



OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY
Carol Kerven,
Odessa Centre Ltd, United Kingdom

*CORRESPONDENCE
Serena Ferrari,
✉ serena.ferrari@cirad.fr

RECEIVED 29 August 2025
REVISED 08 September 2026
ACCEPTED 25 September 2026
PUBLISHED 27 October 2026

CITATION
Ferrari S and Wane A (2026) Balancing
tradition and modernity: meat
consumption trends in coastal
West Africa.
Pastoralism 16:15507.
doi: 10.3389/past.2026.15507

COPYRIGHT
© 2026 Ferrari and Wane. This is an open-
access article distributed under the terms
of the Creative Commons Attribution
License (CC BY). The use, distribution or
reproduction in other forums is permitted,
provided the original author(s) and the
copyright owner(s) are credited and that
the original publication in this journal is
cited, in accordance with accepted
academic practice. No use, distribution or
reproduction is permitted which does not
comply with these terms.

Balancing tradition and modernity: meat consumption trends in coastal West Africa

Serena Ferrari^{1,2*} and Abdrahmane Wane³

¹CIRAD, UMR SELMET, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, ²SELMET, Univ Montpellier, CIRAD, INRAE, Institut Agro, Montpellier, France, ³International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI), Dakar, Senegal

This study investigates the perceptions of meat quality among urban consumers in three West African capital cities: Dakar, Abidjan, and Abuja, with the goal of assessing the market potential for meat from extensive Sahelian livestock systems. To complement large-scale quantitative assessments of West African urban meat demand (e.g., ILRI/CIRAD household surveys), this qualitative study applies Convention Theory to unpack the underlying social, cultural, and quality-evaluation logics of consumers. Based on 49 focus group discussions across low-, middle-, and high-income households in Dakar, Abidjan, and Abuja, qualitative transcripts were systematically analyzed in QDA Miner Lite to evaluate consumer quality conventions based on a variety of criteria, including intrinsic characteristics like taste and freshness, as well as extrinsic factors such as price, origin, and safety. The findings reveal that consumers' choices are guided by a balance of different "quality conventions". The organoleptic convention, which focuses on taste and appearance, is the most dominant factor in their decision-making, followed closely by the market convention, where price and accessibility are key. The study also identifies a significant role for the industrial convention, as consumers value modern practices like clean points of sale and hygienic packaging. However, this is nuanced by a strong preference for "local" and "traditional" products, which is driven by a domestic convention rooted in trust and familiarity. Consumers also rely on a civic convention, linking their choices to societal principles like supporting the local economy and animal welfare. The conclusion suggests that for meat from Sahelian pastoral systems to thrive, it must professionalize its processes to meet hygiene standards while also leveraging its traditional, healthy, and local identity.

KEYWORDS

food safety, pastoralism, quality convention theory, urban consumer behavior, West Africa

Introduction

Meat consumption is a sensitive topic in the coastal countries of West Africa, due to tensions between demand and supply of meat. Demand is increasing quantitatively—due to population growth—and evolving qualitatively. The phenomenon of urbanization contributes to the emergence of new consumer classes and consumption habits (Mankor, 2009; Guibert et al., 2009). Furthermore, consumers are becoming increasingly strict about product safety, more specifically regarding production, processing and storage conditions. However, these same consumers have generally low purchasing power, which is very restrictive, particularly with regard to the frequency of consumption of meat. On the supply side, although the coastal countries have livestock sectors that contribute significantly to domestic needs, they remain largely dependent on imports from Sahelian countries: Mali,

Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad. Here, the livelihood of a very large part of the population depends on livestock farming and on the export of live animals. Yet, the current place and the potential for marketing meat from Sahelian livestock farms on the markets of coastal countries represent a considerable social challenge in the region.

In this study, we ask whether coastal country markets represent commercial outlets with growing potential for Sahelian livestock systems. To answer this question, we set out to identify current trends in consumption and demand for meat in those countries, by analyzing consumers' perceptions of the qualities and attributes attributed to available kinds of meat. The survey was conducted among households in the capital cities of Senegal, Nigeria, and Côte d'Ivoire, which are broadly representative of meat demand and consumption behavior profiles. We addressed the quality of meat from different animal species (beef, mutton, goat, pork, and bushmeat), as well fish and eggs—considered as alternative products.

Consumer perception of food quality

The concept of “quality” in contemporary food systems has become remarkably complex, transcending objective nutritional or health attributes to encompass ethical, environmental, and societal dimensions. This complexity is particularly pronounced in the animal products sector, which faces intense consumer expectations (Prache and Santé-Lhoutellier, 2020). In many parts of the world, the consumption of animal products is, on one hand, a marker of good nutrition and improved living standards, but also, on the other hand, being questioned for its impact on the climate, natural resource use, human health, and animal ethics (id.).

Consumer perception of food quality may differ depending on the country and region of the world, being influenced by a variety of factors. In many countries, especially in the South, food safety is a major concern for consumers due to a lack of strong enforcement institutions and limited private-sector investment. Consumers are often concerned about contaminants, chemical preservatives, and the overall health risks of food. In Kenya, Bukachi et al. (2021) investigated the consumer perceptions of food safety in animal source foods choice and consumption in Nairobi's informal settlements, showing that lack of traceability of source, unhygienic environments in which they were sold and health risks around consuming too much or improperly cooked products are key in consumers' perception. They frequently rely on personal mitigation strategies, such as boiling milk or buying from trusted vendors (id.).

Some categories of consumers are more concerned by food safety than others (Miftari et al., 2024) show that in Kosovo the most concerned are usually young, women, and university-educated consumers, who tend to seek higher transparency and accountability from food producers due to greater access to information, and have a stronger connection to the environment and animal welfare. Income also plays a significant role in food choices. In Latin American and African countries, price is often a primary factor for low-income consumers, who may prioritize affordability over other quality attributes (Marsola et al., 2020; Corniaux et al., 2021). Higher-income consumers, on the other hand, tend to show more concern for factors such as health, nutrition, and sustainability (Marsola et al., 2020).

Consumers use various cues to judge quality, including individual physiological and psychological characteristics. Intrinsic cues, such as freshness, taste, and appearance, are often the most important (Ferrari, 2021). Extrinsic cues, such as price, packaging, branding, and country of origin, also influence purchasing decisions (Mehta et al., 2024). In some developing countries, consumers may prefer imported foods with certifications from more developed nations, as these are perceived as safer and of higher quality (Wu et al., 2021).

Quality conventions to solve uncertainty

Since the agri-food sector is characterized by uncertainties regarding product quality, consumers and producers rely on shared understandings and rules to coordinate their actions and evaluate products. Convention Theory (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991) offers a powerful analytical framework for understanding these shared understandings of quality. In this regard, Sylvander (1994), p. 35 defines quality as “uncertainty about the definition and evaluation of the product characteristics taken into account by the partners during a transaction.” The author identifies four quality conventions: i) *industrial*, referring to compliance with specific standards, i.e., objectified rules external to the actor; ii) *domestic*, relating to the existence of lasting links between economic actors, links that are based on trust in people or brands; iii) *civic*, resulting from the adherence of actors to common societal principles; and iv) *market*, according to which the actors have information and are able to judge the quality of the products on the basis of the characteristics observed during the transactions. These quality conventions correspond to ideal types, which do not exist in reality in a pure but rather composite form. Following the same logic, Boltanski and Thévenot (1991) identify six different logics or orders of worth, which represent six different ways of interpreting entities (people, objects, actions, concepts, etc.). These orders of worth are as follows: i) *market* (price); ii) *industrial* (efficiency); iii) *inspired* (creativity); iv) tied to *opinion* and/or *fame* (reputation); v) *family* (esteem); and vi) *civic* (wellbeing and collective interest).

Another way to evaluate a quality is to judge its specificity. According to (Allaire and Sylvander, 1997), “a quality, as a characteristic of a product, is specific if its production conditions are based on specific resources, that is to say, non-imitable, either for technical reasons, or due to a specificity of transactions, or for regulatory reasons” (p. 8). According to (Tablier and Nicolas, 1994), it would result from an agreement on a qualification, the benchmarks of which are the origin (as a spatial inscription and historical continuity) and taste. It would stem from a collective representation of the product, taste, and the consumer.

