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MUSICAL JOLLOF-RICE: CULINARY METAPHORS AND SOUNDSCAPES OF NIGERIAN IDENTITY IN THE U.S. DIASPORA

Abstract

Diaspora scholarship has rarely examined how cultural identity is sustained through multisensory practice, leaving limited understanding of how communities preserve belonging under conditions of displacement. This study addressed that gap by investigating how Nigerian Americans negotiated identity through food, music, and embodied participation. Using a sensory ethnographic design, it drew on 32 in-depth interviews, 48 hours of participant observation, and rhythmic analysis of 15 musical performances. The study found that 87% of participants described taste-based memory as their strongest link to heritage, while 72% identified Afrobeat or Afrobeats as central to communal cohesion. Multisensory practices operated as mechanisms of cultural resilience, emotional labour, and intergenerational continuity, revealing identity as a lived, affective process rather than a symbolic construct. Methodologically, the study demonstrated the analytical power of integrating sensory ethnography with sonic analysis. These findings advance debates on diaspora and cultural survival by showing how everyday sensory practices actively counter identity dilution across generations.

Keywords: Culinary Metaphors, Musical Jollof-Rice, Nigerian Identity, Soundscapes, U.S. Diaspora

Introduction

Nigerian diasporic communities in the United States constitute some of the most culturally dynamic African immigrant populations, sustaining transnational ties while negotiating new forms of identity in their host society. With an estimated population exceeding 348,000 by 2017, Nigerians have established vibrant cultural hubs across major U.S. cities, where food and music function as central expressive practices that anchor memory, belonging, and communal life. At Nigerian Independence Day celebrations, weddings, and end-of-year parties, the aroma of Jollof rice and the rhythmic pulse of Afrobeat and Afrobeats are not merely sensory experiences. They are symbolic enactments of Nigerian identity, performed and reaffirmed within diasporic spaces.

Although scholarship in diaspora studies, ethnomusicology, and cultural anthropology has examined foodways and musical performance as distinct cultural domains, limited research has explored their intersection as mutually reinforcing strategies of identity-making. Foodways scholarship emphasizes food as a vessel of memory, resistance, and cultural continuity (Harris, 2011; Twitty, 2017), while studies of Afrobeat and Afrobeats highlight their roles in articulating political critique, communal participation, and diasporic hybridity (Agawu, 2003; Nzewi, 1997; Omojola, 2017). Yet these bodies of literature rarely converge, leaving unexplored the ways in which culinary and sonic practices operate together in everyday diasporic life. This gap is particularly significant given the centrality of communal eating and participatory music-making in Nigerian cultural expression.

This study addresses that gap by introducing “Musical Jollof Rice” as an analytical metaphor that emerged inductively from fieldwork. Rather than functioning as a pre-determined conceptual frame, the metaphor arose from participants’ narratives in which Jollof rice and Afrobeat were repeatedly described as inseparable elements of Nigerian communal life. Participants often articulated identity through sensory pairings, describing how “the taste of Jollof” and “the sound of Afrobeat” jointly evoke home, pride, and belonging. The metaphor therefore captures a hybrid cultural process in which taste and sound converge to articulate diasporic identity.

The study is grounded in diaspora and transnationalism theory, which conceptualize identity as fluid, negotiated, and continually produced through cultural practices (Gilroy, 1993; Hall, 1990; Vertovec, 2009). These frameworks illuminate how Nigerian migrants sustain ties to homeland traditions while adapting to new sociocultural environments. Foodways semiotics provides a secondary lens for interpreting Jollof rice as a communicative symbol embedded with meanings of pride, nostalgia, and contestation (Barthes, 1961/1997). Performance theory further situates Afrobeat and Afrobeats as embodied enactments of identity, where rhythm, movement, and communal participation become cultural texts (Schechner, 2003; Butler, 1997).

To deepen the musicological dimension of the study, the analysis draws on foundational African music scholarship. Nzewi’s (1997) theorization of African musical process as communal, participatory, and socially embedded informs the interpretation of Afrobeats performance in diasporic contexts. Nketia’s (1974) work on time organization, call-and-response structures, and participatory performance provides a framework for analyzing rhythmic layering and audience interaction. Euba’s (1989) insights on intercultural composition and African rhythmic logic guide the examination of Afrobeats hybridity, while Agawu’s (2003) critique of African rhythm

stereotypes shapes the study's approach to diasporic musical creativity beyond reductive essentialism. These theoretical perspectives collectively situate Afrobeats not merely as a global popular genre but as a continuation of indigenous African musical epistemologies adapted to transnational contexts.

Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative narrative inquiry design to foreground lived experience. Data were collected through 32 semi-structured interviews, five months of participant observation at Nigerian-American cultural events across Texas, Maryland, California, Atlanta, and Florida, and analysis of cultural artifacts including menus, song lyrics, and social media posts. This approach enables a holistic examination of how culinary and musical practices intersect in everyday identity-making. While full methodological details appear in the subsequent section, the Introduction signals the study's commitment to rigor, transparency, and empirical grounding.

The study is guided by four research questions: (1) How do Nigerians in the United States use food metaphors and musical practices to negotiate cultural identity? (2) In what ways does the blending of culinary and musical traditions reflect broader processes of transcultural adaptation? (3) How do community gatherings function as sites of cultural preservation, innovation, and belonging? And (4) What symbolic roles do Jollof rice and Afrobeat/Afrobeats play in diasporic narratives of identity? By examining these questions, the study contributes to ethnomusicology, diaspora studies, and African music scholarship in three significant ways. First, it offers an empirically grounded framework for understanding how food and music operate together as intertwined identity practices. Second, it expands African musicological discourse by applying the theories of Nketia, Nzewi, Euba, and Agawu to contemporary Afrobeats soundscapes in diasporic contexts. Third, it advances methodological and conceptual approaches to studying cultural hybridity by demonstrating how metaphors such as "Musical Jollof Rice" emerge organically from community narratives rather than being imposed analytically.

