The African Heritage Diet

Ubuntu in Abundance!

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What is the African Heritage Diet?

This diet pattern **traditionally** comes from the **African continent** and its **Diaspora;** including the **Caribbean** and parts of **South America.**

It encompasses a **diverse range of healthy culinary traditions** shaped by **geography, climate** and **cultural heritage.**



Historically, the **diet** at its core has been **predominantly plant-rich**, **high in fibre** and **lower in saturated fat** and based on **seasonal and minimally-processed foods**.

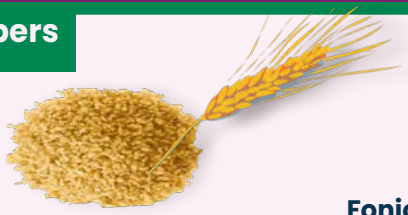
Food is often eaten communally in an **Ubuntu spirit**, literally meaning ***"I am because we are"***. This is a traditional virtue with compassion and humanity at its centre, where sharing meals is core to community identity, emotional wellbeing and supports social bonds. These are major lifestyle factors increasingly recognised as important for overall health[1,2].

Core components of the African heritage diet

Whole Grains and Tubers



Cous cous: North-African Semolina



Bulgar (cracked wheat): West and East African traditional wheat-based grains



Fonio and sorghum: Ancient West African grain. Nutrient -dense and climate resilient.



Injera: (teff-based fermented flatbread with Ethiopian origins): North African nutrient dense and naturally gluten free.



Teff: iron-rich and naturally gluten-free



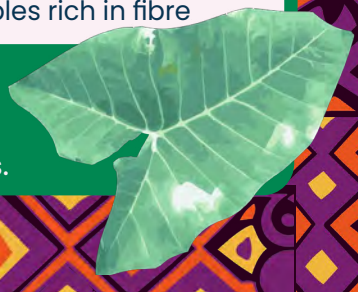
Unripe plantain, Green Banana (unripe): a resistant-starch carbohydrate



Maize (ugali/pap/nsima) and **dambou** (pearl/finger millet)**:** naturally gluten-free



Cassava, Eddoes, yam and taro (cocoyam) with skins**:** starch-based tubers/root vegetables rich in fibre



Benefits: Traditional African carbohydrate staples are rich in fibre, resistant starch and micronutrients, that supports heart and gut health and provide slow releasing energy for improved glycaemic control, for stable blood sugars.

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Core components of the African heritage diet

Legumes (Protein-Rich Foods)

Benefits:
Excellent sources of protein, fibre, minerals such as iron, and B vitamins such folate.

Beans and peas: eaten in Northern and Central Africa in stews.


Red lentils


Fava beans


Black-eyed peas


African yam beans and Bambara groundnuts: highly nutritious legumes native to West Africa.


Chickpeas


Cowpeas (vigna) eaten in Northern and central Africa in stews


Tofu (Beske): traditional Nigerian-based soya food




Groundnut (unsalted peanut): commonly eaten in stews


Carlin peas (pigeon peas)

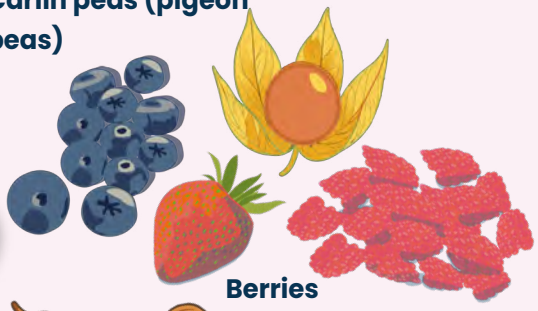
Fruits and Vegetables

Fruits:


Soursop (graviola)


Papaya (pawpaw)


Citrus fruits


Berries


Dates


Figs


Tamarind

Vegetables:


Okra/okro


Spinach and dovi (collard greens)


Amaranth leaves


Pumpkin leaves (Ugu)


Pumpkin


Butternut squash


Garden egg (African aubergine)


Callaloo (water spinach)

Benefits: Often richer in vitamins and minerals than common fruits and vegetables. Supports the body's function (immune system) and significantly reduces the risk of major chronic diseases.

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Core components of the African heritage diet

Nuts & Seeds



Sesame seeds (Benne): used in rice dishes, soups and smoothies



Pumpkin or melon seeds (Egusi): used in soups and stews



Almonds, cashews, pistachios and walnuts (unsalted): used in stews or tagines and snacks



Peanuts/groundnuts (unsalted): used in soups, sauces and snacks

Benefits: Provide essential fatty acids, minerals such as zinc, magnesium and an additional source of plant protein known to reduce the rates of cardiovascular disease.