The study of conventions involves understanding where they originate, how they have evolved, and how they will evolve. For example (Sylvander, 1994), analyzes quality conventions for organic products and recognizes a civic convention (respect for the environment and health) that has intervened in an industrial convention (compliance with quality standards). According to the author, two parallel developments are predictable: one oriented toward a domestic convention (maintaining trust between consumers and brands), the other toward market coordination (price reduction) (Marescotti, 2001). notes a ten-year evolution in conventions regarding the quality of Chianina

beef in Italy. Local exchanges (domestic conventions), once dominant, have been disrupted by territorial openness and the emergence of new production and consumption models (industrial coordination). In this context, we then witnessed the emergence of a civic-type convention, motivated by the shared desire to preserve a common heritage (Chianina meat). Marescotti thus shows that the decline and revaluation of a specific product are the result of the evolution of different quality conventions. He concludes that the protection and valorization of typical products revolves around the emergence of the civic convention, based on the recovery of domestic coordination.

Mobilize the convention theory to seize consumers' criteria for meat quality assessment

In order to understand how West-African urban consumers perceive meat quality and safety, we build on Convention Theory. This theory comes from a research program that has been developed from the 1980s, particularly in France and the United States. It is intended as an approach to the problems of economic organization (Marescotti, 2001), positioning itself on the border between microeconomics and sociology. Convention Theory is based on the postulate that “the agreement between individuals, even when it is limited to the contract of a commercial exchange, is not possible without a common framework, without a constitutive convention” (Eymard-Duvernay, 1989). A convention is “a behavioral structure of coordination that offers a resolution process for a recurring problem, by emitting information about identical behaviors of individuals” (Gomez, 1994).

Quality is a social construction, which “sets the rules of an implicit consensus on what should be the objects exchanged” (*id.*, p. 137). The different concepts of quality represent quality conventions. For convention theorists, the aggregation of different forms of qualification “is an indicator flagging the existence of orders of justification or orders of worth” (Daudigeos and Valiorgue, 2010) as proposed by Boltanski and Thévenot (1991). The process of constituting conventions is gradual and spontaneous. It originates from repeated social interactions, initially within a defined domain, then extended to involve other individuals through imitation mechanisms. They thus represent benchmarks, generating information, which simplify decision-making and facilitate coordination between agents. Conventions are constantly subject to evolutionary changes, which result from changes in worldviews, in the interrelationships between individuals, and in their perceptions of the surrounding environment (Marescotti, 2001). The trust that agents place in the convention is not automatic, but they can question it through suspicion. The convention can then evolve in three different ways: 1) it can collapse and disappear; 2) it can be kept alive by some segments of the population and disappear among others; 3) it can integrate the doubt brought by suspicion and broaden “its scope as a problem-solving procedure” (Gomez, 1994).

Quality is a social construct, which pre-exists exchange and production, but also arises from them. “It establishes the rules of an implicit consensus on what the exchanged objects should be and therefore allows the existence of transactions (it is because quality is

imposed that the customer chooses)” (Gomez, 1994). The different meanings of quality represent quality conventions, which “intervene in coordination as exogenous to the laws of the market, while strongly structuring it” (Sylvander, 1994, p. 34). Indeed, exchanges are characterized, in reality, by the asymmetry of information on the quality of the object exchanged by the agents. The latter therefore require a prior agreement on what the exchanged quality is. This assumes that they share certain common references before taking part in the transactions (Orléan, 2011).

There is indeed a gap between the objective characteristics of a product and the qualities perceived by the actors. This is a consequence of the impossibility for the actors to perceive and measure all the qualities. Quality conventions serve precisely to reduce uncertainty about quality. If they succeed in eliminating this uncertainty, we will no longer be in the presence of a quality, but of a product characteristic. Consequently, we can only speak of quality if we are in the presence of uncertainty.

Through this study, we aim at verifying the following hypothesis: *In the urban markets of the West-African coastal countries, meat quality conventions are dominated by domestic and industrial orders of justification.*

Materials and methods

This qualitative study is part of a broader regional research initiative examining animal-source food consumption across West African urban hubs (Wane et al., 2024). While broad quantitative surveys capture income elasticities, expenditure tiers, and market shares across coastal capital cities, this qualitative component utilizes Convention Theory to investigate the subjective benchmarks and institutional trust mechanisms driving consumer choices. We conducted focus groups in the three capital cities of the target countries, given that we assumed that these cities could reflect the diversity of consumption patterns and preferences of different segments of the population. We conducted 15 focus groups per country at “consumption sites” (households, groups of colleagues/friends), involving no fewer than five people each. This approach helps to stimulate dialogue and discussion among participants and to reduce biases that could arise from the presence of an outsider (the researcher).

Sampling method

The sample of consumption sites is based on two variables: (i) the *area of residence* and (ii) the *socioeconomic status* of the respondents. The area of residence was selected as a primary sampling criterion because, in West African urban centers, geography is intrinsically linked to food environment accessibility and socio-economic status. We used national population censuses to allocate the sample. For the second variable, aware of the difficulty of assessing the total amount of household income, we used as proxies: the condition of the house and its furnishings, as well as the respondents' education level. Indeed, we argue that the level of spending on housing and education is positively related to the level of food spending. To identify and reach consumption sites, we used a snowball

TABLE 1 Population by department in the Region of Dakar.

Department	Population
Dakar	1,476 669
Guédiawaye	424,759
Pikine	1,508 545
Rufisque	632,252
Total	4,042 225

Source: 2022 projection from the *Agence Nationale de Statistique et de la Démographie* (ANSD).

sampling technique, which consisted of asking interviewees for other contacts with specific characteristics.

Sampling in Dakar

In the Dakar region, we conducted 17 focus groups (the number was determined based on existing literature and available research resources). Taking into account the

administrative division of the region, we distributed the focus groups across the four departments (Dakar, Guédiawaye, Pikine, Rufisque–Table 1) according to their population size (Figure 1). We therefore conducted 6 in the Dakar department, 2 in Guédiawaye, 6 in Pikine, and 3 in Rufisque. The choice of consumer groups is also made according to the socio-economic level of the respondents and will be distributed as follows: 6 focus groups for socio-economic class 1 (low income), 6 for class 2 (middle income), 5 for class 3 (high income).

Sampling in Abidjan

Adibjan has been, since 2001, a 2119 km² autonomous district that consists of ten communes of the former City of Abidjan (422 km²) and four formerly rural surrounding sub-prefectures, but now overtaken by the urban sprawl of Abidjan (Table 2). We conducted 17 focus groups distributed as follows: 3 in Abobo, 3 in Yopougon, 4 in four peripheral sub-prefectures, and 7 in the remaining eight communes of the city of Abidjan. Of these 17 focus groups, 6 were conducted with groups of consumers from socio-economic class 1 (low income), 6 from class 2 (middle income) and 5 from class 3 (high income).

