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# Sustainable Nutrition on Indigenous Cuisines and Human Tourist Health in Selected States in Nigeria

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### ABSTRACT

When it comes to dealing with both challenges of producing food to feed an increasing global population while taking care of the environment, this research examined indigenous Nigerian cuisines and their use in promoting sustainable nutrition and healthcare among tourists. The project was solely an explorative one since it sought to find out just how indigenous methods of cooking shape food patterns among tourists, indigenous methods' influence on tourists' health, and, of course, indigenous methods' contribution towards taking care of the environment. The study was carried out in four states: Cross River, Edo, Ekiti, and Delta, with rich cultural cuisines and flavors. In this study, both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed using 400 questionnaire surveys among tourists and 40 in-depth interviews among tourists as well. Here, statistical descriptive, 't'-test, and chi-square methods were utilized. The study indicated that, local Nigerian foods are perceived to be healthy, environmentally friendly, and have cultural significance. Over four-fifths of the participants agreed that the local foods offer important nutrients and that they are processed using green practices. Women perceived more health benefits associated with local foods than men. Approximately two-thirds (69%) of the tourists enjoyed the foods, while a small majority (58.3%) reported feeling physically well after consuming the local foods. A small proportion had mild gastrointestinal upset or declined to sample various local foods for personal dietary reasons or qualms. The study concludes that indigenous cuisines play a crucial role in sustainable tourism and public health. It recommends integrating traditional foods into national tourism and health policies, training hospitality workers in indigenous food preparation, and involving local communities in culinary tourism to ensure authenticity and equitable benefits.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Cuisines, Sustainable Nutrition, Culinary Tourism, Tourist Health, Traditional Food Systems

### Introduction

The twenty-first century has also heightened global concerns regarding food security, sustainability, and health. The food industry has thus enhanced food availability yet degraded the environment and witnessed a rise in non-communicable diseases due to an increase in the consumption of ultra-processed foods in many nations. The Food and Agriculture Organization underlines that food security requires a sustainable food system that “guarantees access to food

and nutrition while protecting the economic, social, and environmental basis for future generations.” The global crisis thus gave rise to indigenous food systems that play a crucial role in advancing sustainable nutrition and health. Indigenous people have diverse food cultures adapted to their land that have supported them for several generations in different countries around the world. The food system is characterized by biodiversity and a link between food production and the land, providing valuable experiences in sustainability and adapting to climate change itself (FAO, 2021).

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Indigenous practices are also intricately integrated within their natural surroundings, leveraging a wide range of animals and plants. A good example can be cited within the Three Sister's farming practice followed by Native American Indians, reflecting a highly optimized approach incorporating maize, Phaseolus beans, and Cucurbita squash (Kapayou *et al.*, 2023). Similarly, the Amazon indigenous community follows a diet rich in camu camu and açai fruits, sustainably sourced within the rainforest environment (Araujo *et al.*, 2024). Such indigenous diets are normally more nutritious compared to Western diets, ensuring a complete repertoire of necessary vitamins and minerals. These are also known to be relatively low on saturated fats and sugars, meeting modern standards on the prevention of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) (Cena & Calder, 2020). Such diets could thus constitute the fabric within the overall strategy on combating health malnutrition and challenges on health equity.

Being an important engine of the global economy, tourism also has cross with the indigenous food systems. On one hand, food tourism opens opportunities for cross-cultural interaction and indigenous empowerment. On the other hand, the presence of tourism has the potential to damage the indigenous food systems not only through increased demand, which could result in the over-exploitation of indigenous resources, but also through the loss of cultural authenticity and deterioration of the environment. Moreover, the commercialization of Indigenous foods with little involvement of the local community might generate cultural exploitation and appropriation (Scheyvens *et al.*, 2021). Indigenous food systems in Africa generally consist of traditional foods that reflect local cultures. These foods often depend on local agriculture and crop cycles. The indigenous foods of Nigeria are very diverse and depend on a variety of local grains, vegetables, and vegetables' roots and local spices. The foods are not processed and have high nutrient density. Despite this, globalization and urbanization have propelled a trend away from traditional food systems to fast foods that cause malnutrition and lifestyle diseases

among locals and foreigners (Landreville, 2020).