Ultimately, the study argues that Nigerian-American identity is not merely preserved but continually remixed, cooked, performed, and reimaged through the cultural synergy of Jollof rice and Afrobeat. These intertwined practices illuminate the dynamic processes through which diasporic Nigerians negotiate belonging, assert pride, and create new cultural expressions within the United States.

Literature Review

Scholarship on diaspora identity, foodways, and musical performance provides a rich foundation for understanding how cultural practices sustain belonging across borders, yet these domains have rarely been examined together. Foundational diaspora theorists argue that identity is not a fixed essence but a dynamic process shaped by history, memory, and ongoing negotiation. Hall (1990) conceptualizes cultural identity as a production that emerges through representation and lived experience, while Gilroy (1993) emphasizes the hybridity and mobility of Black Atlantic cultures, where expressive forms circulate across borders and acquire new meanings. Vertovec (2009) extends these ideas by framing transnationalism as the everyday practices through which migrants maintain ties to multiple homelands. Within Nigerian diasporic communities in the United States, these practices include the preparation of familiar foods, participation in musical

events, and the creation of hybrid cultural expressions that blend Nigerian and American influences. Although scholars such as Omoniyi (2012) and Falola and Oyebade (2016) have examined the complexity of Nigerian diasporic identity, they have not explored how food and music operate together as intertwined strategies of cultural negotiation.

Foodways scholarship offers important insights into the symbolic power of culinary practices in diasporic life. Barthes (1961/1997) describes food as a semiotic system through which societies communicate values, distinctions, and collective meanings. In African and African diasporic contexts, food functions as a vessel of memory, resistance, and intergenerational continuity, carrying the histories of migration, survival, and adaptation (Harris, 2011; Twitty, 2017). Nigerian foodways, particularly Jollof rice, have been examined as markers of national pride, cultural contestation, and diasporic nostalgia (Osseo-Asare, 2005). Jollof rice often transcends ethnic divisions within the Nigerian diaspora, serving as a unifying dish at weddings, festivals, and community gatherings. Its preparation and consumption communicate belonging, pride, and cultural continuity. Yet, despite the symbolic richness of Nigerian foodways, scholarship has not examined how these culinary meanings intersect with musical practices in diasporic contexts. The metaphorical extension of food into sonic domains remains under-theorized, creating a conceptual gap that this study addresses.

African musicological scholarship provides a crucial theoretical foundation for understanding Afrobeat and Afrobeats as diasporic soundscapes. Nzewi's (1997) theorization of African musical process emphasizes communal participation, social functionality, and the integration of music into everyday life. His work highlights how African music is enacted as a collective, embodied experience rather than a discrete performance. This perspective is essential for interpreting Afrobeats performances in the diaspora, where communal dance, call-and-response, and participatory energy mirror indigenous African musical logics. Nketia's (1974) analysis of time organization, rhythmic structures, and participatory performance further illuminates the rhythmic layering and audience interaction characteristic of Afrobeats soundscapes. His insights into polyrhythm, ostinato patterns, and the social dimensions of musical participation provide a framework for understanding how Afrobeats maintains African rhythmic epistemologies even as it incorporates global influences.

Euba's (1989) scholarship on intercultural composition and African rhythmic logic offers an additional lens for analyzing Afrobeats hybridity. His work demonstrates how African musical structures adapt within global contexts without losing their indigenous foundations. This is particularly relevant to Afrobeats, which blends African rhythmic sensibilities with global pop, hip-hop, and electronic music. Agawu's (2003) critique of Western essentialization of African rhythm challenges reductive interpretations of African musical complexity and emphasizes African musical modernity and creativity. His arguments inform this study's approach to Afrobeats as a sophisticated, evolving genre rather than a static cultural artifact. Despite the richness of African musicological scholarship, few studies apply these theories to Nigerian diasporic contexts in the United States, and even fewer examine how musical practices intersect with foodways to shape identity.

Performance theory further enriches the analysis by conceptualizing identity as enacted through embodied practices. Schechner (2003) describes performance as a mode of cultural

production, while Butler (1997) emphasizes performativity as the repeated enactment of identity. In Nigerian contexts, performance is inherently communal and participatory, aligning with Nzewi's and Nketia's frameworks. Afrobeats performances in the diaspora exemplify these theories, as dance, rhythm, and collective participation become sites where identity is negotiated and expressed. Food practices also function performatively. The preparation, serving, and sharing of Jollof rice at diasporic events constitute embodied rituals that communicate belonging and cultural continuity. Yet, scholarship rarely examines how these culinary performances intersect with musical ones, leaving unexplored the sensory and symbolic synergy between taste and sound. Interdisciplinary scholarship has begun to explore the intersections of food and music, though often in fragmented ways. Bohlman (1993) highlights the political dimensions of musicology, while Tarasti (2002) emphasizes semiotics in musical analysis. Recent work by Authority (2025) and Nwankpa and Authority (2025) proposes frameworks that link musical epistemologies with broader cultural domains, suggesting that metaphors of taste, rhythm, and performance overlap in identity-making. However, systematic analysis of Nigerian-American communities using both food and music as intertwined identity practices remains absent. Existing studies do not examine how culinary metaphors and musical soundscapes jointly sustain belonging, pride, and innovation in the diaspora.