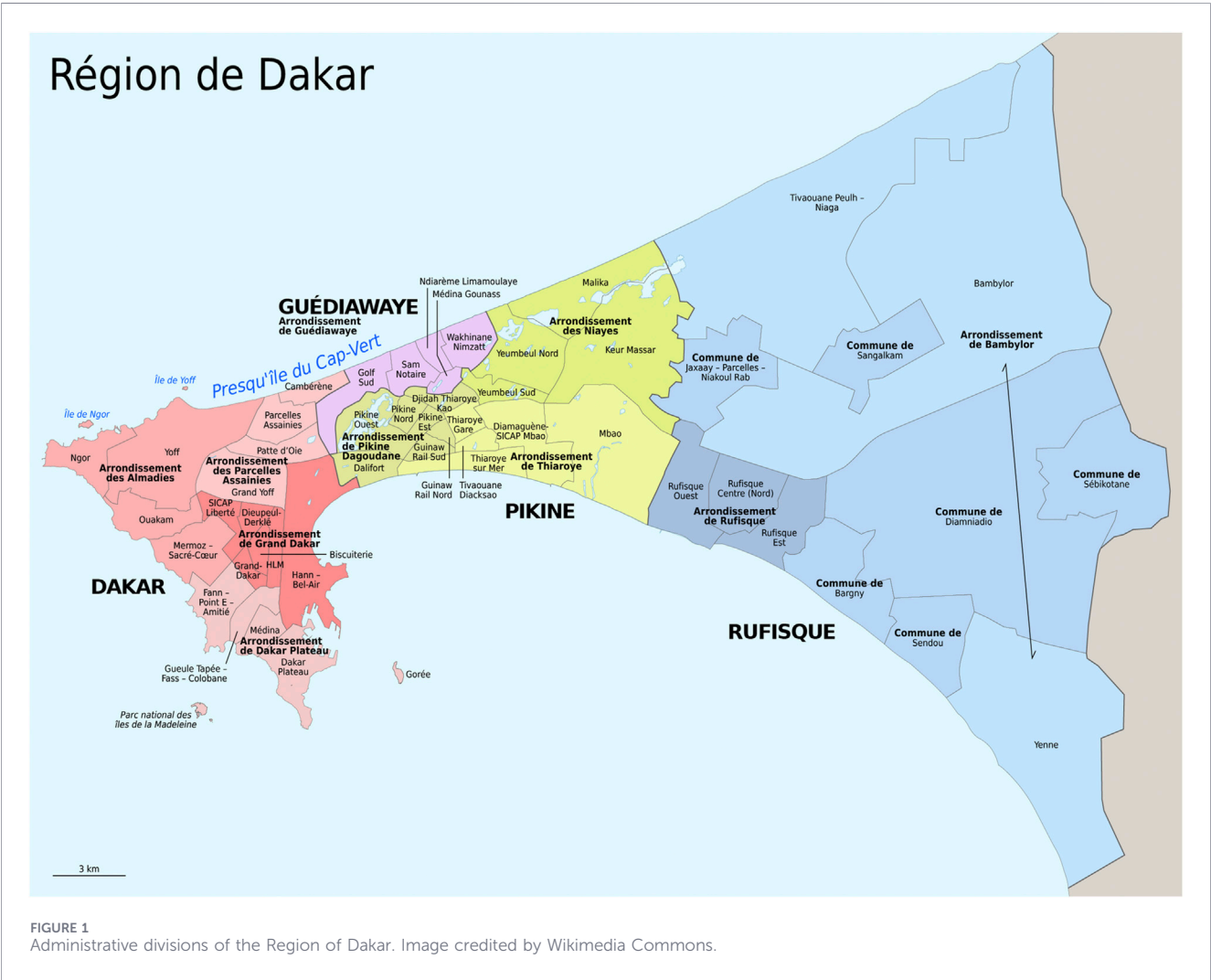


TABLE 2 Population of the autonomous district of Abidjan.

Department	Sub-prefecture or commune	Men	Women	Total	Masculinity ratio	Households (number)	Households (average size)
Abidjan	Abobo	680,422	659,661	1,340,083	103	280,206	4.8
	Adjame	180,917	159,974	340,892	113	72,671	4.7
	Attecoubé	163,989	149,146	313,135	110	67,683	4.6
	Cocody	330,016	362,566	692,583	91	169,438	4.1
	Koumassi	209,098	203,184	412,282	103	97,794	4.2
	Marcory	110,458	103,603	214,061	107	50,945	4.2
	Plateau	3,635	3,551	7,186	102	1,584	4.4
	Port-bouet	321,726	297,07	618,795	108	146,903	4.2
	Treichville	55,91	50,642	106,552	110	25,046	4.2
	Yopougon	795,443	775,622	1,571,065	103	349,48	4.5
Total-city Abidjan	Abidjan	2,851,614	2,765,020	5,616,633	103	1,261,750	4.5
Abidjan	Anyama	200,517	189,076	389,592	106	80,147	4.8
	Bingerville	101,397	103,259	204,656	98	46,607	4.4
	Brofodoume	10,623	9,734	20,357	109	5,088	4.0
	Songon	46,833	42,945	89,778	109	20,544	4.4
Total-s/p abidjan	Abidjan	359,369	345,014	704,384	104	152,386	4.6

Source: General Census of Population and Housing 2021.

Sampling in Abuja

The Federal Capital Territory of Nigeria consists of six area councils: Abaji, Abuja Municipal, Bwari, Gwagwalada, Kuje and Kwali (Figure 2). These cover an area of approximately 7290 km². The selection of consumer groups to be surveyed was based on the *council area* of residence, following a weighting based on population projections for the year 2022. A total of 15 focus groups were conducted (Table 3), with the following distribution: 1 in Abaji, 8 in Abuja Municipal Area Council, 2 in Bwari, 2 in Gwagwalada, 1 in Kuje, 1 in Kwali. Of the 15 consumer groups, 5 are from socio-economic class 1 (low income), 5 from class 2 (middle income), and 5 from class 3 (high income).

Subject of the study: meat & co. (red meat, white meat, fish)

We recall the final purpose of this study is to identify the potential for the West-African livestock sector exports to coastal countries. Knowing that, we decided to focus on meat in the broad sense, that is red meat and the other products that may be considered by consumers as substitutes: white meat and fish. Indeed, it is recognized that households have the tendency to arbitrate among those products based on product accessibility (Wane et al., 2021). Yet, we did not take into account other animal-source foods (such as eggs and dairy products), since they are not considered by consumers as meat substitutes in meal preparation.

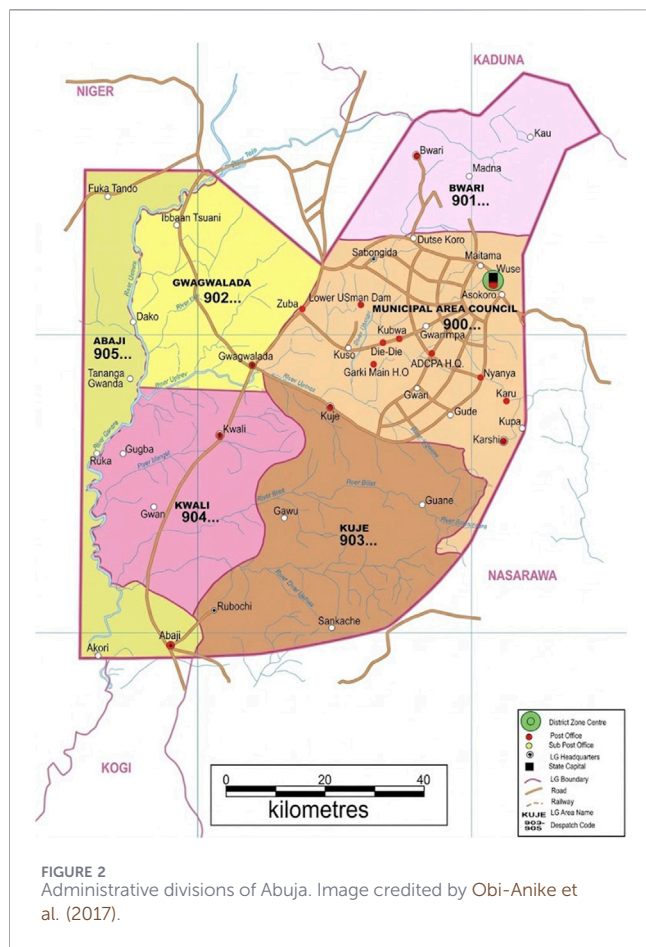
The interviews tackled the following issues:

- The products consumed, as perceived by the interviewees. It is key to compare the vocabulary used by consumers and the official nomenclature of products, in order to understand the characteristics according to which consumers distinguish the different products (perception of quality);
- Supply practices (places and frequencies of purchase, quantities, people who finance and decide to purchase, etc.);
- The situations of use (the different recipes and preparations, the places and times of consumption), which made it possible to identify which are the main substitute products and why;
- The desirable product characteristics, to understand how quality is perceived, according to which criteria and which benchmarks;
- Food safety issues;
- The uncertainty about product quality and its causes.

How we ran the focus group interviews

The focus group interviews were very open and inspired by the register of conversation. They took place in the most usual language for the interviewees. They were recorded to be transcribed afterward. Each interview took between 1 hour and 1 hour and a half, and took place in three phases:

1. Socio-demographic characteristics (age, level of education, profession, description of the consumption site) and purchase and consumption situations (products consumed, quantities, places of purchase, dishes, etc.);



2. Exhibition of photos showing different meat & co. products: which products are preferred? Why are they preferred over others? This phase was used to focus the interviewees' attention on the subject of the study. In addition, it allowed the interviewees to compare the different products, to classify them, to express judgments, especially on issues relating to product accessibility, availability, seasonality, and use;
3. Exhibition of photos showing different production/processing/sale/consumption situations. The aim of this

phase was to induce the interviewees to express their opinion on the different situations shown by the photos. The interviewees were invited to sort the photos according to whether they like them or not and to explain why.