The combination of local food culture and the concept of tourism in Nigeria presents a unique chance for sustainable growth, as highlighted by Adekunle *et al.*, (2024). The integration of local cuisine into the hotel and tourism industries holds the promise of improving the experience, localizing the economy, and promoting better health. However, despite this potential, very little scholarly focus has been placed on the significance of the use of the local cuisine of Nigeria within the health of tourists, and this, within the perspective of sustainability. With the ever-changing possibility of the world's consumption patterns towards the positive and healthier option of sustainable foods, it is necessary that the possible use of the local cuisine of Nigeria, within the perspective of the ever-growing world of tourism, be considered. In this regard, the study was conducted with the intention of exploring the significance of the use of the local cuisine of Nigeria, and the possible influence on the well-being of the tourists.

## Methodology

### Study Area

The research was carried out in four states located in Nigeria. The four states were chosen for the study purposely. They include Cross River, Edo, Ekiti, and Delta. These states were considered because they all have rich cultural backgrounds and a diverse range of indigenous foods. Actually, all four states represent the diverse nature of the cuisine of the various ethnic groups found in Nigeria. This includes the influence that the indigenous foods have on the promotion of sustainable nutritional wellbeing among the tourists as well.

### Population of the Study

The population of the target population was divided into two main categories: hospitality professionals, and tourists. The hospitality professionals included chefs, hotel managers, and food service staff working in local hotels and eating joints where indigenous

foods were being served. The tourists consisted of locals and foreign visitors who had consumed indigenous foods within the selected states. The two groups were targeted with the aim of gaining complementary views on indigenous foods.

### Data Collection Methods

The research design adopted was the mixed methods design, involving the use of both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Quantitative data was collected using a pre-structured questionnaire, which was evenly distributed to 400 respondents, with 100 from each of the four states considered, which are Cross River, Edo, Ekiti, and Delta states. Each of the questions was answered based on a five-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Neutral (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1). Data was collected through semi-structured interviews on 40 tourists (10 from each state), who had previously consumed the local foods. These interviews were aimed at investigating aspects such as food preparation methods, food sources, health beliefs, and the role of local foods within local cultures and tourism sectors. These interviews were all voice-recorded and later analyzed thematically to get key findings.

### Sampling Technique and Data Analysis

Purposive sampling method has been used for participant selection in both the quantitative and qualitative components. For the survey study, the selection of participants was based on their involvement with traditional cuisine. For the qualitative component, the selection of participants was dependent on their knowledge and experience with traditional food behaviors.

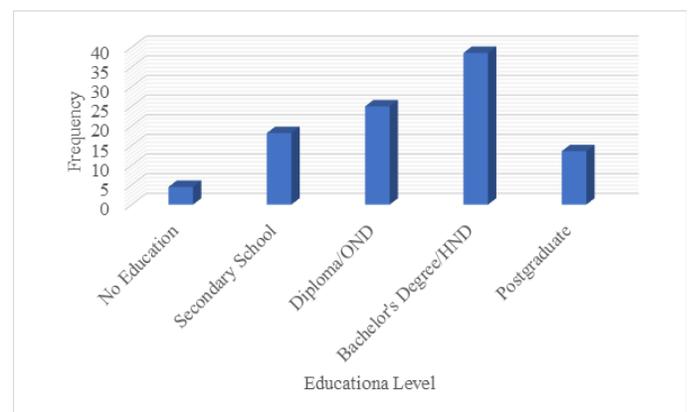
The data analysis involved the use of both descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. For the description of the quantitative data, the use of means, standard deviations, and frequencies was involved. For the purposes of investigating the relationships among the variables, the use of t-test, and Chi-square statistics was involved.

The qualitative data obtained was analyzed through

the techniques of thematic analysis. The transcripts obtained from the interviews were coded to search for prevailing themes connected to sustainable nutrition, perceptions of health, as well as tourist interactions with indigenous food. The use of both qualitative and quantitative data increased the validity of research results.

### Results and Discussion

The demographic profile of respondents reflects a youthful and educated population (Table 1), with most participants aged 18–35 and holding at least a bachelor's degree. This aligns with recent research suggesting that younger, educated individuals are more inclined toward culinary tourism and are more aware of health and sustainability issues (Buffa, 2015; Testa *et al*, 2019). The slightly higher male participation is consistent with studies showing that men often dominate travel-based surveys (Stanford, 2017). The high proportion of employed and self-employed respondents also indicates economic capacity to explore and assess indigenous cuisines. Educational attainment plays a key role in shaping informed dietary choices, especially regarding sustainable and traditional food systems (Reisch, 2021), as seen in Figure 1 that majority of the respondents were literate.