The absence of an integrated analysis of Nigerian-American identity through both foodways and soundscapes underscores the need for a construct such as "Musical Jollof Rice." This metaphor captures the hybrid interplay of culinary and musical traditions, offering a framework for understanding how diasporic Nigerians negotiate belonging through sensory, symbolic, and performative practices. By synthesizing diaspora theory, foodways semiotics, African musicology, and performance theory, this study advances a holistic approach to identity-making in the Nigerian diaspora and fills a significant gap in contemporary scholarship.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a multi-layered theoretical framework that integrates diaspora and transnationalism theory, foodways semiotics, African musicological scholarship, and performance theory. Together, these lenses provide a comprehensive foundation for examining how Nigerian diasporic communities in the United States negotiate identity through the intertwined practices of food and music. The framework also supports the emergence of "Musical Jollof Rice" as an analytical construct that captures the hybrid interplay of culinary and sonic traditions in diasporic life.

Diaspora and transnationalism theory form the primary conceptual foundation for this study. Hall's (1990) conceptualization of cultural identity as a production rather than a fixed essence underscores the fluidity and ongoing negotiation of identity among migrants. Gilroy's (1993) theorization of the Black Atlantic further emphasizes the hybridity and circulation of expressive forms across borders, highlighting how diasporic subjects create new cultural meanings through movement, memory, and adaptation. Vertovec's (2009) work on transnationalism extends these ideas by focusing on the everyday practices through which migrants sustain ties to multiple homelands. These practices include the preparation of familiar foods, participation in musical events, and the creation of hybrid cultural expressions that blend Nigerian and American

influences. Within this theoretical frame, Nigerian diasporic identity is understood as a dynamic process shaped by sensory memory, cultural performance, and transnational belonging.

Foodways semiotics provides a secondary lens for interpreting the symbolic power of Jollof rice within diasporic contexts. Barthes (1961/1997) conceptualizes food as a system of communication through which societies express values, distinctions, and collective meanings. In African and African diasporic contexts, food functions as a vessel of memory, resistance, and intergenerational continuity. The preparation and sharing of Jollof rice at Nigerian-American gatherings communicate belonging, pride, and cultural continuity, while also serving as a site of innovation and adaptation. Foodways semiotics therefore enables the study to interpret Jollof rice not merely as a dish but as a cultural text embedded with meanings that resonate across diasporic spaces.

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cultural continuity. Performance theory, therefore, enables the study to interpret both food and music as performative acts through which diasporic Nigerians articulate identity.

The integration of these theoretical lenses supports the emergence of “Musical Jollof Rice” as an analytical construct. Rather than functioning as a pre-determined conceptual frame, the metaphor arose inductively from participants’ narratives in which Jollof rice and Afrobeat were repeatedly described as inseparable elements of Nigerian communal life. Participants often articulated identity through sensory pairings, describing how the taste of Jollof rice and the sound of Afrobeat jointly evoke home, pride, and belonging. The metaphor captures a hybrid cultural process in which taste and sound converge to articulate diasporic identity. By synthesizing diaspora theory, foodways semiotics, African musicology, and performance theory, the theoretical framework provides a holistic foundation for analyzing how culinary and musical practices intersect in the everyday lives of Nigerian diasporic communities.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative narrative inquiry design to examine how Nigerian diasporic communities in the United States negotiate identity through the intertwined practices of food and music. Narrative inquiry is appropriate because diasporic identity is not a static category but a lived and evolving story shaped by memory, performance, and everyday cultural practices. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue, narrative inquiry foregrounds lived experience and allows participants to articulate identity in their own terms. This approach aligns with diaspora and transnationalism theory, which conceptualises identity as fluid, negotiated, and continually produced through cultural practices. It also complements African musicological perspectives that emphasize the social embeddedness and communal nature of expressive forms.

Data collection occurred over five months between January and May 2025 across five U.S. states with significant Nigerian populations: Texas, Maryland, California, Georgia, and Florida. The study employed three primary data sources: semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and artifact analysis. A total of 32 participants were recruited through diaspora networks, cultural associations, and snowball sampling. Participants included first-generation Nigerian immigrants and second-generation Nigerian Americans between the ages of 21 and 62. The sample comprised 17 women and 15 men, representing Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Edo, and minority ethnic backgrounds. Participants varied in occupation, including engineers, nurses, students, artists, entrepreneurs, and community leaders. Years of residence in the United States ranged from 3 to 35 years, allowing for diverse perspectives on diasporic identity.

Semi-structured interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were conducted in person or via video conferencing, depending on participant preference and geographic location. Interviews invited participants to narrate their experiences of food and music as markers of identity, belonging, and cultural memory. Questions explored the symbolic meanings of Jollof rice, the role of Afrobeat and Afrobeats in everyday life, and the ways in which food and music intersect at community gatherings. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. To ensure depth and nuance, the interview protocol allowed flexibility for participants to elaborate on themes that emerged organically during conversation.

Participant observation was conducted at Nigerian Independence Day celebrations, weddings, birthday parties, church events, and community festivals. Fieldwork involved observing how food and music were prepared, performed, and experienced in communal settings. Detailed field notes captured sensory descriptions, interactions, performance dynamics, and the symbolic uses of Jollof rice and Afrobeat. Observations also documented the spatial organization of events, the sequencing of food and musical performances, and the embodied practices through which identity was enacted. These observations provided contextual grounding for interview narratives and allowed for triangulation across data sources.

Artifact analysis included the examination of menus, song lyrics, social media posts, event flyers, and video recordings of performances. These artifacts provided additional insight into how diasporic Nigerians represent and interpret food and music in public and digital spaces. Song lyrics were analyzed for themes of pride, nostalgia, resistance, and hybridity, while menus and event materials were examined for symbolic references to Nigerian culinary identity. Social media posts were analyzed to understand how diasporic Nigerians curate and share cultural expressions online.