4. Listing and ranking of safety-related issues for meat (knowledge, attitudes and practices). The participants were asked what are some of the attributes they look for to determine the safety of meat, or what are the things that make meat less or not suitable for human consumption?

Interview analysis technique

The interviews were transcribed and coded according to the concepts of Convention Theory. The analysis was carried out using the QDA Miner Lite software (Figure 3). This allows to assign a “code” (see quality convention) to each relevant segment of the interviews and then to gather all the interview segments corresponding to each specific code, in order to have an overview of the discourse of the actors and eventually “quantify” the importance of each quality convention for the interviewees. The different codes or quality conventions were taken from both the scientific literature (Eymard-Duvernay, 1989; Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991) and field specificities.

Results: quality conventions around meat in the three countries

Based on the theory and on field specificities, we identified 9 quality conventions, as listed in Table 4. Based on their number of occurrences, we “quantified” the importance of each quality convention around meat (and substitute products) among urban consumers in Dakar, Abidjan and Abuja. Indeed, the number of occurrences of each quality convention (corresponding to a code in the analysis of the interviews) can be considered as a proxy for the importance of consumer choice criteria. Table 4 and Figure 4 show the occurrences of quality conventions in the three countries. In the remaining sections of this part of the article, we detail in more depth the different quality conventions, as they appear in the discourse of the interviewed consumers.

TABLE 3 Population of the Abuja council areas.

Council areas of the Federal capital Territory (Abuja)	Population recensement 2006	Population projection 2022	Focus groups
Abaji	58,642	127,900	1
Abuja Municipal area council	776,298	1,693,400	8
Bwari	229,274	500,100	2
Gwagwalada	158,618	346,000	2
Kuje	97,233	212,100	1
Kwali	86,174	188,000	1
Total	1,406 239	3,067,500	15

Source: <https://www.citypopulation.de/en/nigeria/admin/>

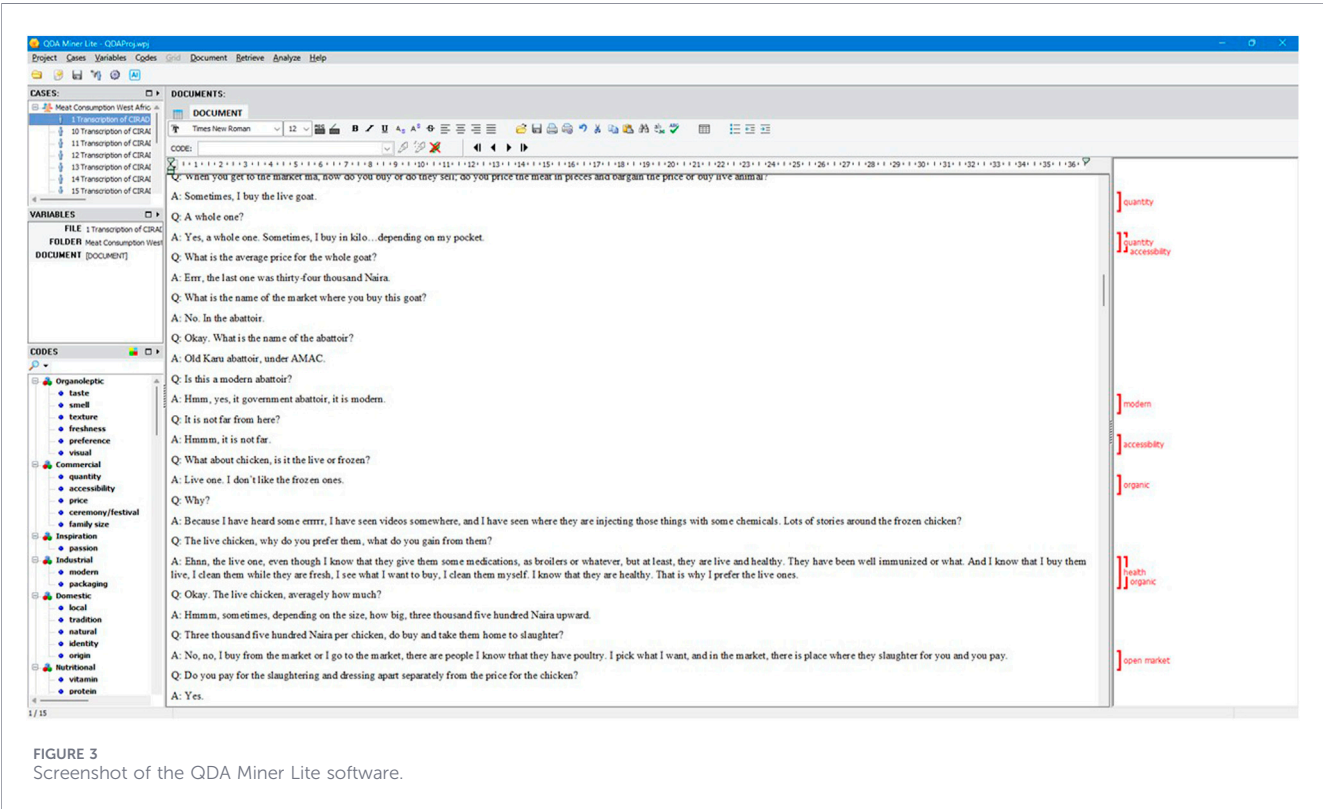


TABLE 4 Occurrences of the different quality conventions in each of the three countries and across the survey as a whole.

Quality conventions	Number of occurrences			
	Senegal	Ivory coast	Nigeria	Grand totals
Organoleptic	329	483	302	1114
Market	286	361	103	750
Industrial	217	104	67	388
Domestic	97	128	29	254
Nutritional	73	86	57	216
Civic	11	39	25	75
Religious	26	31	8	65
Opinion	12	5	22	39
Inspiration	2	3	15	20
Totals by country	1053	1240	628	2921

Source: authors.

Organoleptic characteristics at the heart of consumer choice

In the interviews conducted, it is clear to what extent the organoleptic quality convention is predominant in the world of consumer choices—which is easily understandable in the case of food products. Indeed, the first criterion that motivates the preference for one product rather than another is the set of

characteristics related to taste, aroma, texture, freshness, visual appearance, or even a preference that consumers cannot explain (Figure 5). The words used to describe these characteristics are numerous: tasty, fresh, soft, bland, hard, fatty, tender, bitter, sweet, sticky, etc.

For example, in the interview extract below, we can see how a Dakar consumer justifies his preference for mutton rather than chicken:

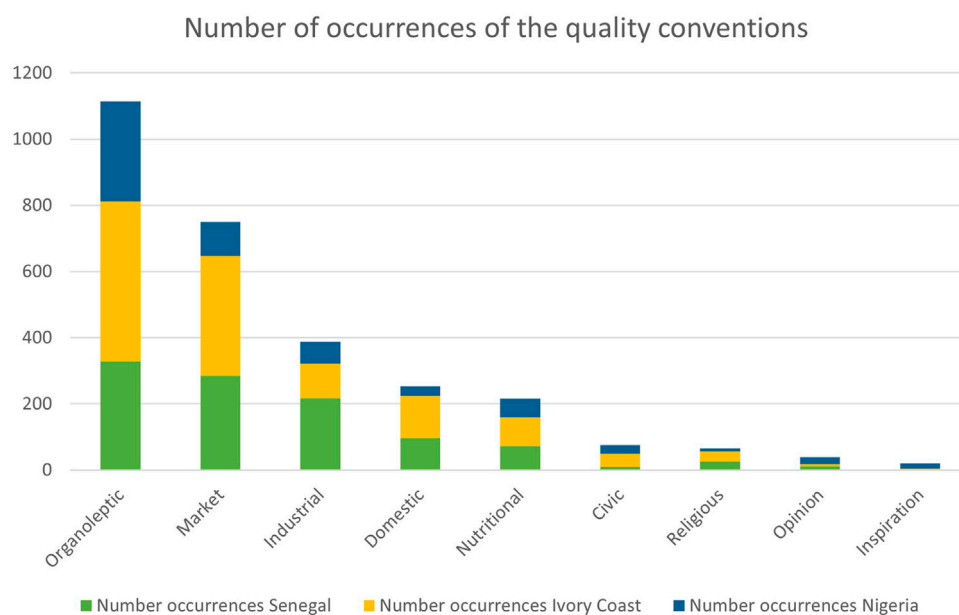


FIGURE 4
Occurrences of the different quality conventions in the three countries.