**Figure 1.** Distribution of Respondents by Educational Level

**Table 1.** Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>	Male	240	54.5
	Female	200	45.5
<b>Age Group (years)</b>	18–25	120	27.3
	26–35	180	40.9
	36–45	90	20.5
	46 and above	50	11.3
<b>Marital Status</b>	Single	260	59.1
	Married	160	36.4
	Divorced/Widowed	20	4.5
<b>Occupation</b>	Student	110	25
	Employed (Public/Private)	200	45.5
	Self-Employed/Entrepreneur	90	20.5
	Unemployed	40	9.1

### Objective 1: Nutritional and Sustainable Value of Indigenous Nigerian Cuisines

There was an overwhelming majority in agreement or strong agreement with positive statements regarding the nutritional and sustainable value of indigenous Nigerian cuisines as presented in Table 2. For example, in item B1, "I believe indigenous Nigerian cuisines are rich in essential nutrients", 42.5% agreed and 37.5% strongly agreed, which meant that 80% of the respondents attested to the richness in nutrients of traditional meals. This view was also repeated in B2, with 43.8% agreeing and 33.8% strongly agreeing that 77.6% were of the view that local ways of cooking help preserve the nutritional value of food. These practices correspond to the overall impression that the local Nigerian diet is not merely healthy but environmentally sustainable as well. This could not be more in agreement with Tura *et al.*'s views in 2025, where they said that "Traditional diets in sub-Saharan Africa consist of a blend of legumes, leafy vegetables, and unprocessed foods with high micronutrient value, which have lower industrial

processing." This is supported further by Striebig *et al.* in 2019, in which the authors have tried to explore the positive effect on the environment brought about by using local, seasonal, and environmentally friendly foods to lower carbon dioxide emissions from long-haul food transport. There is a consensus from B1 to B4 based on the growing recognition that people have with regard to the connection between local food practices, health, and the environment.

Only one difference in genders was found via the t-test on item "I experienced positive health effects from eating indigenous food":  $t(438) = -3.12, p = 0.002$  (Table 3). This indicates that more female participants perceived a higher level of health benefit from eating indigenous food than males did. Several reasons exist that can explain such a difference. There is evidence that women tend to be more health-conscious and attuned to dietary effects, and therefore more likely to notice and report health effects of traditional diets (Sadler *et al.*, 2024). Women are also more likely to consume more vegetable-based and less

processed foods, which are characteristics of indigenous foods, and therefore more likely to notice health effects. There are also psychosocial and cultural dynamics involved: women may associate traditional meals with emotional health, family, and cultural identity, and this could have a positive impact on their perception of health outcomes (Wright *et al.*, 2021). There are also biological aspects involved. Studies such as Gorini *et al.* (2025), have identified that gender differences in metabolism and absorption of nutrients might lead to different physiological responses to the same diets. This *biological* distinction, along with behavioral tendencies in food choice and self-surveillance of health, may

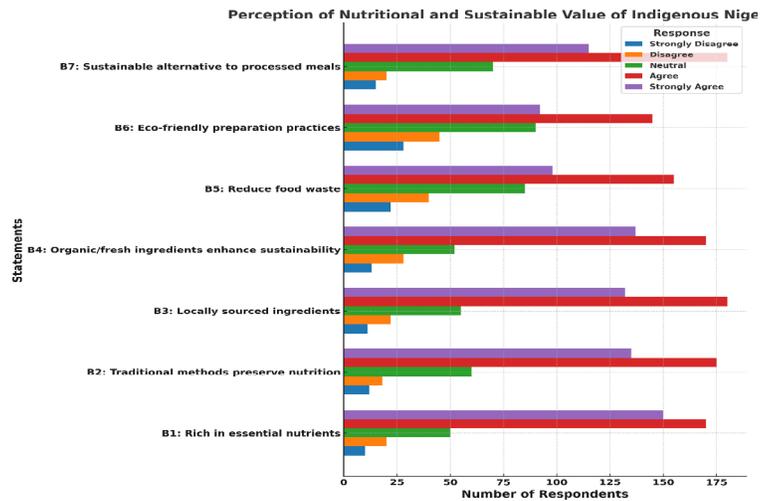


Figure 2. Perception of Nutritional and Sustainability Value of Indigenous Nigeria Cuisine

