

A PLATE OF CHARCOAL : A RECREATION OF CULTURAL MEMORY THROUGH FOOD

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Abstract

Food is one of the significant medium used to represent culture, ethnicity and an individual. The paper focuses on the overlooked communities culinary world with the help of memory studies. The paper researches to prove the misjudged concept of the diasporic African communities, though their true identities are reflected through their passion. This would be substantiated by taking two living examples: First, Chef Eric Adjepong, a first generation Ghanaian-American born and raised in New-York. Second, Chef Portia, founder of *The Africa Cookbook* and her daughter Lumia (Mira de Smidth) from South Africa. Culinary skill is used as a tool by both Portia and Adjepong with reference to their memory of slavery, reflected in the look, taste and smell of their dishes, trying to relive their past. They try to treasure their tradition and memories through the literary arena, by narrating them in the cookbook, articles and their blogs. Cooking relishes their traumatic past as well as childhood memories of their native land and is alive through their food which

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highlights their true ethnicity in a Western world. Narrative memory is used to portray the ethnic beauty and the Pan-African journeys for experiences and recipes by them through their cooking as well as writings. This paper focuses on the expression of food culture by the African community using the theory of cultural memory and ethnography that exhibit their journeys through the cookbook where they talk about what inspired them to choose the culinary profession, their priorities for healthy dishes, and their purpose of cooking. The concept of health in addition to trauma studies, parallel to memory studies is used in this paper to prove that they want to get over their trauma and revisit memories through the culinary journey.

Introduction

Literature has always dealt with areas and theories that help travel and think deep into human lives, culture, tradition, geography, psychology, social science and so on, as a medium of representation. But food or food theory is overlooked or is often considered less important, but equally has played a significant role as imagery or as other tools that help us sense or visualize the atmosphere of a scene in a text. Food is also a significant theme in literature by and about women and in children's literature. For example the tea-time is a very common setting related to food in children's literature, wine has been a common drink often used by many of the poets, poems and fiction, like the poem "The Vine" by Robert Herrick and the famous poem by Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Canterbury Tales"- At the end of the prologue, Chaucer says that with their meal "Strong was the wine and pleasant to each guest." Wine helped fortify them against the arduous pilgrimage which lay ahead, and many more. Food plays an inevitable role in the maintenance of our lives, and so, has an unquestionable part to play in literature as well which deals human mind and world. Food is also one of the significant medium used to represent the culture, ethnicity and an individual. The aim of my paper is to throw light on the overlooked communities' culinary world within the memory studies, to prove that the diasporic African communities are no more the misjudged book covers who today, no matter what, has reflected their true identities through their passion. I wish to substantiate this through the lives of two chefs: First, Chef Eric Adjepong, a first generation Ghanaian-American born and raised in New-York and a finalist on season 16 of Bravo's Top Chef. Second, Chef Portia Mbau, founder of *The Africa Cookbook* and the African Café at Cape town, South Africa and her daughter Lumia (Mira de Smidth), co-founder and photographer of the cookbook. Culinary is used as tool in both the cases and see how the theory of trauma is used here as reference to their memories of slavery, reflected in the look, taste and smell of their dishes with their tradition and culture rooted in it. Cooking is used as a medium to relish their traumatic past as well as childhood memories of their native land and keeps it alive through their food. They bring their

memories alive through their dishes which mould their true identities in a Western world. Eric has put up his own restaurant and creates his dishes bringing out the ethnographic beauty of his continent to his customers using his rich spices to bring his continent alive on his plate. Portia and Lumia brings to forefront innumerable Pan-African recipes made in their complete richness. *The Africa Cookbook* is not just a book of recipes but her Pan-African life journeys all around Africa socializing, absorbing and learning the real taste of nature and relishing the continent's old true memories and roots by imbuing them in the French, Italian, or any other Western dishes to her customers as an all-time reminder of their roles during the time of the colonisers. This paper would mainly focus on the expression of food culture by the Africa community in a Western society using the theory of cultural memory and ethnography that they here, Eric and Portia) try to exhibit through their journey of a competition (Top Chef) ,travel across the continent and through *The Africa Cookbook* where they talk about their inspiration into the culinary profession, their priorities for healthy dishes for their customers, and their purpose of cooking. Some of the areas like trauma studies, and health concepts and a different shade of the concept of Otherness in the African food contrary to that of the Westerner's, parallel to memory studies will be used in this paper to further analyse the culinary lives of these two African Chefs.