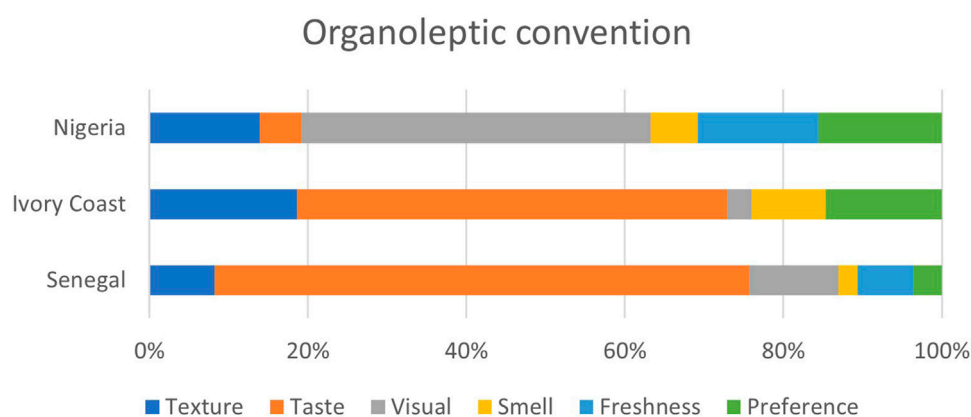


FIGURE 5
Proportional distribution of internal quality benchmarks within the Organoleptic Convention across countries (% of total organoleptic codes).

“Chicken meat is too tasteless. If we make it dibi [grilled], what will it be like? Dibi from chicken meat cannot be tasty. Unless it’s other chickens like the ones this boy’s mother raised, then it can be tasty. They’re big chickens; when we killed them, there was no fat.”

Below another Abidjan consumer explains his passion for mutton based on its taste:

“Mutton, [...] yes I like it, [...] because the taste, all that, especially when it’s braised... it’s so mild, it’s well done.”

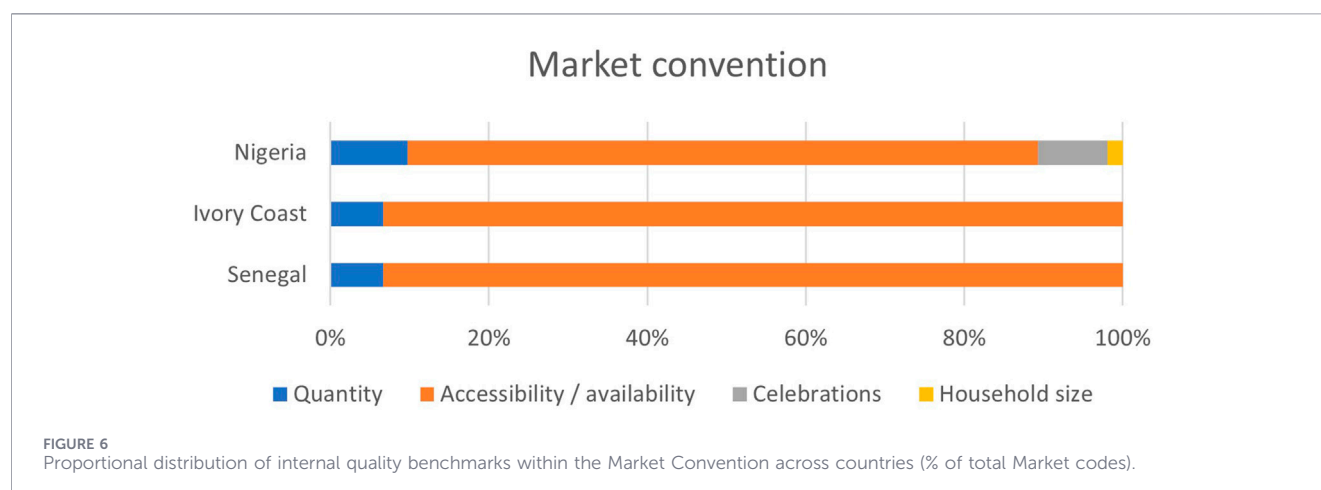
Price as a key factor in consumer decisions

The market convention also occupies a central place in the discourse of consumers, who choose meat products mainly on the

basis of their accessibility in terms of price, their availability in their surroundings and also the relationship between quantity and price (Figure 6). For example, in the interview extract below, an Ivorian consumer explains the general preference for pork for reasons related to price:

“Pork meat... [...] you know that in Yopougon here, everywhere you go, you find this meat, it is appreciated by everyone [...] first of all it’s because it’s cheaper, [so] that everyone eats.”

As one might imagine, buyers must consider not only the absolute price of the desired product, but also the possibility of being able to feed their entire household with it. This is particularly evident in this excerpt from an interview conducted in Abuja:



“The children are no longer at home and half a goat’s cheese is enough for us for two months. When they are at home, it only lasts for the holidays.”

The financial possibilities of buyers also influence the place and method of purchase: the more fragmented the purchasing power, the fewer alternatives will be available, as this Nigerian consumer explains:

“When I have no alternative, I go to the market because the slaughterhouse has restrictive hours. If you want to buy from the slaughterhouse, you have to go early. This is because the market vendors go to the slaughterhouse to resell [the meat]. [...] We always buy from them, that’s the problem: we cannot buy the whole cow, that’s why we go to them [the market vendors]. [...] If you have money, you can buy from the slaughterhouse. You cannot go to the slaughterhouse with 4,000 or 10,000 naira [about \$5 to \$12]. Those who go to the slaughterhouse with 40,000 or 50,000 naira [about \$50 or \$60] can have a share [of the animal].”

The choice of product also depends on its availability on the market, the offer of which can sometimes be limited in terms of variety, as the Senegalese consumer explains below:

“You cannot find these types of meat on the market. The meat choices on the market are very limited. For example, if you need duck meat on the market, you might have to look for it for days, and you’ll never find it.”

Sometimes, despite budgetary constraints, certain choices are forced by specific occasions, such as religious ceremonies, festivities, etc., as shown by this excerpt from an interview conducted in Nigeria:

“Sometimes we eat [...] fatty rice and chicken for Christmas. [...] We look for every way to prepare it during the Christmas period.”

Figure 6 shows the benchmarks used by consumers in the three countries within the framework of the market convention.

A predilection for products considered “modern” and “industrial”

We have seen that the industrial quality convention ranks third in consumers’ discourse around their preferences. Rather than the type of product, this is mainly reflected in the attention paid to packaging and the point of sale. Most consumers attribute high added value to the “modern” aspect of a product or situation, as clearly demonstrated by the exclamation of this Nigerian consumer:

“Yes [I like it], it’s a government slaughterhouse, it’s modern.”

The extract from this interview conducted in Dakar clearly shows how consumers identify the places of sale that they consider reliable:

“There are some of these sellers that, when you see the meat they sell, you just want to buy this meat because they take good care of it, the place of sale is very clean. On the other hand, if you find a seller whose meat [...] is full of flies and the place is dirty, you are not going to buy from him.”

Sometimes certain signs of hygienic safety can be used to establish the “industrial” nature of meat—take, for example, what this Senegalese consumer says about the stamps affixed by third-party organizations:

“Whoever supplies me with meat, usually has a good seal on it, you can see the seal from the health services. And I trust him.”

There may also be cases where the “modern” character of a product is considered a sign of poor quality, since there are doubts about the effects that certain methods linked to intensive production and/or industrial preservation could have on health. This is

explained, for example, by these consumers from Dakar and Abuja respectively:

“I know that [in] industrial farming, animals are force-fed food and GMOs, and that affects their meat. But here [in extensive farming], it’s more natural, the cows only eat grass, there are no chemicals.”

“This [product] is packaged [wrapped in nylon]. This other one seems to be chemically preserved. I prefer the packaged one.”