African Heritage plant-based food-swap guide

Modern UK African diets have shifted away from **traditional heritage foods** often towards less healthful eating patterns. **Returning to the traditional heritage diet** through **simple food-swap** ideas can be a powerful tool to better support **long-term health** and preserve **cultural heritage**.

Common choice	Traditional heritage plant-based swap	Benfits of food swap:
Eggs & white toast	Swap → Tofu: turmeric seasoned (Soya/ Beske) + seeded whole grain toast	Naturally devoid of cholesterol and higher in fibre for better gut and heart health
Waffles made with refined flour	Swap → Akara/bean waffles (black-eyed or brown beans)	Higher protein & fibre content which can improve blood lipids and cholesterol levels
Pancakes made with eggs	Swap → Baghrir (Moroccan crepes) made with semolina eaten with vegetables or salad	

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Common choice	Traditional heritage plant-based swap	Benfits of food swap[3,7]
 White fried rice	 Jollof rice made with long, whole grain basmati rice, tomatoes, scotch-bonnet pepper	Higher in fibre for improved blood sugar (glycaemic) management and improved gut health
Pancakes (refined flour)	North African Injera with red lentils, cabbage, timatim (tomato salad)	Semolina pancakes with salads, spinach West African red rice, brown rice, fonio, teff or bulgur wheat
Fried ripe plantain (in refined oil)	Boiled, baked unripe plantain or green banana Kenyan/ Ugandan matoke stew with greens	Higher in resistant starch for overall satiety and weight management
Refined fufu/eba/ garri (traditional low fibre dumpling)	Unripe plantain flour, chickpea flour or oat fufu with stew	Higher in fibre for better digestion and gut health
Instant noodles with packet seasoning ('indomie')	Whole grain noodles with homemade vegetable-stock, fresh/frozen greens, mushrooms, unseasoned nuts and/or edamame	Lower sodium and higher in other micronutrients like potassium for better heart health

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Common choice	Traditional heritage plant-based swap	Benfits of food swap[3,7]
Southern African meat based sishebo	Vegetable-based sishebo with any left over vegetables, onions, curry spice, beans, potatoes, carrots eaten with whole grains	
Meat based peanut stew	West African peanut stew with sweet potatoes, chickpeas and kale	Peanut butter (no sugar/salt) provides iron, a good source of fibre and is high in protein
West African meat stew and white rice	Carlin or pigeon pea stew with whole grain eg. millet or whole grain rice	
North African meat tagine white rice	North African chickpeas and/ or tofu tagine, with mixed vegetables whole grains eg. teff	Chickpeas provide plant-based protein, fibre and iron to support digestive health, heart health and energy

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Plant-Based African Plate

Fruits and vegetables

Peas, beans, lentils, beske, nuts, seeds



High fibre and whole grain carbohydrates



Drinks

Water, rooibos, honeybush tea, hibiscus tea mint tea, cacao

Oils and spreads



Choose unsaturated oils and use in small amount (e.g. 2-3 teaspoons a day)

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Plant-based African heritage meal ideas

The following examples are **guided meal recipes** for **breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks** - all of which can be interchangeable!

Breakfast



1. **Sweet Oat, Sorghum or Millet porridge**
with fortified plant-based milk alternative, a handful of chopped unsalted nuts, pumpkin and fresh/frozen fruit topped with cinnamon



2. **Akara bean or Tofu waffles**
with avocado, slice of whole grain bread and green veggies



3. **Moi Moi (black bean cake)**
with red peppers, onions, scotch bonnet, garlic and ginger



4. **Chickpea pancakes (Karantita)**
With pomegranate salad

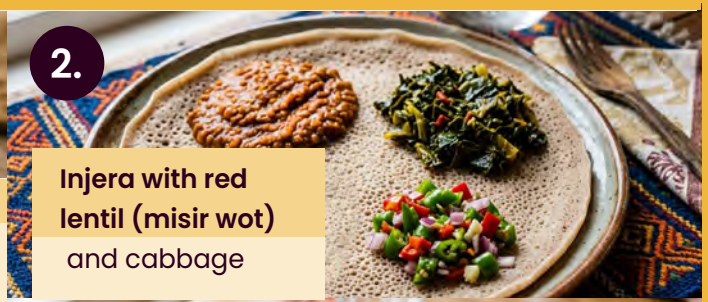


5. **Cassava smoothie bowl**
with soaked cassava in fortified plant-based milk alternative