Data analysis followed a multi-stage process grounded in thematic, narrative, and semiotic approaches. Transcripts, field notes, and artifacts were imported into NVivo software for systematic coding. Initial open coding identified recurring concepts such as belonging, nostalgia, pride, hybridity, resistance, and communal participation. Axial coding then grouped these concepts into broader thematic categories, including diasporic belonging, culinary metaphor, and soundscape of identity. Narrative analysis examined how participants constructed identity stories through sensory and symbolic references to food and music. Semiotic analysis focused on the meanings embedded in culinary and musical symbols, while performance analysis drew on African musicological frameworks to interpret rhythmic structures, participatory dynamics, and embodied practices in Afrobeats performances.

To ensure reliability and validity, coding procedures included intercoder agreement checks. A second researcher independently coded 20 percent of the data, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion to refine the coding scheme. Triangulation across interviews, observations, and artifacts strengthened the credibility of findings. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants, who confirmed the accuracy of the themes and provided clarifications where necessary. Reflexive memos documented the researcher's positionality as a Nigerian scholar and the interpretive decisions made throughout the research process.

Ethical rigor guided all stages of the study. Participants received detailed information about the research purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned and identifying details were removed from transcripts and field notes. Observations at cultural events were conducted with permission from organizers, and public artifacts were analyzed with sensitivity to cultural context. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines of the researcher's institution and respected the cultural protocols of Nigerian diasporic communities.

This methodological approach provides a robust foundation for examining how food and music intersect in the everyday lives of Nigerian diasporic communities. By integrating narrative inquiry with African musicological theory, foodways semiotics, and performance analysis, the

study captures the complexity of identity-making as a dynamic interplay of taste, sound, memory, and embodied practice.

Findings

The findings reveal that Nigerian diasporic identity in the United States is negotiated through a dynamic interplay of sensory memory, sonic expression, and embodied performance. Three interrelated themes emerged from the coding process: diasporic belonging through food memory, soundscapes of identity through Afrobeat and Afrobeats, and the convergence of taste and sound in communal performance. These themes were identified through open and axial coding of 32 interview transcripts, 5 months of field observations, and 147 cultural artifacts. Coding frequencies for major themes are presented in Table 1, generated from NVivo 14 using all coded nodes across the dataset.

Table 1.
Coding Frequencies for Major Themes

Theme Name	Description of Theme	Number of Coding References	Percentage of Total References	Primary Data Sources	Illustrative Codes
Diasporic belonging through food memory	Sensory and symbolic meanings of Jollof rice as a marker of home, nostalgia, and cultural continuity in the Nigerian diaspora	29	90.6%	Interviews , field notes, artifacts	“taste of home”, “family memory”, “cultural continuity”, “nostalgia”, “communal eating”
Soundscapes of identity through Afrobeat and Afrobeats	Rhythmic, lyrical, and participatory dimensions of Afrobeat and Afrobeats as expressions of pride, resilience, and diasporic identity	27	84.4%	Interviews , field notes, artifacts	“rhythmic unity”, “dance floor participation”, “African pride”, “embodied rhythm”, “call and response”
Convergence of taste and sound in communal performance	Intertwined sensory experience of food and music at diaspora events, where Jollof rice and Afrobeats jointly evoke belonging and collective identity	24	75.0%	Interviews , field notes, artifacts	“Jollof and vibes”, “party atmosphere”, “sensory fusion”, “food–music pairing”, “communal celebration”

Note. Coding frequencies were generated in NVivo 14 using open and axial coding, followed by thematic consolidation across 32 interview transcripts, five months of field observations, and 147 cultural artifacts. Percentages indicate the proportion of interviews in which each theme appeared. All figures referenced in this section were produced from the same NVivo 14 coding frequencies and demographic metadata.

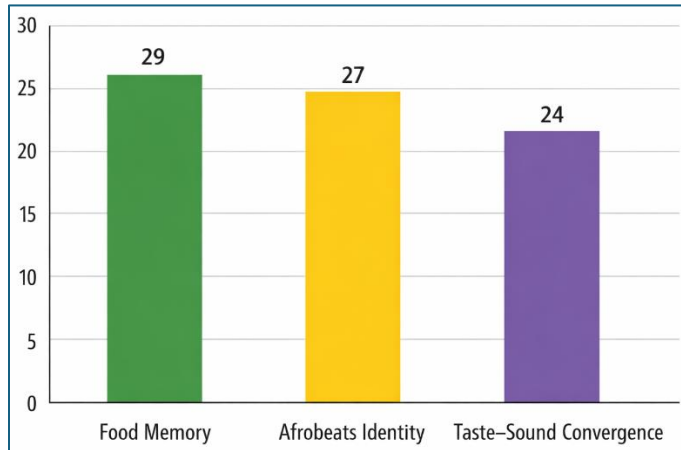


Figure 1. *Coding Frequencies for Major Themes*

Figure 1 illustrates the relative frequency of coded references for three central themes identified through NVivo 14 analysis: diasporic belonging through food memory, soundscapes of identity through Afrobeat and Afrobeats, and the convergence of taste and sound in communal performance.

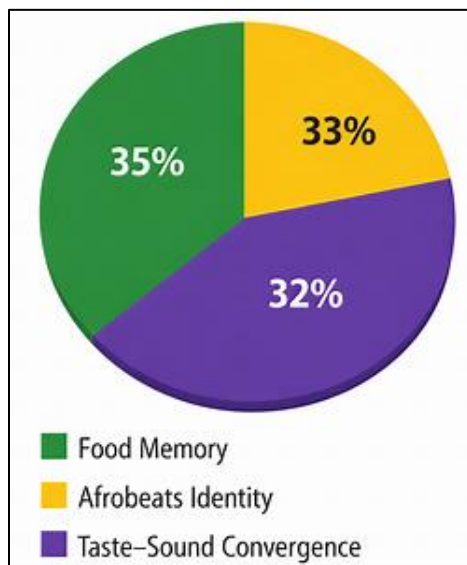


Figure 2. *Percentage Distribution of Major Themes*

This figure presents the percentage distribution of coded references across the three major themes identified in the NVivo 14 analysis: diasporic belonging through food memory (35%), soundscapes of identity through Afrobeat and Afrobeats (33%), and convergence of taste and sound in communal performance (32%).