Another Ivorian consumer also points this out:

“I myself prefer this [a “traditional” product] because it’s natural, [what is] presented there is not natural. [...] You know that [...] those who are there [the “traditional” sellers], when they buy [the animals], they slaughter and then they come [to resell] with that.”

In summary, urban consumers seem to attach great importance to the modern and industrial character of products, and especially to their place of sale, but remain suspicious of conservation methods, the potential repercussions of which they are unaware.

A widely disseminated notion of “local products”

Most of the consumers interviewed showed a preference (which often remains unexplained) for local products, as opposed to products defined as “imported” or “coming from elsewhere.” Expressions such as “at home,” “our products,” “our traditions,” or “we Africans” abound in the consumers’ narrative. Let’s take the example of these Ivorian and Senegalese consumers, who declare:

“I only eat African chicken, I do not eat broiler chicken.”

“I like that [referring to an old pot cooking meat], that’s the old days, [...] it reminds me of the village.”

“I choose meat from local cows [...] because it’s the one I know.”

These expressions can be explained by the comfort that a known and well-controlled situation offers to the person, unlike products or methods that one would not know and which could potentially be a source of danger. Let us see, for example, what some Dakar consumers declare:

“No, we never buy it [imported liver]. [It] is not good and yet it is cheaper. [...] A frozen liver is not good.”

“I prefer local chicken and local mutton. [...] It’s more original. The rest is pre-made.”

“I prefer traditional sheep farming. [...] Because bush sheep have a varied diet, whereas these sheep raised in homes are force-fed and given medication so that they grow quickly.”

Modern processing and sales practices, although sometimes a source of confidence for consumers, can also be accompanied by a certain mistrust, since they call into question the quality “that we know.” This is explained, for example, by these Senegalese consumers:

“I do not trust [smoked beef sold in supermarkets], [...] I buy my meat at the market [...] and I smoke it myself. [...] Then I’m sure it’s beef.”

“[In supermarkets], they never say where the minced meat comes from because it’s the delicatessens that sell it. We do not know if they make it themselves, or if it’s imported, you cannot understand. You cannot know the origin. Because some say they make it themselves.”

“Usually, we do not just kill; before slaughtering the animal, we say prayers. But in slaughterhouses, machines kill the chickens. And the machines only kill, then the chicken is thrown into hot water where another machine plucks the feathers.”

Figure 7 summarizes the benchmarks on which consumers rely to explain a domestic-type quality convention.

The nutritional contribution of meat products

The consumers interviewed were sensitive to the nutritional aspect of the products they purchased. They praised the “vitamin” content of meat products and most declared themselves in favour of “traditional” products because they were richer in nutrients, as in the case of these consumers from Dakar:

“Broiler chicken is easier to prepare, but local chicken is healthier for the body.”

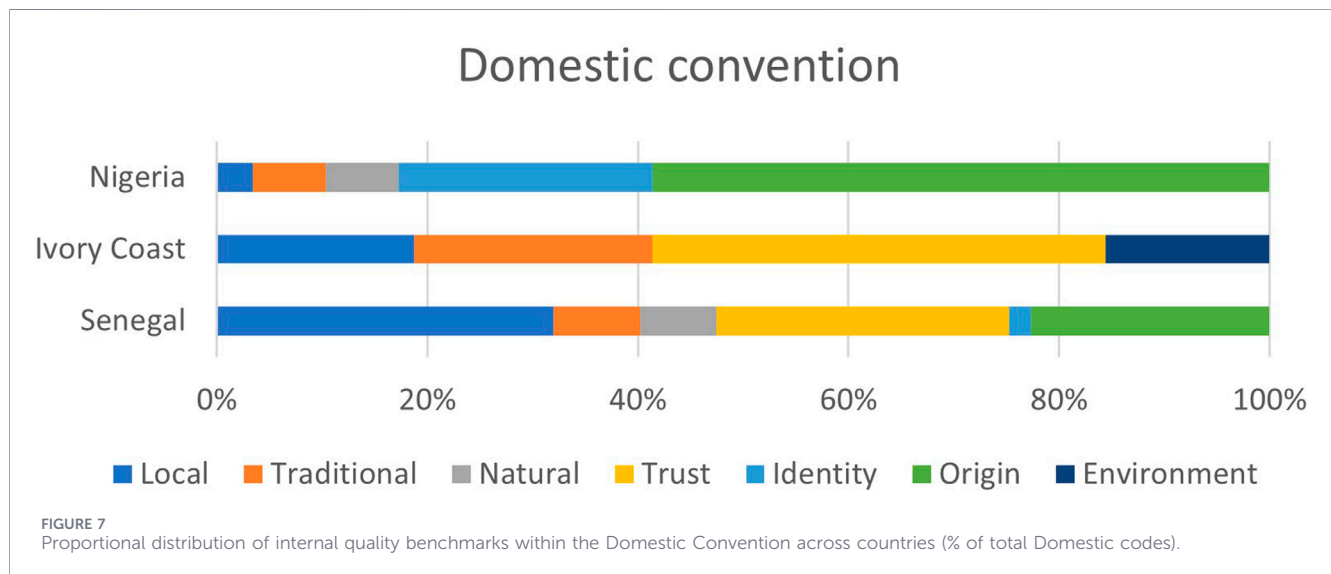
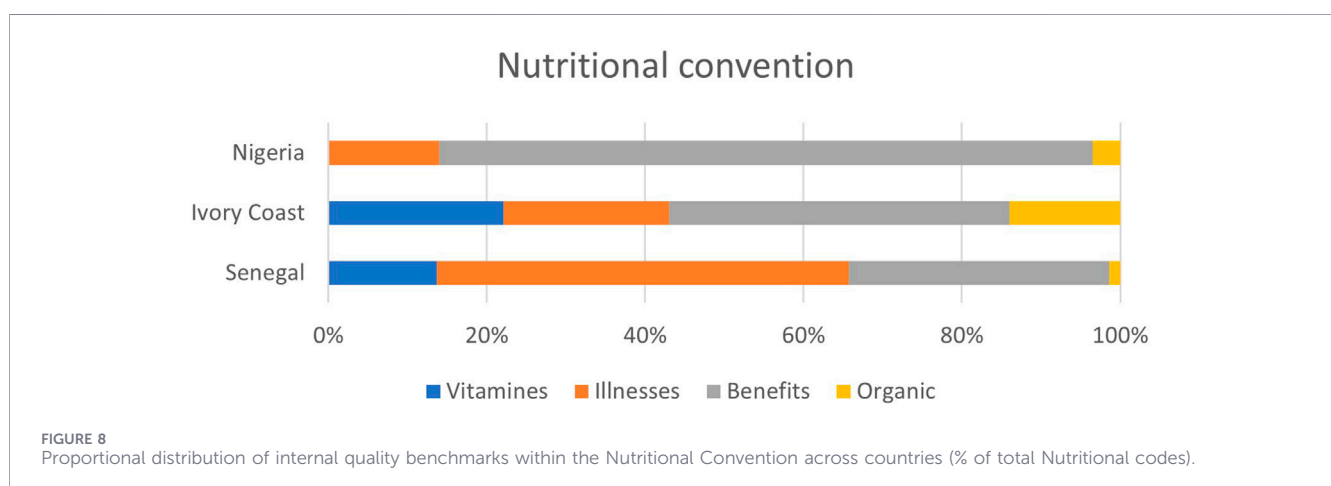
“The meat from these [extensively raised] sheep is healing. So is the meat from extensively raised goats. Because these herds only eat leaves from several tree species. The late owner of this house never agreed to eat meat from animals raised in urban areas.”

The interviewees seem to be sensitive to the risks that excessive consumption of (red) meat could cause to their health, especially for the less young, as shown by these interview extracts from Abuja and Dakar respectively:

“We often hear from bloggers or advertisements [...] that red meat [beef] is not good for adults. That’s why we do not eat it as much as chicken and fish.”

“I prefer this meat without fat [...] because I heard that fat causes illnesses and that you should buy meat without fat.”

Nutritional issues also require special attention to children, who require special nutrition, as this consumer from Abidjan, for example, points out:



“I like liver, [...] it nourishes children when [they] are anaemic.”