Table 2. Nutritional and Sustainable Value of Indigenous Nigerian Cuisines

S/N	Statements	Strongly Dis-agree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
B1	Indigenous cuisines are rich in essential nutrients	10 (2.5%)	20 (5.0%)	50 (12.5%)	170 (42.5%)	150 (37.5%)
B2	Traditional methods preserve nutritional value	12 (3.0%)	18 (4.5%)	60 (15.0%)	175 (43.8%)	135 (33.8%)
B3	Ingredients are mostly sourced locally	11 (2.8%)	22 (5.5%)	55 (13.8%)	180 (45.0%)	132 (33.0%)
B4	Organic and fresh ingredients enhance sustainability	13 (3.3%)	28 (7.0%)	52 (13.0%)	170 (42.5%)	137 (34.3%)
B5	Indigenous cuisines reduce food waste	22 (5.5%)	40 (10.0%)	85 (21.3%)	155 (38.8%)	98 (24.5%)
B6	Preparation involves eco-friendly practices	28 (7.0%)	45 (11.3%)	90 (22.5%)	145 (36.3%)	92 (23.0%)
B7	Traditional food is a sustainable alternative to processed meals	15 (3.8%)	20 (5.0%)	70 (17.5%)	180 (45.0%)	115 (28.8%)

possibly explain the alleged better health outcomes in women in this study.

**Table 3.** Male and female tourists differ in their health outcome experiences after consuming Nigerian indigenous food?

Gender	Mean Score	SD	N
Male	4.10	0.75	200
Female	4.35	0.65	200

**t-test Result:**

- **Null Hypothesis (H<sub>0</sub>):** There is no significant difference between males and females regarding experienced health outcomes.
- **t(438) = -3.12, p = 0.002**

**Objective 2: Tourists’ Perceptions and Health Outcomes Instructions**

Frequency distribution of the response indicated a positive experience with regard to the Nigerian indigenous food, as shown in Table 4 above. In fact, 69% of the tourists found the experience "very enjoyable," with a positive taste experience. It can be noted that there was a positive experience in regard to organic satisfaction, which supports a study carried out by Okech and Timothy, (2023), which argued that "the sensory experience offered by traditional African cuisine is one of the key determinants in enhancing the satisfaction for culinary tourists." In a similar manner, 58.3% also reported a positive experience with regard to feeling physically refreshed after eating, an indication that the experience contributed towards health value for the visitors. The overall experience in regard to taste satisfaction, as well as feeling physically refreshed, underlines the significance of indigenous food as a strategic element in determining health-visa based tourism in the country. Cultural experience was also a dominant element in understanding the significance, with 47.3% of the respondents showing cultural significance in the positive experience that they received. This supports Chukwurah *et al.*, (2025),

which argued through a similar study that "food serves as a tangible expression form for intangible culture." In fact, indigenous cuisines in the country offer a platform for tourists to relate with the various cultures in Nigeria, with a strong ethnic background in its preparation for various ethnic groups in the country.

Conversely, up to 18% rated the experience as just fair, 11% were disappointed because the taste or choice didn’t live up to their expectations, and 6.8% felt a slight degree of unease. Although the possibility of health troubles contains a small fraction (2.3%), and 4.5% never attempted indigenous cuisines, the figures are important when considering the extent to which tourists measure health-related risks. Yeung and Yee (2020) observe that the potential health risks ‘can influence the behavior and overall perceptions of tourists’ towards a destination as a whole. New foods, cleanliness, or unequal approaches to the preparation of meals are possible causes of the discontent. This highlights the importance of health and cleanliness awareness within the hospitality and tourism industry in Nigeria (Oladeji *et al.*, 2023).

The results of the chi-squared tests situated these experiences firmly within the context of the demographic variables (see Table 5). Here’s the interpretation: There is no significant difference in the selection of "Healthy – I felt physically well" by gender (p=0.200). What this means is that the benefits felt for both male and female respondents were more or less the same. However, the variable age had an influence on the response to "Very enjoyable" (p = 0.015). What this suggests is that the taste, adventure-seeking, or spicy food-seeking habit of the various age groups is not the same. The findings conformed to the pattern that mature travelers are more conservative, whereas younger travelers are more adventurous, as noted in the work of Chen and Shoemaker (2014). The level of education was also significant concerning the appreciation of cultural enrichment (p = 0.018), suggesting that higher levels of education result in greater interest in the cultural backgrounds underlying the cultural stories told through food. In

this case, Uche & Alabi (2023) argue that a high level of education is associated with a greater interest in heritage tourism. Additionally, the level of income was significant concerning disappointment with food ( $p = 0.043$ ), suggesting that individuals with higher incomes have higher expectations or perhaps a more refined palate, possibly comparing Nigerian food to international food standards.