Lunch/Dinner



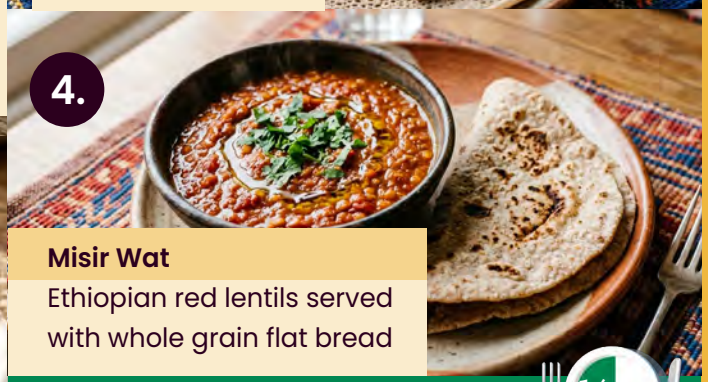
1. **Egusi soup**
with egusi (melon seeds), Nigerian Tofu (Beske, Aware) and sauteed mushrooms



2. **Injera with red lentil (misir wot)**
and cabbage



3. **Red rice stew with egusi**
vegetable stew with black eyed beans



4. **Misir Wat**
Ethiopian red lentils served with whole grain flat bread

Nutrition Note:
Consider adding more vegetables (half the plate), incorporating into sauces and stews.

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5. **Vegetable okra soup** with oat fufu



6. **Green plantain or banana porridge** mixed with brown or black eyed beans

Snack ideas



1. **Roasted chickpeas or bambara groundnuts** with traditional spices such as yaji/homemade suya spice(Nigerian) or berbere (Ethiopian spice). High protein, easily portable and filling



2. **Fonio or millet flapjack** Mix cooked grains with nuts, seeds, and dried fruit. High fibre and protein snack.



3. **Benne bliss snacks** Sesame seed clusters, rich in calcium, protein and healthy fats



4. **Boiled or baked yam/plantain with peanut or bean dip** classic West African snack combination

Drinks



Sugar free drinks Cacao or naturally flavoured beverages such as hisbiscus (zobo)

Nutrition Note:

Consider **slowly increasing** the **fibre content** of meals over weeks.

Washing/soaking beans/ chickpeas and lentils **overnight** to **minimise** digestive discomfort or bloating.

Try **substituting** large amounts of **oil** with cut whole **nuts** for **high quality fats** to support heart and brain health.

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Top Tips for transitioning to the traditional African Heritage diet



1. Choose whole grains over refined grains:

Consuming **whole grains benefits the whole body** and significantly **reduces the risk** of **chronic disease** (e.g. heart disease, diabetes and certain cancers such as colorectal cancer).



2. Include a daily portion of legumes:

Beans, **chickpeas** and **lentils** are **high** in **protein, fibre** and **minerals** that **supports** heart and gut health.



3. Use nuts and seeds instead of animal fats:

Nuts and seeds are **high** in **fibre** and **high quality essential fats** supporting heart and brain health.



4. Swap out salt for traditional herbs and spices:



Season food with **traditional** delicious **African heritage spices** such as **cinnamon, Ras El Hanout, coriander** and **cumin**.

5. Cook the African way!:



Try **traditional cooking methods** like **fermentation, steaming, boiling, stewing**. These have vast **health benefits** compared to other methods like deep-frying. Consider using an **air fryer** for some dishes when time is pressured.

6. Choose indigenous and seasonal produce:



Many UK produce naturally **overlaps** with **traditional African plant foods** and can be **purchased locally** in stores, farmers markets and specialised sections or supermarkets. E.g. using cavalo nero/kale in efo riro, using callaloo in soups, UK leek, mushrooms, pumpkins and butternut squash as additional vegetables in stews and soups.

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7. Make a medley mash-up:

One-pot cooking brings **flavours** and **beneficial nutrients** together! **Mash** cooked potatoes or yams with vegetables and spices.

8. Reduce ready made and ultra-processed foods:

Aim to make some **traditional whole foods** and **sauces at home**. Use individual **spice mixes without added salt and sugar** for better nutritional value and taste!



9. Food fellowship:

Share meals together. This is core for many across the continent. Consider **teaching others** e.g. children, friends or other family members. **Community eating** significantly **supports wellbeing and preserves knowledge for future generations!**

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Further Resources and Recipe ideas:

1. https://oldwayspt.org/
2. African Eatwell Guide



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