



Seeds of Belonging: The Role of Cultural Foods in Diaspora Health and Community in Rhode Island



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Introduction

Food transcends sustenance—it is a sacred form of community and communion. For first-generation immigrant families, **food can also fragment identity** as families navigate the tension between maintaining traditional diets and adapting to their Western environment. This study explores how the intergenerational passage of traditional farming and cooking practices serves as a sustainable solution to food insecurity, social isolation, and health disparities among the African Diaspora.

Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative, volunteer ethnography approach combined with visual storytelling. Data was collected over two months through participant observation, field notes, and interviews. African Alliance of Rhode Island (AARI) served as the main organization that collaborated on this project. This included observing community farms, working on greenhouse plots, volunteering at pop-up markets, and participating in cooking demonstrations. An output of the study were artworks that documented the organization.

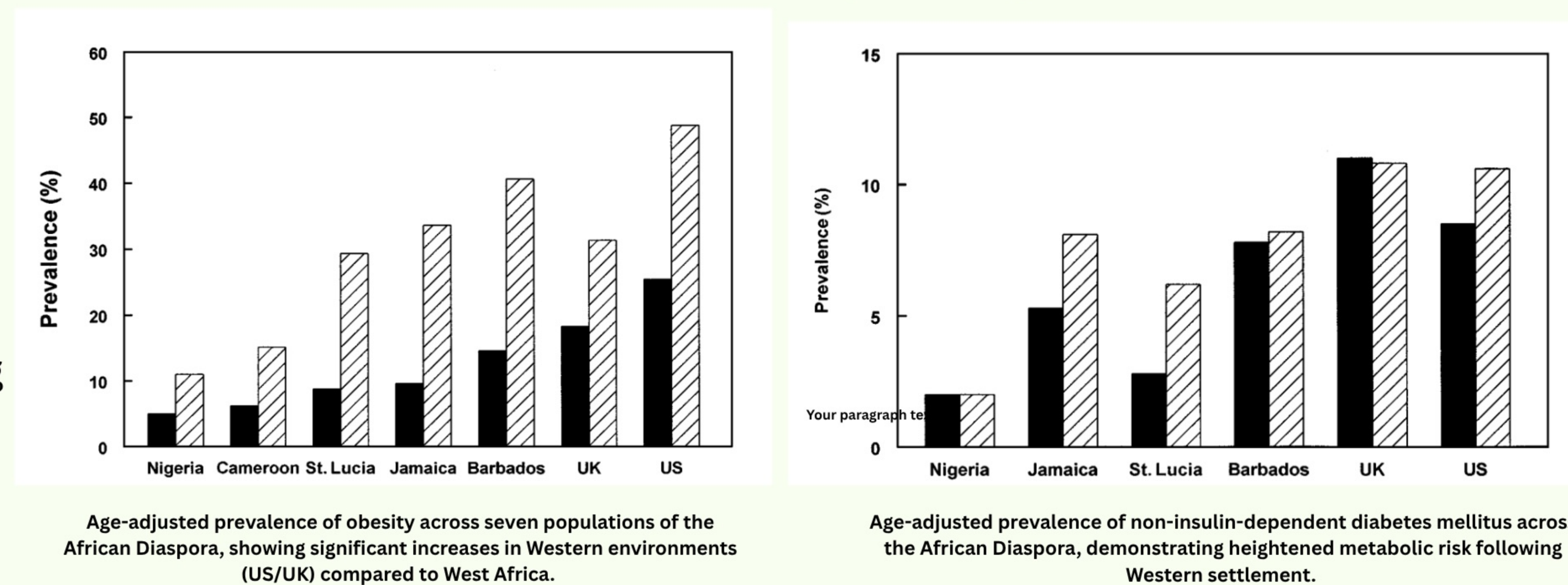
One Less Worry Soup Kitchen: Volunteering at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Cranston to observe primary relief services.

Local Farmers Markets: Engaging with local growers and consumers at the Garden City Center in Cranston, the Armory Street Market, and Downtown Pawtucket.



Theoretical Framework

Structural racism, inequitable policies, and forced shifts to a Western diet drive high rates of metabolic diseases like diabetes and obesity among African immigrants, especially women. Traditional food access programs often lack the social and cultural supports necessary to serve these communities effectively. Integrating culturally familiar foods and urban farming into public health interventions restores agency, improves physical health, supports mental well-being, and preserves cultural identity across generations.



Access to healthy, affordable food is determined by structural racism and policy disparities across race, sex, and income. For African immigrants, settlement in Western environments triggers a "nutrition transition"—a forced shift from traditional organic diets to highly processed Western foods.

As shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2, cross-cultural epidemiological data highlights the severe metabolic impact of this transition on the African Diaspora. Rates of both obesity and non-insulin-dependent diabetes rise sharply when comparing populations in West Africa (e.g., Nigeria, Cameroon) to those living in the UK and US. To reverse these health disparities, food interventions cannot rely solely on standard Western guidelines; they must integrate culturally familiar foods, urban agriculture, and holistic community support.

References

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Findings

Observations highlighted that immigrant vulnerability stems not only from financial hardship, but from a lack of familiar community, language, and cultural foods. To address this, the African Alliance of Rhode Island (AARI) focuses on four key pillars: Farming, Markets, Health & Education, and Cooking Demonstrations. Initiatives like the 6-acre Bami farm plot provide space for immigrant farmers to adapt to new environments, pass down agricultural knowledge, and prepare the next generation to be "future ready".



Insights

Primary vs. Tertiary Prevention: Immediate relief programs (like soup kitchens) and long-term cultural interventions (like community farms) are interdependent; both are essential to combat food insecurity sustainably.

Cultural Vitality: Family practices—like backyard farming and cooking whole foods from scratch—are vital acts of heritage preservation.

Food as a Cultural Bridge: Creating spaces for traditional agriculture turns food into a powerful connector across generations, families, and communities