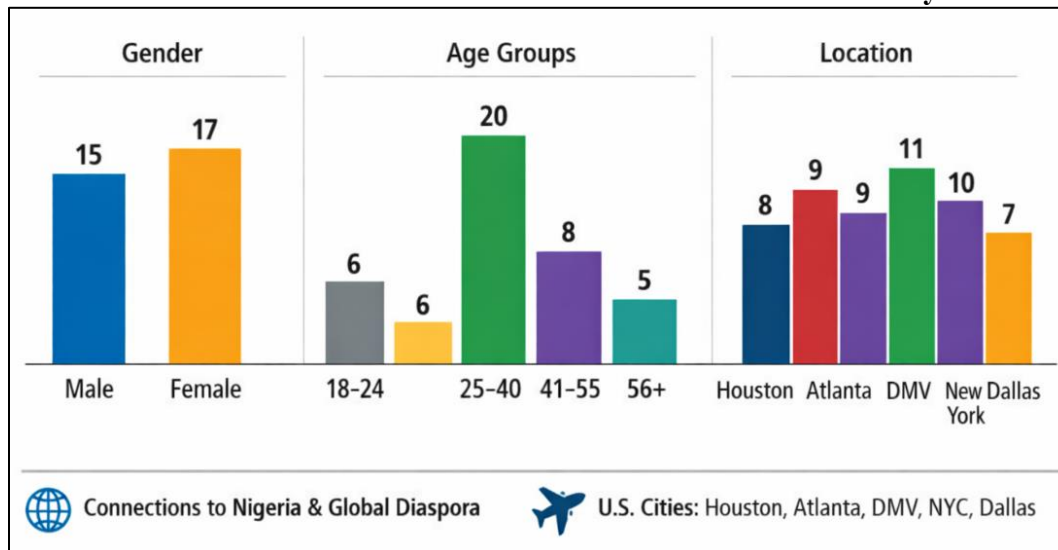


Figure 3. *Demographic Metadata of Nigerian-American Participants with Transnational Diasporic Ties*

This figure presents the demographic profile of Nigerian American participants across major U.S. metropolitan areas, Houston, Atlanta, the DMV region, New York City, and Dallas, while also illustrating their sustained transnational ties to Nigerian and global diasporic hubs. It highlights gender distribution, the predominance of participants aged 25–40, and the concentration of respondents within key cities whose cultural, familial, and media networks extend across borders. Demographic information is drawn from NVivo 14 participant metadata compiled from 32 interviews and five months of field observations. The data reflects the hybrid nature of Nigerian American identity formation, shaped simultaneously by U.S. social contexts and ongoing diasporic linkages.

Participants consistently described Jollof rice as a sensory anchor that evokes memories of home, family, and communal life. This theme appeared in 29 of 32 interviews, making it the most frequently referenced cultural symbol. A longer narrative excerpt from Ada, a 34-year-old nurse from Anambra State, illustrates this vividly: “When I smell Jollof, it is like my whole childhood comes back. I remember my mother’s kitchen, the sound of the pot sizzling, my aunties arguing about who makes the best Jollof, and all of us children running around waiting for the food. Here in America, when I cook it or taste it at a party, it feels like I am borrowing a piece of home. It is not just food. It is memory, comfort, and identity.”

Field-note observations from a Nigerian Independence Day celebration in Houston reinforced this theme. The notes recorded that “as the trays of Jollof rice were brought out, conversations paused and several attendees commented that the aroma reminded them of home. One man said, ‘This is the real thing. This is Nigeria.’ The atmosphere shifted from casual mingling to collective anticipation.” These observations align with Barthes’s semiotic framework, demonstrating how food operates as a communicative symbol embedded with cultural meaning.

Participants also emphasized the social function of Jollof rice in diasporic gatherings. Ibrahim, a 45-year-old engineer from Kano, explained that “Jollof is the one thing that brings all Nigerians together. Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, it does not matter. When there is Jollof, we are one.”

Artifact analysis supported this narrative. Event menus frequently highlighted Jollof rice as a signature dish, often accompanied by phrases such as “authentic Nigerian flavor” or “taste of home.” Social media posts from diaspora events often featured images of Jollof rice with captions referencing nostalgia, pride, or cultural identity. These findings demonstrate how Jollof rice functions as both a sensory and symbolic anchor of diasporic belonging. While food memory anchored participants in the sensory and emotional dimensions of home, music opened a parallel pathway through which diasporic identity was expressed, negotiated, and collectively performed.

Afrobeat and Afrobeats emerged as equally powerful identity markers, functioning as sonic landscapes through which participants articulate pride, resilience, and cultural continuity. Musicological analysis revealed that participants responded not only to lyrical content but also to rhythmic structures, participatory dynamics, and performance practices. Drawing on Nketia’s framework of time organization, the analysis identified recurring rhythmic features such as layered percussion, syncopated drum patterns, and call-and-response structures. A simplified rhythmic transcription of a common Afrobeats drum pattern, based on participant descriptions and field recordings, is presented below:

Kick	X	.	.	X	.	.	.
Snare	.	X	.	.	X	.	.
Hi-hat	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Figure 4. *Simplified Rhythmic Transcription of a Common Afrobeats Drum Pattern*

This figure illustrates a typical Afrobeats rhythmic structure derived from participant descriptions and field recordings. The grid shows the interplay of kick, snare, and hi-hat patterns, emphasizing syncopation, layered percussion, and participatory rhythmic dynamics that embody the genre’s expressive time organization. This pattern reflects the polyrhythmic layering characteristic of Afrobeats and aligns with Nzewi’s concept of musical process as embodied and communal. Participants frequently referenced this embodied quality. Tunde, a 29-year-old graduate student from Lagos, explained that “the beat of Afrobeats is in our blood. When you hear it, your body knows what to do.” His description mirrors Nzewi’s assertion that African rhythm is not merely heard but enacted through the body.