Recreation of Memory

Any chef, who puts his soul into cooking would always have something to unleash through his cuisine. People from around the heart of darkness is no less in any sense, and they have proved it, be it any profession from doctors to scholars, and even in the culinary profession that must not be overlooked. This paper tries to reflect this, first using the narrative memory as a tool where Chef Eric Adjeponge and Portia Mbau has narrated and still narrates the traumatic memories of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade through their cooking and *The Africa Cookbook*. The narrative memory is something that is conscious and voluntary. It is not only used to talk about the past happenings but an act of recreating it through the changing memory. It reshapes the past in variety of ways, and here, it is through the art of culinary.

"I wanted to tell the story of the trans- Atlantic slave trade from Africa through Caribbean ports, the American South and South America through food", Adjepong said recently. "It's an unfortunate story, but one that needs to be told". He decided to use his menu to show the judges how influential Africa's culinary heritage is on other parts of the world, including America. Adjeponge was the first contestant to solely focus on West African food and impressed his judges, week after week with flavours and dishes that they usually don't see on the show. Unfortunately, judges never tasted his food in finals where he was eliminated after his first course following an outcry by his fans, but fortunately, Tom Colicchio, head "Top Chef" judge, invited

him to his restaurant “Craft” in Manhattan, where Mr. Adjeponge presented his full course meal-“The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade through Food”, a dinner that travels across the Atlantic Ocean reminiscing the forced migration of the enslaved Africans and highlighting the deep and lasting global culinary influences of the continent that included a combination of ingredients from Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal with influences from countries and regions along the slave trade routes, tracing lines to Jamaica and other islands in the Caribbean, Brazil and the south eastern United States. This throws light on the idea of historicism, a term coined by the German philosopher Karl Wilhelm Friedrich Schlegel. Historicism is the idea of attributing significance to elements of space and time, such a historical period, geographical place, and local culture, in order to contextualize theories, narratives and other interpretative instruments.

Chef Adjeponge and Chef Tyrone Mance who cooked at “Craft” brought the rich ethnicity of the continent into their dishes and re-establish their historical identity. “Craft” could be seen a space where the racial gap narrows down, where the true spirits meet irrespective of their colour or region to recreate their cultural memory unlike the so called cook show platforms where at times the richness of regions like that of African heritage is overlooked at the end- with reference to the old mind-set of white verses black at heart. A positive change in this attitude could be expected in the coming future where we have people like Chef Collicchio who could accept, learn from and be a part of another culture marking a difference. This was the first in a series of dinners at “Craft” spotlighting chefs with strong culinary voices who do not have any kind of physical or psychological barricades in the restaurant spaces. The previous year at June, “Craft” hosted dinners by the chefs Omar Tate, a Philadelphia chef who uses food to explore blackness in America at his pop-up Honeysuckle; Gabriela Alvarez, who uses food to tell the story of Puerto Rico before and after Hurricane Maria; and Behzad Jamshidi, who uses spoken word and art in addition to food to create a multisensory Persian experience'. 'Mr. Colicchio said more diners are seeking out these kinds of stories instead of "just ingredients on a plate," and that he wants to use his platform to support this kind of work.'

"I'm Italian- American, but I grew up cooking French food and was taught that's what you had to do," he said. "I think a lot of people are turning around and saying, 'No, we don't have to do that food.'" These statements of Mr. Colicchio is a piece of inspiration for the other natives from the once colonised land to put on flames on the imperialistic physical and psychological control on them.

Portia Mbau's is another inspiring journey where she narrates how the flavours of Arica inspired *The Africa Cookbook* and that which bagged the Gourmand

Award for Charity Cookbook-Africa. Her recipes are result of her Pan-African journeys that helped sharpen her cooking skills and that which she brings to her readers and customers through her dishes in the cookbook. She narrates her travel memory - "Travelling Africa is such an inspiring, sensory experience; especially if you walk the streets and dine with the locals. After seeing the street vendors grilling meat, smelling smoked spices and selecting fresh fruit at an open-air market, you cannot help but be changed as a person and a chef", evokes the memories of cultural richness and how such knowledge seeking effort could change an individual, a change into simplicity and deep rootedness into the true culture and ethnicity. Her dishes cooked at The African Café back at Cape town and at home is embellished with the African culture rooted in it whichever western dish it may be. A recreation of a culture within another culture evoking memories of a life time.

