

1. See the resources from the Musée du Quai Branly exhibition "Mission Dakar Djibouti [1931-1933] – contre-enquêtes" (April to September 2025): www.quaibranly.fr/fr/collections/provenances/contre-enquetes

2. "L'Afrique à la conquête de son marché alimentaire intérieur – Enseignements de dix ans d'enquêtes auprès des ménages d'Afrique de l'Ouest, du Cameroun et du Tchad". Nicolas Bricas, Claude Tchamda, Florence Mouton, AFD, 2017.

3. *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability, Working Group II Contribution to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.*

more resilient crops. Similarly, the rediscovery of irrigation techniques in semi-arid areas is attracting growing interest, including outside the continent.

From subsistence to heritage: new perspectives on African cuisines

African cities are emerging as vibrant culinary laboratories. They are seeing the emergence of a new generation of creative 'urban' cuisines, where traditional recipes are being reinvented, largely by women, whose role remains underestimated. Although women are often confined to the domestic sphere, they are the ones working in street food kitchens that feed millions of city dwellers daily. Some solidarity initiatives are promoting their invisible knowledge. In Tunisia, for example, the Ftartchi programme enables women who are outside the labour market to professionalise their culinary skills through training courses focused on fusion cuisine, combining inclusion, tradition and innovation.

Long marginalised or even overlooked in global gastronomic narratives, African cuisine is now undergoing a vibrant renewal, driven by a dynamic of cultural recognition, heritage pride, and creative reinvention. From Abidjan to Dakar, Kinshasa to Paris, and Lagos to New York, African cuisines are being exported and transformed, asserting themselves through migration, intra-continental exchanges and regional hybridisation. The current hype surrounding certain African dishes—relayed by the media, including social media, and the 'soul food' movement in the United States—attests to this symbolic conquest.

African cuisines are thus gaining visibility on the European scene. Entrepreneurial initiatives are part of a booming market, such as the Mom Koumba brand, and are making African flavours accessible through major retailers. This dynamic is based both on consumer curiosity and on growing demand from the 14 million people of African descent living in Europe.

A generation of chefs from the African diaspora is spearheading a bold culinary revolution. Trained in the traditions of French gastronomy, they are developing a creative cuisine inspired by the flavours and practices inherited from their countries of origin. Chef Hugues Mbenda explains: 'I first learned the basics of French gastronomy, because every chef working in France must master the fundamentals. Then I returned to Kinshasa to rediscover flavours and create Kin, a restaurant that bridges French and African cuisines'. We are thus witnessing a dynamic not only of transmission but also



EVOLUTION
"I'll have an iced latte macchiato..."
"... Palm-nut stew."

of great inventiveness, based on a blend of cultural heritages shaping an institutionally recognised cuisine—what Vêrane Frédiani, author of *L'Afrique cuisine en France*, describes as 'Afropean'. Adejoké Bakare, a British chef of Nigerian origin, embodied this recognition when, in 2024, she became the first Black woman in the United Kingdom to receive a Michelin star.

This new perspective, evidenced in the media and gastronomic spheres, is gaining ground in the scientific world. Whereas research on African culinary cultures has formerly focused on food security issues, it is now increasingly incorporating their richness in terms of symbolic, memorial and heritage value.

Certain neglected areas of study have thus come under the spotlight, such as Réunion Island, where cooking is a space for encounters and re-invention. Through the lens of Édouard Glissant, the notion of the rhizome allows us to appreciate the richness of the local gastronomy. The rhizome, with its intertwined branches, embodies an identity in motion that combines, transforms and invents. Laurence Tibère, professor of sociology at the University of Toulouse Jean-Jaurès, shows that in this sense, Creole cuisine constitutes a true 'commonality' ('en-commun') in a region where Africans, Malagasys, Indians and Europeans have all left their mark. To explore the origins of Réunion dishes is to accept a degree of uncertainty. Culinary creolisation is thus part of a shared identity narrative.

Archaeological work carried out in Réunion since the 2000s has shed new light on the Maroon food cultures developed in the micro-societies formed by runaway slaves (the 'Maroons'). These communities, on the fringes of the colonial system, developed specific practices based on a detailed knowledge of the environment, resilience, and food self-sufficiency. Today, their practices

From Abidjan to Dakar, Kinshasa to Paris, and Lagos to New York, African cuisines are being exported and transformed

are being rediscovered and revived. Yet the question of their origins remains a very real issue. Many dishes that are part of Réunion cuisine are being reassessed in terms of their links with Madagascar or the African continent. These connections, long overlooked or amalgamated into a generic identity—that of the ‘*kaf*’, inherited from the slave-trading past—are now eliciting renewed interest.

Re-examining these origins also means restoring the plurality of the cultural and historical legacies shaping the island.

EATING BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: FOOD STANDARDS, CONSTRAINTS AND CULTURAL FUSION

As they encounter a different culinary world, immigrants discover both the unfamiliarity of French food-related practices and the implicit contours of their own eating habits. The migratory experience reveals cultural boundaries and norms that had been internalised. This was shown in a survey of 55 people from 14 African countries, living in France.⁴ Cultural differences are particularly evident in table manners. French norms, which are strict about the structure and scheduling of meals, contrast with the more flexible and collective forms often observed in the countries of origin. Where individualisation prevails in France, with different dishes and separate portions, the respondents emphasised the importance of a single dish, shared preparation, and more flexible mealtimes. Individualisation in France is also found in the profusion of packaging, reflecting a consumption pattern focused on individual portions and ready-to-eat meals.

Respondents described a twofold shift in their frame of reference, in terms of both products and uses. The consumption of foods previously perceived as inaccessible or even culturally unacceptable—such as mould-ripened cheeses—requires a rethinking of what is edible. Furthermore, the culinary use of certain familiar products is changing. Leeks, for example, used in Cameroon to flavour a sauce or spice up a dish, elicit surprise when they are served with a vinaigrette.

In addition to these symbolic shifts, there are practical adjustments as the scarcity of basic ingredients (chilli peppers, cassava, yams) causes daily menus to be modified. It is in this intertwining of constraints and opportunities that the blending of food cultures emerges: a constantly changing dynamic, sometimes imposed (canteens, collective catering), and sometimes a conscious choice (reinterpretation of the use of spices).

4. Research by students doing an Advanced Master's® degree in Innovations and Policies for Sustainable Food at L'Institut Agro Montpellier and the CIRAD, and a Master's degree in Social Sciences Applied to Food at the University of Toulouse Jean-Jaurès.



REUNIONESE DISHES

"The African influence is evident"

"You mean Kaf?"

"Malagasy rather, right?"

"Not at all, that's Indian"

CONCLUSION

The many facets of Africa, a continent of diverse dimensions and histories, invite us to move beyond the representations that have long confined its reality to stereotypical opposites. Deconstructing these preconceptions reveals a dynamic continent, rich in trajectories, social and economic innovations, and vibrant culinary creativity. Faced with this complex reality, it is necessary to adopt nuanced and contextualised approaches to the challenges facing contemporary African food systems, particularly in a context marked by the major disruptions of climate change. The profound transformations underway require not only the promotion of local crops adapted to new environmental conditions, but also the mobilisation of key territories, in which cities play a strategic role. As hubs for experimentation and dissemination of culinary and food innovations, they also constitute a lever for rethinking food policies.