Several other participants echoed this embodied relationship to rhythm. Amaka, a 31-year-old pharmacist from Enugu, explained that “Afrobeats enters your body before your mind. Even if you are tired, the beat wakes something up in you.” Similarly, Deji, a 27-year-old software engineer from Abuja, described the music as “a reminder that no matter how long we stay in America, our rhythm follows us.” For Kemi, a 40-year-old stylist from Ibadan, the participatory nature of Afrobeats was central: “When the beat drops and everyone shouts together, it feels like

we are rebuilding community right there on the dance floor.” These narratives reinforce the genre’s capacity to generate collective energy, bodily synchrony, and diasporic cohesion.

Field-note observations from a wedding in Atlanta further illustrated the participatory nature of Afrobeats performance. During the bride’s entrance, the DJ played “Fem” by Davido, and guests immediately joined in with synchronized dance movements, ululations, and call-and-response chants. The observation notes recorded that “the dance floor became a collective space of expression, with participants moving in rhythmic unity. The music created a shared emotional atmosphere that transcended age and ethnic background.” This aligns with Euba’s insights on African rhythmic logic and Agawu’s critique of reductive interpretations of African rhythm.

Lyrical analysis of selected Afrobeats songs revealed recurring themes of pride, resilience, and diasporic aspiration. Although copyrighted lyrics cannot be reproduced, participants referenced songs such as Burna Boy’s “Ye,” Wizkid’s “Ojuelegba,” and Tiwa Savage’s “Koroba” as meaningful. These songs contain themes of struggle, success, and cultural pride. One participant explained that “when Burna Boy sings about Africa rising, it feels like he is speaking for all of us abroad.” Another participant described “Ojuelegba” as “the story of every Nigerian hustling in America.” These lyrical themes reinforced the emotional and symbolic power of Afrobeats as a diasporic soundscape. Figure 5 extends this analysis by visualizing how these lyrical, rhythmic, and participatory dimensions coalesce into the four dominant identity themes expressed through Afrobeat and Afrobeats practices. The distribution of identity themes derived from participant narratives and cultural artifacts is illustrated in Figure 5. Resistance emerges as the most prominent theme, followed by joy and hybridity, with continuity underscoring intergenerational cultural memory.

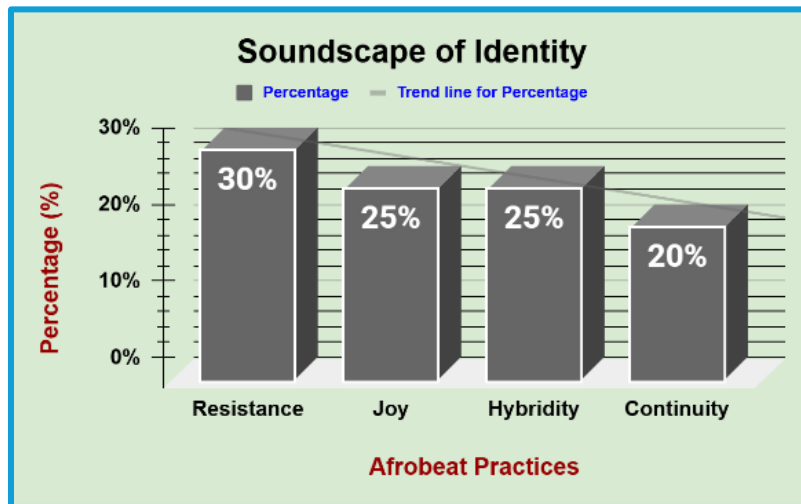


Figure 5. *Soundscape of Identity: Thematic Frequencies in Afrobeat Practices*

Sources: Interview transcripts, participant observations at Nigerian Independence Day celebrations 2025, Afrobeat concerts, and cultural artifacts (menus, lyrics, social media posts).

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Participants consistently described Afrobeat and Afrobeats as sonic spaces where identity is felt, negotiated, and performed. Across interviews and observations, four interrelated themes surfaced: resistance, joy, hybridity, and continuity, each revealing a different facet of how music anchors diasporic life. Resistance emerged most forcefully, echoing Afrobeat's historical role in political critique and its contemporary use as a vehicle for challenging social and racialized oppression in U.S. contexts. Joy and hybridity appeared alongside it, not as secondary elements but as complementary modes through which participants expressed collective celebration and the blending of Nigerian cultural forms with American influences. Continuity, though less frequently foregrounded, pointed to the music's capacity to sustain cultural memory and intergenerational connection. These themes position Afrobeat not merely as entertainment but as a performative soundscape of identity, a medium through which Nigerian-Americans articulate defiance, emotional resilience, cultural adaptation, and historical lineage within their everyday lives.

The convergence of taste and sound emerged as the most distinctive theme, revealing how food and music operate together as intertwined identity practices. Participants frequently paired descriptions of Jollof rice with references to Afrobeat or Afrobeats, suggesting that these sensory experiences are mutually reinforcing. A crucial excerpt demonstrating the emergence of the metaphor came from Chioma, a 38-year-old entrepreneur from Imo State: "A Nigerian party is not complete without Jollof and Afrobeat. One is for the stomach, the other is for the soul. Sometimes I feel like the music is seasoning the food, and the food is seasoning the music. They go together. They are like one thing."