Forty open-ended questionnaire responses were analyzed through thematic analysis to reveal the underlying reasons for the outcome. Five overall themes emerged: enjoyment and connection to culture, feelings of positive health outcomes, negative experiences, mixed feelings or neutral experiences, and non-attendance. There appears to be an overall strong tie to enjoyment and feelings of belonging to culture as 60% reported that food exceeds its purpose as nutrition to become an act of cultural narrative and fulfillment. This relates to the theory that food as an experience, as described by Neuman (2019), involves an amount of creative, cultural, and symbolic engagement. This involves preparation that is influenced by personal and experiential emotions. The theme of health benefits was also prominent, with 37.5% of participants suggesting an improvement in digestion or energy levels. This could be attributed to the fact that the cuisine in Nigeria consists of fresh vegetables and preservative-free ingredients, making the meals organic in nature. African meals are also well-balanced, and if the conditions are hygienic, such meals are ideal for health (FAO, 2020). Another factor cited by the respondents was the cleanliness of the cuisine, echoing the need for health tourism (Talukder, 2025).

However, approximately 12.5% of the respondents were mildly disgusted, while one person experienced some rather grave concerns with their physical well-being. These people prove that, despite some tourists' expectations, dietary intolerance, unusual spice, and poor food hygiene standards might threaten some visitors. The reaction towards the spicy soup and palm oil was notable, with demands for proper ingredient information and allergen alerting in eating

establishments. Furthermore, 7.5% of respondents refused to partake in any Nigerian foods, opting instead for continental ones. These individuals might represent tourists with a rather high level of neophobia, as well as less enthusiasm to try novel foods (Hall & Mitchell, 2021). The fact that 15% of these visitors found the food merely 'average' reveals an incongruence between propaganda and empirical reality. Nigerian foods might inflate visitors' hopes, not living up to these expectations in some eating establishments, or may vary in terms of quality, with some eating spots being less good than others. To address these concerns, there is an urgent need for the Nigerian hospitality industry to promote realities rather than hopes to tourist visitors. In this respect, stress on improving quality standards, staff, and food preparation is paramount to increasing tourist satisfaction (Jacob *et al.*, 2021).

**Table 4.** Tourists' Perceptions and Health Outcomes Instructions

Response Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Very enjoyable – I liked the taste	276	69.00%
Healthy – I felt physically well	233	58.30%
Culturally enriching – Learned tradition	189	47.30%
Average – Neither good nor bad	72	18.00%
Disappointing – Expected more flavor	44	11.00%
Minor discomfort (e.g., stomach upset)	27	6.80%
Serious health issues	9	2.30%
Did not try any indigenous dishes	18	4.50%

**Noticed of Health Changes (Positive or Negative) After Consuming Nigerian Traditional Meals Thematic Analysis (n = 40 Participants)**

**Table 5.** Summary of Chi-square Results by Demographic Group

Demographic Variable	Dependent Variable	Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ )	df	p-value	Significance
Gender	Selected “Healthy – I felt physically well”	1.64	1	0.200	Not Significant
Age Group	Selected “Very Enjoyable – I liked the taste and variety”	12.38	4	0.015	Significant
Education Level	Selected “Culturally enriching – I learned traditions”	10.12	3	0.018	Significant
Occupation	Selected “Average – Neither good nor bad”	5.72	4	0.221	Not Significant
Income Level	Selected “Disappointing – I expected more flavor”	9.85	4	0.043	Significant

**1. Theme: Enjoyment and Cultural Connection**

- Sub-theme: Culinary Enjoyment
  - 24 participants (60%) described their experience as "very enjoyable," emphasizing flavor, variety, and presentation.
  - Sample quote: *“I loved the spices and the richness of the dishes; they tasted authentic and satisfying.”*
- Sub-theme: Cultural Enrichment
  - 18 participants (45%) stated that eating indigenous meals helped them understand local customs and food practices.
  - Sample quote: *“It gave me a taste of Nigerian heritage—I learned how food reflects different tribes and traditions.”*

**2. Theme: Perceived Health Benefits**

- Sub-theme: Improved Digestion and Vitality
  - 15 participants (37.5%) reported feeling lighter, experiencing improved digestion, or higher energy levels.
  - Sample quote: *“After eating these meals, I didn’t feel bloated like I usu-*