The strong black diaspora stands out in the white majority community equally through culinary, along with literary world where we have numerous black writers like bell hooks, Ralph Ellison, Maya Angelou, Langston Hughes, Alice Walker etc. and Eric Adjepong and Portia Mbau are powerful examples for this who intensely focus on recreating the African ethnicity and richness through their spices, mixes, tastes, smell and in its appearance amidst the Western world. This act could be seen a strong resistance or voice against the white indirect discrimination shown in the Western psyche against the coloured and their effort to achieve what we call as the American Dream. Here, memories of culture of the black native land is reminisced every moment when they recreate and rediscover a dish that tells their communities history, tradition and traumatic stories of oppression and slave trade. They take pride in narrating how certain spices and recipes that the Westerners use and cook were actually from the slaves, the black cooks who cooked for the colonisers at their residents. That could be thought as part of syncretism rather than hybridity in the western world because they had taken it for granted that they don't realize it and look down upon real place of origin or the people belonging there. Memories not just talk about the past but brings the past to the present, to turn the present to an unforgettable past, a history that they continue to bring alive on our taste buds. The super power of the present, the electronic media help stimulate this task and knowledge through media like photography and social media for the global reach. 'The African Cookbook' is an effort put together by Portia Mbau and her daughter Lumai, co-founder of The Africa Cafe and photographer.

Excerpts from an Interview

Portia shares her earliest and best food memories

My earliest food memory is cheese my mother, Louise, gave me to eat

My best childhood food memory is of my mom's mango pickle, called achar, a relish that originates in India.

When I was growing up the kitchen was my playground

I have no formal culinary training and I didn't set out to teach myself to cook. I picked it up organically, absorbing it from people around me

Returning to SA in 1988 with optimism, I Experienced a rude awakening: discrimination was alive and well.

In 1990 I fell in love with Jason, who happened to be white. Although mixed-race romance was no longer taboo in SA it was still tricky.

In 1992 I opened a restaurant (The Africa Café) in Observatory, Cape Town. I'd long been amazed that there were no restaurants in SA that offered local food made with soul.

(Chef Portia Mbau's new cookbook is a celebration of all things Africa. The owner of Africa Café shares her culinary journey in The Arica Cookbook, 01 March 2020-00:01 By ILANA SHARLIN STONE)

'The Africa Cookbook is a compilation of her tried and tested recipes, designed to bring the flavours and techniques of Africa into your home kitchen. With Portia's added flair, the dishes go beyond tradition into innovation. Part of her signature is the use of healthy and organic ingredients that still evoke the authentic, much loved flavours of Africa.' She talks to the media - "The ultimate cookbook for innovative dishes from across Africa. Pan-African recipes with Portia's personal twist, accompanied by travel stories that reveal their origin. Dishes served in The Africa Café restaurant for over 27 years...Adventurous food lovers can explore a continent of flavours and find favourites. The inspiring story of black woman entrepreneur."

"I am also an avid gardener and lover of plants, so the farming and vegetation of a country or region also inspired my cooking. Being naturally adventurous, I love learning new cooking techniques and buying different utensils, which I'm then excited to get home and play with and create new recipes."

Having roots at a continent that lives close to the nature, Portia and Adjepong always carried that natural freshness and health cooking from scratch even to prepare a sauce or a side dish without going for any tin or preserved food items. 'As a chef, Mbau favours cooking from scratch with plant-based ingredients, avoiding ingredients in a can or out of a packet', that shows their belief in their natural richness and norms of culinary and thus reflecting their true cultural- traditional ethnicity.

This could be seen as an attempt of a community to detach from the formal norms or expectancy in terms of the tastes, looks and thoughts in a western world and relish their own independent one in a friendly manner, not by disturbing that of the foreign world.

Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to highlight that, the so called black communities belonging to the African continent, even when residing in a western space has proved that they are no less and voice through their art of culinary that they no longer will be submissive but progress for their desire to come true creating their own spaces. This could be seen as the construction of an archetypal structure within the structures of the white community in the western world. Here the intension is not to create a separate physical division within the western world for the blacks, but the establishment of individual identity with its complete equal respect in the western world, to rediscover and recreate their native memories and spaces through their culinary efforts. The concepts of historicism, ethnicity, trauma studies, the sub topics of memory studies like cultural, narrative and travel memories used in this paper helps us have a good understanding about the culinary life experiences and journeys of the two celebrity chefs, Chef Eric Adjeponge and Portia Mbau, and how they make sure they strictly stick on to their traditional and cultural rootedness by recreating it through cooking. No matter whatever western dish will they cook, each one would have an African root and a story to tell in it and these dishes are a result of the memories ingrained within one's self and the nostalgia that sprouts in him from the circumstances he is in. Memories are not just about remembering or thinking about the past or a particular thing or an incident but also something that is preserved alive, unforgotten and un- alienated. This paper would reflect how stories, tales, memories, rage and experiences travel through culinary by two individuals representing the overlooked black communities residing in a western world, expressing their unwillingness to be the way they are asked to be. They are not here to mimic but to be real. These two inspiring lives have managed to hold their identity high being successful entrepreneurs. The concept of mimicry takes a different turn in this case where they are unlike other western or non -western countries that try merely to mimic or copy their foreigners in their tastes and preferences.

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