In summary, as shown in Figure 8, consumers attribute health benefits to meat (but especially to certain types of meat), such as vitamin intake, especially when the products are considered “organic” (read: from extensive farming); nevertheless, the repercussions that can result from an unreasonable consumption of meat products are also mentioned.

Other quality conventions related to belief attributes

Other quality conventions are mobilized in the narrative of the interviewed consumers: quantitatively, they seem to be less important than those developed in the previous sections, but could actually carry great potential for certain types of meat. We refer to choice criteria linked to belief attributes of

products, that is, characteristics that the consumer cannot verify either at the time of purchase or at the time of consumption—they can only believe that the product has a specific characteristic. As an example, we mention the contribution that certain products and/or production systems can have on the local economy and the development of the country. This seems particularly significant in Senegal, where the interviewed consumers often use this argument to justify their purchasing choices:

“I think we should keep what is produced in the country [and] leave everything that is imported. [...] We should improve local production. We must do it for our country.”

“Why not our cows? [...] These foreign cows, we take them from elsewhere to bring them here, so these [local cows] were born here and grew up here. Let us do as foreigners do: put them on farms and take good care of them. This would mean that

cows of foreign origin will no longer come, we will rely on our own. [...] Which will increase [improve] our economy.”

Another relatively recurring argument revolves around animal welfare, which, according to several consumers, is preserved in free-range farming systems and respectful conditions of animal transport and slaughter. Let's see, for example, how consumers, respectively Nigerian and Ivorian, approach the issue:

“This [referring to an intensive chicken farm] is an industrial camp, they [the chickens] do not have the opportunity to move, unlike what we [traditionally] do.”

“Putting the animals like that [in a truck]... no, that's not good. First of all, the animals suffer, [...] because they're not comfortable. There's the sun, it's raining, they're crammed in... it's true that they're animals, but it's not good, it's not the best way to transport them.”

At the same time, we would like to report an excerpt from an interview conducted in Nigeria, which draws attention to a sentiment that goes against the preference for “traditional” livestock farming, pointing to the negative impact that the mobile lifestyle of extensive livestock farmers can have on animal welfare:

“There are people who raise these kinds of cows at home. There are [other] people who make them wander [the nomads]. Those raised at home seem healthier than those that wander. The latter are stressed because they [the breeders] travel a long way with them. Often they do not consult official veterinarians, but rather use local methods to care for the cows.”

Another criterion for choosing meat products is religious, particularly in the case of Muslim households. This has an impact on the level of trust in “new” products (for example, packaged or frozen) and “anonymous” sales outlets, such as supermarkets. Consider, for example, the statement of this Senegalese consumer:

“I prefer meat that comes from the country to that which comes from abroad. [...] We are Muslims, there are slaughter charters that we must respect for meat to be halal for us, whereas with meat that comes from abroad, we do not know the conditions in which the animal is slaughtered.”

Finally, we would like to mention a selection criterion that relates to the sentimental side of consumers: that attached to the “inspiration” coming from certain producers or production systems. As an example, we report these two extracts from interviews conducted in Dakar:

“This breeding [referring to an intensive farm], [...] I know it's industrial breeding. [...] But this [extensive] breeder does it with love, because the trouble he takes to feed his cows under the sun, he does it just out of love for his herd. On the other hand, in breeding on farms, there is no love.”

“Broiler chicken farming is done just to make money, whereas Wolof [local] chicken farming is done for the love of farming, because they grow slowly, no one [counts] the time [necessary] to feed them and wait for them to grow.”

Discussion: balancing tradition and modernity

This study's finding that consumers in coastal West Africa balance both traditional and modern quality perceptions aligns with the broader academic literature on food consumption in developing countries (Bukachi et al., 2021; Corniaux et al., 2021; Ferrari, 2021; Marsola et al., 2020; Miftari et al., 2024; Prache and Santé-Lhoutellier, 2020; Wu et al., 2021). The preference for local, “traditional” products, which are perceived as fresher, tastier, and more natural, can be understood through the lens of a domestic convention of quality. This is a shared understanding built on trust in familiar, local, and traditional methods, which is particularly relevant in areas where food systems are still deeply rooted in community and family practices. The paper's finding that consumers favor local products because they are “the one I know” reflects this domestic convention, where familiarity and trust are key benchmarks for quality. Their traditional character gives local meats higher value based on their specificity (Allaire and Sylvander, 1997). Indeed, their quality is specific since they are produced under specific conditions and based on specific resources. There are non-imitable, because the production and processing technique are anchored in local culture (Tablier and Nicolas, 1994; Pecqueur, 2003). Among the three countries studied, this is especially true for Senegal, which is both a consumption basin and a pastoralist area. Here, extensive livestock systems are perceived as part of the local and national heritage and need to be preserved.

Simultaneously, the study's observation of a preference for “modern” and “industrial” products, such as those that are packaged and sold in clean environments, reflects an industrial convention of quality. This perception is driven by the belief that these products are safer and of higher quality due to their adherence to specific standards. Though, unlike other case studies where it has been shown that imported foods from more developed nations are perceived as safer and of higher quality (Wu et al., 2021), in this study we observed that imported meat is perceived as “artificial” and unsafe. Consumers express suspicion about the preservation methods and potential health impacts of industrial products, especially when coming from abroad. This wariness is consistent with research showing that a lack of strong enforcement institutions and limited private-sector investment often lead to consumer concerns about contaminants and chemical preservatives in food products (Bukachi et al., 2021).

Consumers use primarily intrinsic cues, such as freshness, taste, and appearance, to judge product quality, as it has been demonstrated by the literature for dairy products (Ferrari, 2021). Price is also a primary factor, which is confirmed by other pieces of research (Marsola et al., 2020; Corniaux et al., 2021). Though, these tangible characteristics are tightly nested with other psychological factors. The study's emphasis on belief-based attributes—such as the perceived positive impact on the local economy and animal welfare—is also supported by the literature (Prache and Santé-Lhoutellier, 2020; Miftari et al., 2024). Convention

Theory recognizes that quality extends beyond objective attributes to include ethical, environmental, and societal dimensions. The study's findings on the importance of local products for the country's economic development or the belief that extensive farming is more respectful of animal welfare fit within the framework of a civic convention, which is based on adherence to common societal principles. Similarly, the importance of religious considerations, particularly for halal meat, demonstrates how cultural and religious beliefs act as key quality benchmarks that influence consumer choice.

Concerns about food safety are a major theme in the study's findings and are a recurring issue in the scientific literature on food consumption in the Global South. Consumers in the surveyed West African cities, like those in informal settlements in Nairobi (Bukachi et al., 2021), are concerned about unhygienic sales environments and a lack of traceability of the source of their food. They often resort to personal mitigation strategies, such as buying from trusted vendors, as a way to manage these safety risks, which is a common practice highlighted in the literature (id.). The study's analysis of different consumer demographics also aligns with other research, which shows that factors like income and education level play a significant role in food choices. Lower-income consumers prioritize price and affordability, while higher-income, more educated consumers show greater concern for health, nutrition, and environmental sustainability.

In the region studied, meat has always occupied a domestic sphere, relying on informal exchanges based on repeated transactions and interpersonal trust (Mankor, 2009). In other words, in addition to organoleptic benchmarks, quality conventions on meat in the region have been always dominated by a domestic qualification. During the last decades, with the import of foreign and standardized foods, as well with a better access to information from around the world, the industrial convention has appeared, thus pushing toward more safety standards and signs. Nonetheless, this need for food standardization is nuanced by another convention based on civic concerns, that are the respect for the environment and health (such as in the case of organic products studied by Sylvander, 1994), but also the desire to preserve a common heritage (such is in the case of the Chianina meat in Marescotti, 2001).

This evolution on meat quality convention stems from two developments among consumers: on the one hand, an increased awareness around civic-type values, linked to traditional agricultural practices, the environment, the terroir, and the local economy; on the other hand, a sort of defence of local products, as a means of maintaining the link with the terroir. Building on the three evolution patterns theorized by (Gomez, 1994), we can say that nowadays, after appearing, the industrial convention has not collapsed not disappeared, rather it is still strong among all segments of the population. Though, it has also integrated the doubt brought by suspicion ("industrial products may be harmful") and broadened its scope through encompassing civic concerns. This means that winning meat products are locally produced, respect food safety standards and make clear their sustainable character.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that urban West African meat markets are not in a linear transition from "traditional" to "industrial," but are

demanding a modern-pastoral hybrid. Consumers prioritize organoleptic traits—taste and freshness—above all else. However, their growing industrial demand for hygiene is currently hamstrung by a profound suspicion of industrial "artificiality" and the "anonymous" nature of imported products. The strategic implication is that the Sahelian meat sector must institutionalize the "domestic" trust that currently exists only at the interpersonal level.