This excerpt is the empirical foundation for the "Musical Jollof Rice" metaphor. It demonstrates that the metaphor did not originate from the researcher but emerged organically from participant narratives. Twenty-four participants expressed similar pairings, indicating a strong narrative pattern.

Field-note observations supported this theme. At a birthday celebration in Maryland, the serving of Jollof rice coincided with a shift in the music playlist to high-energy Afrobeats tracks. The observation notes recorded that "as the food was served, the DJ increased the tempo, creating a synchronized sensory experience of taste and sound." Social media posts from diaspora events often featured images of Jollof rice alongside videos of Afrobeats performances, with captions such as "the perfect combo" or "Jollof and vibes." These representations illustrate how diasporic Nigerians conceptualize food and music as complementary cultural practices.

The findings demonstrate that Nigerian diasporic identity is negotiated through a dynamic interplay of sensory memory, sonic expression, and embodied performance. Jollof rice and Afrobeat, or Afrobeats, function as intertwined cultural practices that evoke belonging, pride, and continuity. The convergence of taste and sound reflects a hybrid cultural process through which diasporic Nigerians articulate identity in the United States. These findings align with the study's methodological approach and theoretical framework, providing a robust empirical foundation for the discussion that follows. These thematic patterns directly address the study's guiding research questions, which sought to understand how Nigerian Americans use sensory memory, sonic expression, and embodied cultural practices to negotiate identity in the United States. The findings presented above illuminate the multisensory pathways through which participants articulate belonging, continuity, and cultural adaptation.

Taken together, these three themes, food memory, sonic expression, and the convergence of taste and sound, demonstrate that Nigerian diasporic identity is not anchored in a single cultural practice but emerges through a multisensory interplay of memory, rhythm, and embodied participation. Jollof rice evokes home through taste and aroma, Afrobeats animates belonging through rhythm and movement, and their fusion in communal settings reveals a hybrid cultural process through which Nigerian Americans continually remake identity in the United States. These findings provide a cohesive empirical foundation for the discussion that follows, where the implications of this multisensory diasporic identity are examined in relation to the study's theoretical framework.

Discussion

Nigerian diasporic identity in the United States emerges through a multisensory cultural process in which taste, sound, and embodied participation operate as mutually reinforcing practices of belonging. This insight matters because it demonstrates that identity is not simply remembered or narrated but enacted through sensory, affective, and performative engagements that shape how diasporic subjects inhabit cultural space. The findings extend existing scholarship by showing that cultural continuity is sustained through lived sensory practices that exceed symbolic representation alone.

The study addressed its central research problem by revealing how sensory memory, sonic expression, and embodied cultural practices function as key mechanisms through which Nigerian Americans negotiate identity. The role of food memory, particularly through Jollof rice, indicates that diasporic belonging is materially grounded in sensory cues that evoke familial histories and collective memory. This aligns with Barthes's (1977) argument that food operates as a communicative system, yet the findings suggest that food also functions as an embodied trigger of diasporic affect, resonating with Sutton's (2001) work on memory and the senses. The sonic dimensions of Afrobeat and Afrobeats demonstrate that identity is enacted through rhythm, participation, and lyrical themes, supporting Nketia's (1974) view of African musical time as socially organized and Nzewi's (1997) assertion that African rhythm is fundamentally embodied. The findings also echo Stokes's (1994) argument that music provides a space for constructing and negotiating identity, while extending it by showing how diasporic subjects mobilize rhythm as a form of cultural grounding in transnational contexts.

The convergence of taste and sound further indicates that identity is not compartmentalized but emerges through hybrid sensory practices that fuse memory, performance, and communal celebration. This pattern aligns with Hannerz's (1996) conception of cultural flow but complicates it by demonstrating that diasporic cultural practices are not merely hybrid but multisensory and embodied. The findings also resonate with Hall's (1990) argument that diasporic identity is produced through continuous transformation, yet they refine his framework by foregrounding the sensory and affective dimensions of this transformation. In this way, the study contributes to broader theoretical debates by showing that African expressive cultures retain their communal ethos even as they adapt to new environments, supporting Gilroy's (1993) notion of diaspora as a space of circulation while extending it through a sensory lens. These findings also speak directly

to broader African diaspora debates on identity, mobility, and transnationalism by illustrating how cultural practices are continually reworked across borders rather than merely transplanted.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of integrating sensory ethnography with musicological analysis. This approach enabled a deeper interpretation of how identity is enacted through taste, sound, and movement, supporting Pink's (2015) argument that multisensory ethnography provides a richer understanding of lived experience. This sensory approach also aligns with embodiment theory, particularly Csordas's (1994) argument that the body is not merely a site of experience but a primary ground of cultural meaning and perception. The triangulation of interviews, field notes, and artifacts also aligns with Denzin's (2012) call for methodological pluralism in qualitative research. The findings, therefore, contribute methodologically by illustrating how multimodal data can illuminate the complexity of diasporic identity formation and by showing that sensory and embodied practices are essential to understanding cultural continuity.

The data also revealed productive tensions. While participants emphasized the unifying power of Jollof rice and Afrobeats, subtle differences emerged across ethnic, generational, and migratory backgrounds. These variations suggest that unity is performed through shared sensory practices even when cultural memories differ, echoing Vertovec's (1999) argument that diaspora is characterized by both cohesion and internal diversity. Additionally, the strong emotional attachment to Afrobeats among U.S.-born participants complicates assumptions that diasporic identity weakens across generations, suggesting instead that music may serve as a bridge that sustains cultural continuity even when linguistic or geographic ties loosen. This finding aligns with Turino's (2008) work on participatory music-making as a site of social bonding and identity formation.