*ally do with processed foods.”*

- Sub-theme: Natural and Fresh Ingredients
  - 13 participants (32.5%) associated the meals with organic and chemical-free preparation.
  - Sample quote: *“It felt clean—like eating something straight from nature.”*

**3. Theme: Negative Reactions**

- Sub-theme: Mild Discomfort
  - 5 participants (12.5%) reported issues like slight stomach upset, typically after trying spicy or unfamiliar ingredients.
  - Sample quote: *“My stomach reacted badly to egusi soup—it’s probably because I’m not used to palm oil.”*
- Sub-theme: Serious Health Issues
  - Only 1 participant (2.5%) reported significant digestive issues, which may have been due to personal allergies or hygiene concerns.

**4. Theme: Mixed or Neutral Experiences**

- Sub-theme: Average Impression

- o 6 participants (15%) felt the meals were “average,” suggesting they neither loved nor disliked the experience.
- o Sample quote: “*It was okay—not too different from what I’ve eaten before.*”

## 5. Theme: Non-participation

- Sub-theme: Did Not Try
  - o 3 participants (7.5%) indicated they did not try any indigenous Nigerian meals.

Sample quote: “*I stuck with continental options during my trip.*”

## Conclusion and Recommendation

This research proves that local Nigerian meals have an important place within sustainable diets and the health and well-being of travelers. It was ascertained that the local meals offered in Cross River, Edo, Ekiti, and Delta States provide high nutrition, diversity, and sustainability. Additionally, the meals mostly consist of local materials, and their processing is done in an uncomplicated manner and align with international guidelines that can ensure the prevention of non-communicable diseases. Moreover, visitors and hospitality industry participants alike appreciate the health and cultural advantages provided by local meals, as they not only contribute positively to the local economy but also add value to the tourism industry. Additionally, it was confirmed that healthy and well-informed travelers would like healthy and sustainable meals with no compromise’s with sustainable ideals.

To ensure the useful application of indigenous Nigerian cuisine in sustainable health and traveler well-being, there is a need for tourism stakeholders, as well as the Nigerian government, to integrate indigenous foods into tourism strategies as well as health care. This can ensure the preservation of cultural dishes as a means of promoting healthier eating. It is also imperative to train tour operators on how to better prepare indigenous dishes. Finally, active involvement of

local communities in culinary tourism is essential to guarantee authenticity, livelihood support, and benefits sharing in proportionate measures.

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**APPENDIX**

**SECTION A: RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS**

*(To capture background information)*

1. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Gender:  Male  Female
3. Educational Level:  
 No Education  Secondary  OND/Diploma  Bachelor’s Degree/HND  Postgraduate
4. Marital Status:  Single  Married  Divorced/Widowed
5. Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

**SECTION B: Nutritional and Sustainable Value of Indigenous Nigerian Cuisines**

**Instructions:** Kindly indicate your level of agreement with the following statements using the scale: **Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Neutral (3), Disagree (2), Strongly Disagree (1)**

S/N	Statements	1	2	3	4	5
B1	I believe indigenous Nigerian cuisines are rich in essential nutrients.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
B2	Traditional cooking methods help preserve the nutritional value of the food.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
B3	Ingredients used in traditional Nigerian dishes are mostly sourced locally.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
B4	The use of organic and fresh ingredients contributes to the sustainability of indigenous dishes.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
B5	Indigenous cuisines promote environmental sustainability through minimal food waste.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
B6	The preparation of traditional meals involves environmentally friendly practices (e.g., firewood use).	<input type="checkbox"/>				
B7	I consider traditional Nigerian food a sustainable alternative to processed meals.	<input type="checkbox"/>				

**SECTION C: Tourists’ Perceptions and Health Outcomes**

**How would you describe your overall experience with Nigerian indigenous dishes?**

*(You may select more than one option)*

- Very enjoyable – I liked the taste and variety
- Healthy – I felt physically well after eating
- Culturally enriching – I learned more about local traditions
- Average – neither good nor bad
- Disappointing – I expected more flavor or variety
- I experienced minor discomfort (e.g., stomach upset)
- I experienced serious health issues
- I did not try any indigenous Nigerian dishes

C11: Have you noticed any health changes (positive or negative) after consuming Nigerian traditional meals? Please explain. \_\_\_\_\_