While price remains a critical barrier for low-income segments (market convention), there is a latent civic and nutritional demand for meat that is "natural" and supports the regional economy. Sahelian meat is currently trapped in a commodity trap, competing on price against subsidized international imports. To escape this, the sector must pivot toward de-commoditization. This involves creating quality signs (labels/stamps) that verify the extensive/grass-fed nature of the product, effectively turning a production method into a premium market attribute.

Finally, the industrial convention in West Africa is as much about the point of sale as it is about the product. Consumers equate cleanliness and packaging with safety, yet they fear the "chemicals" of the cold chain. The implication for regional development is a shift in investment toward the urban interface. Rather than just increasing herd sizes in the Sahel, focus must be placed on modernized, transparent urban slaughterhouses and refrigerated retail outlets in Dakar, Abidjan, and Abuja that maintain the local identity while meeting the modern hygiene expectations.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC) (Protocol/Ref: ILRI-IREC2023-12). The participants provided oral informed consent to participate in this study, which was approved by the ethics committee.

Author contributions

SF wrote the manuscript, and AW reviewed the text. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Funding

The author(s) declared that financial support was received for this work and/or its publication. The study was commissioned by the Inter-State Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (*Comité Inter-États de Lutte contre la Sécheresse au Sahel*, CILSS), and conducted by the International Livestock Research Institute

(ILRI) and the French Agricultural Research Centre for International Development (*Centre de coopération internationale en recherche agronomique pour le développement*, CIRAD).

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

References

- Allaire, G., and Sylvander, B. (1997). Qualité spécifique et innovation territoriale. *Cahiers d'économie Sociol. Rurales* 44, 29–59. doi: 10.3406/reae.1997.1546
- Boltanski, L., and Thévenot, L. (1991). *De La Justification. Les Économies De La Grandeur*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Bukachi, S. A., Ngutu, M., Muthiru, A. W., Lépine, A., Kadiyala, S., and Domínguez-Salas, P. (2021). Consumer perceptions of food safety in animal source foods choice and consumption in Nairobi's informal settlements. *BMC Nutr.* 7, 35. doi: 10.1186/s40795-021-00441-3
- Corniaux, C., Duteurtre, G., Dia, D., and Chatellier, V. (2021). *Les produits low-cost dans l'internationalisation des marchés agro-alimentaires: le cas des exportations européennes de poudres lactées MGV en Afrique de l'Ouest*. 15^e Journées de Recherche en Sciences Sociales (JRSS), Dec 2021, Toulouse, France. 16 p. Available online at: <https://agritrop.cirad.fr/600858/>.
- Daudigeos, T., and Valiorgue, B. (2010). "Convention theory": is there a French school of organizational institutionalism? Available online at: http://www.ifge-online.org/docftp/conventions_aomwp.pdf (Accessed January 27, 2016).
- Eymard-Duvernay, F., and Eymard-Duvernay, F. (1989). Conventions de qualité et formes de coordination. *Rev. Économique* 40 (2), 329–359. doi: 10.2307/3502117
- Ferrari, S. (2021). Objectivation de la qualité des produits laitiers industriels par les consommateurs au Sénégal. *Systèmes Alimentaires/Food Systems* (6), 195–216. doi: 10.48611/isbn.978-2-406-12705-5.p.0195
- Gomez, P.-Y. (1994). Qualité et théorie des conventions. *Economica*.
- Guibert, B., Banzhaf, M., Soulé, B. G., Balami, D. H., and Ide, G. (2009). *Étude régionale sur les contextes de la commercialisation du bétail / accès aux marchés et défis d'amélioration des conditions de vie des communautés pastorales*. Institut de Recherches et d'Applications des Méthodes de développement (IRAM)/SNV. Available online at: <https://www.fao.org/sustainable-food-value-chains/library/details/fr/c/428800/>.
- Mankor, A. (2009). Consommation urbaine de viandes en Afrique de l'Ouest: l'exemple de Dakar', *Grain de sel*, August. Available online at: https://www.inter-reseaux.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf_p16_17_Conso_viandes_Dakar.pdf (Accessed August 14, 2025).
- Marescotti, A. (2001). Prodotti tipici e sviluppo rurale alla luce della teoria economica delle convenzioni, Basile, Romano (a cura di), *Sviluppo Rurale: società, territorio, impresa*, Milano, Franco Angeli [Preprint]. Available online at: <http://www.origin-food.org/pdf/partners/marpro.pdf> (Accessed February 10, 2016).
- Marsola, C. de M., Cunha, L. M., Carvalho-Ferreira, J. P. d., and da Cunha, D. T. (2020). Factors underlying food choice motives in a Brazilian sample: the association with socioeconomic factors and risk perceptions about chronic diseases. *Foods* 9 (8), 1114. doi: 10.3390/foods9081114
- Mehta, A., Serventi, L., Kumar, L., Morton, J. D., and Torrico, D. D. (2024). Packaging, perception, and acceptability: a comprehensive exploration of extrinsic attributes and consumer behaviours in novel food product systems. *Int. J. Food Sci. Technol.* 59 (10), 6725–6745. doi: 10.1111/ijfs.17463
- Miftari, I., Imami, D., Kaliji, S. A., Canavari, M., and Gjokaj, E. (2024). Analyzing consumer perceptions about food safety by applying the food-related lifestyle approach. *Italian J. Food Saf.* 13 (1), 11315. doi: 10.4081/ijfs.2024.11315
- Obi-Anike, H. O., Ofobruku, S. A., and Okafor, C. N. (2017). Manpower development and employees' performance: Qualitative assessment of small and medium scale business in Abuja Nigeria. *J. Econ. Manag. Trade* 18 (3), 1–6. doi: 10.9734/JEMT/2017/33438
- Orléan, A. (2011). *L'Empire de la Valeur: Refonder L'Économie*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil Couleur des idées.
- Pecqueur, B. (2003). "Territoire et gouvernance: quel outil pertinent pour le développement?," in *Colloque International UMR Sagert, Montpellier*. Available online at: http://www.researchgate.net/publication/229050263_Territoire_et_gouvernance_quel_outil_pertinent_pour_le_dveloppement/file/3deec52cae9758ed6.pdf (Accessed October 20, 2014).
- Prache, S., and Santé-Lhoutellier, V. (pilotes) (2020). Qualité des aliments d'origine animale selon les conditions de production et de transformation. *Synthèse de l'Expertise Scientifique Collective* (France: INRAE), 113. Available online at: https://www.inrae.fr/sites/default/files/pdf/ESCo_Synth%C3%A8se_V20juillet%202020.pdf.
- Sylvander, B. (1994). La qualité: du consommateur final au producteur. *Etudes et Recherches sur les Systèmes Agraires et le Développement* 28, 27–49.
- Tablier, M. T. L., and Nicolas, F. (1994). Genèse de la "typicité". *Sciences des Aliments* 14 (5), 541.
- Wane, A., Rich, K. M., Bamba, Y., N'Goran, A. A., and Fall, A. (2021). Product differentiation and demand for animal-source foods in Côte d'Ivoire. *ILRI Research Report* 85. Nairobi, Kenya: International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI).
- Wane, A., Ferrari, S., and Bamba, Y. (2024). *Consommation et Demande de Viandes En Zones Urbaines Du Sénégal, De La Côte D'Ivoire et du Nigeria*. Nairobi, Kenya: International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI), Rapport d'expertise, 149.
- Wu, W., Zhang, A., van Klinken, R. D., Schrobback, P., and Muller, J.-M. (2021). Consumer trust in food and the food system: a critical review. *Foods* 10 (10), 2490. doi: 10.3390/foods10102490

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. The authors used Gemini (Google) to find and correct grammatical errors.

Any alternative text (alt text) provided alongside figures in this article has been generated by Frontiers with the support of artificial intelligence and reasonable efforts have been made to ensure accuracy, including review by the authors wherever possible. If you identify any issues, please contact us.