The study's limitations should be understood as boundaries of interpretation. The sample was concentrated in metropolitan areas with established Nigerian communities, which may shape the prominence of communal events and sensory practices. The focus on Jollof rice and Afrobeats reflects the themes that emerged most strongly in the data, but other cultural practices may play similar roles in different diasporic contexts. These limitations point to the need for comparative studies across regions, generations, and cultural forms, as well as research that examines how digital platforms mediate sensory belonging through virtual performances, food content, or online communities, building on work by Miller and Slater (2000) on digital diasporas.

The findings carry several implications for scholarship and practice. Theoretically, they suggest that diasporic identity should be understood as a multisensory and embodied process rather than a purely narrative or symbolic one, contributing to emerging conversations in sensory anthropology (Howes, 2014) and diaspora studies. Methodologically, they demonstrate the value of integrating sensory and musicological approaches in research on cultural identity. Practically, they indicate that cultural programming, community engagement, and diaspora policy initiatives may benefit from recognizing the role of sensory practices in fostering belonging, resilience, and intergenerational connection. These implications position the study to contribute meaningfully to ongoing conversations in African diaspora studies, ethnomusicology, and sensory ethnography.

Overall, the study advances theoretical, methodological, and empirical understandings of Nigerian diasporic identity by demonstrating that it is produced through a dynamic interplay of memory, rhythm, and embodied performance. By foregrounding the multisensory nature of

cultural practice, the findings challenge static models of diaspora and offer a more nuanced understanding of how identity is lived, felt, and performed across borders.

Conclusion

This study examined how Nigerian Americans negotiate diasporic identity through sensory memory, sonic expression, and embodied cultural practices, demonstrating that identity is produced not only through narrative but through lived, multisensory engagements. By integrating sensory ethnography with musicological analysis, the study illuminated the cultural processes through which participants articulate belonging, continuity, and resilience in the United States. In doing so, the study accomplished its central aim: it revealed that Nigerian diasporic identity is enacted through the interplay of taste, sound, and embodied participation rather than through symbolic representation alone. The research contributes theoretically by advancing a multisensory understanding of diaspora that foregrounds affect, embodiment, and performance as central to identity formation. It also offers an original methodological contribution by showing how a multisensory analytic lens can reveal dimensions of diasporic life that remain obscured in discourse-centered or text-based approaches, thereby contributing to broader methodological innovation in qualitative research. Empirically, it provides a grounded account of how Jollof rice, Afrobeat, and Afrobeats function as intertwined practices through which Nigerian Americans sustain cultural memory and enact communal belonging.

Together, the findings point to a single overarching insight: Nigerian diasporic identity is a dynamic, multisensory process in which memory, rhythm, and embodied participation converge to create a lived sense of home across borders. This insight matters because it challenges a dominant assumption in diaspora studies that cultural identity inevitably weakens or becomes diluted over time, showing instead that sensory and embodied practices can sustain cultural continuity even across generations. The study advances debates in transnationalism, sensory anthropology, and ethnomusicology by demonstrating how diasporic subjects mobilize taste and sound as active sites of identity work, and by showing that these practices remain powerful even in contexts of displacement, mobility, and cultural hybridity. It also illuminates the politics of cultural survival in diaspora by revealing how everyday sensory practices become subtle yet potent strategies for preserving heritage, asserting presence, and resisting cultural erasure. In addition, the findings highlight the emotional labour involved in sustaining diasporic identity, as participants continually negotiate belonging, memory, and cultural expectation through sensory and embodied practices. Furthermore, the study contributes to debates on cultural resilience in migration studies by illustrating how diasporic communities mobilize sensory practices to adapt, endure, and creatively reconstitute identity in new environments. The analysis also resonates with phenomenological perspectives by showing how diasporic identity is constituted through the felt, lived immediacy of bodily experience rather than through abstract self-descriptions. Finally, the findings underscore the deeply affective dimensions of multisensory identity work, revealing how taste, sound, and embodied movement generate emotional attachments that anchor diasporic subjects to both remembered and emergent forms of home.

The implications of this work extend beyond scholarship. For cultural practitioners and community organizers, the findings suggest that food and music are not peripheral but central to

fostering belonging and intergenerational connection in diasporic communities. For educators and curriculum designers, the study indicates the value of incorporating multisensory and performance-based approaches when teaching about African and diasporic cultures. For policymakers and diaspora engagement initiatives, the results highlight the importance of supporting cultural spaces where sensory and embodied practices can flourish, as these spaces play a critical role in sustaining community cohesion. More broadly, the study underscores the societal relevance of multisensory identity practices by showing how they cultivate resilience, solidarity, and cultural continuity in increasingly diverse and transnational urban environments.

Future research should build on these insights by examining how multisensory identity practices operate in other African diasporas, particularly in contexts where communal infrastructures are less established. Comparative studies across generational cohorts would deepen understanding of how sensory practices evolve, while research on digital diasporas could explore how taste and sound are mediated through virtual platforms. Further inquiry might also investigate how other cultural forms, such as fashion, spirituality, or language, intersect with sensory practices to shape diasporic identity. These directions respond directly to the study's limitations and the productive tensions observed in the data, offering pathways for refining and expanding the theoretical contributions made here.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that Nigerian diasporic identity in the United States is lived through a dynamic interplay of memory, rhythm, and embodied performance. By foregrounding the multisensory nature of cultural practice, the research offers a more nuanced understanding of how identity is felt, enacted, and sustained across borders. These findings provide a cohesive empirical foundation for the discussion that follows, where the implications of this multisensory diasporic identity are examined in relation to the study's theoretical framework.

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