

Acts of Kindness Whilst Imagining a More Equitable British Food Industry

What does food mean to you? If you're part of the African / Caribbean diaspora (like any diasporic community) maybe it's something that's in the background, but still a fundamental part of your culture. You only have to check out the '#jollofwars' on social media to see the level of passion and humour involved when it comes to defining what makes a certain dish such an important part of people's heritage. Jollof is a popular one pot rice & tomato spice-based dish that spans many West African countries – Nigeria, Ghana, Gambia, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Liberia – and which country makes the best jollof forms a big part of the regular food debates on West African cuisine on social media.

Since founding an East African Supper club in Bristol (check out araweloats.com), I have been fascinated by the joy and the tensions that go into defining and making our national cuisines. Yet, outside of the diaspora, African cuisines are, on the whole, invisible in the mainstream food scene. How can this be, when the food of other cultures plays such an important part in food media across western industrialised nations? Why are African cuisines ignored?

THE STRUCTURES THAT FRAME OUR UNDERSTANDING OF AFRICAN FOOD

The colonial legacy of defining black Africans as sub-human has left its traces in insidious ways. If 'culture began when the raw got cooked'¹, how can a supposedly uncultured people have a cuisine? Representations of the African continent and its people are still on the whole negative. We talk about Africa as if it is a country, not a continent, caught in a seemingly endless cycle of famine and war. Its people are often compared with animals and considered primitive, exotic, savage, noble, and lazy. Boris Johnson's disgraceful depictions – calling African

children 'piccannies' alongside 'tribal warriors with watermelon smiles' – did not stop him from becoming prime minister. This reductive and dehumanizing way of describing the African continent and its people is part of a long legacy that includes a systematic erasure of African civilizations and their influence prior to European colonialism. A production of knowledge about 'Africa' was cemented in the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment period, when European philosophers, scientists, and thinkers reduced African peoples to nothing more than objects to be studied, classified, sold, and conquered, all for the benefit of European empires.²

Such systematic erasure and reductions largely explain why it has taken so long for African food to gain prominence outside of the African diaspora. The structural inequality of oppression and racism has also resulted in African people not only being amongst the poorest in the UK³ but also responsible for remittances, sending money back home to support families in need.⁴ This has also stymied the development of the African food industry and culture in the west.

Meanwhile, our knowledge of sub-Saharan African food history, in terms of academic and published works, is riddled with holes. There are some brilliant books which have covered aspects of the food history, such as *Stirring The Pot* by James C McCann, but overall there is lack of support for publishing or research in this area. And much of the work that does exist is produced by white people. What is it that invokes a feeling of discomfort for black people of the African / Caribbean diaspora when published work, knowledge or products about 'our' food culture (however you define it) is produced by white people?

There are many complex factors that play into this feeling of discomfort. The most complex being our experience of wider structural racism which means that, despite it



being 2020, we are still facing many injustices in our communities: from disproportionate levels of death from both Covid and police brutality, to the 'hostile environment' that sees humans escaping war and climate catastrophe as scroungers coming here to take 'our' homes.

In this context, when we see the landscape of food media in Britain and its inability to bear witness to the way in which structural inequities impact on our lives, at the very same time as enjoying foods from the global south⁵ as if they're a Woolworths pic & mix selection, it's no wonder that there is a visceral reaction to this absurd reality. A reality which diasporic food writers like Jonathan Nunn, through Vittles newsletter, or Black Book, a global platform for black and non-white people working in the food industry⁶, seek to change through making visible these complex realities of the food world.

Last year I wrote about food, travel and borders for the Oxford Food Symposium which unpicked the power dynamics at play in our global food and travel industry. There is something perverse about the power of a passport, and what it means for the ability to travel. The vast majority of travellers for leisure are made up of white people from highly industrialised nations that are able to freely travel to seek adventure and excitement in far flung 'exotic' places – whilst the neediest people across the world can't travel here for safety. There's also an irony in the lack of engagement with the same kind of traveller who does not engage with the diverse communities in many cities, whilst loving the multi-cultural and edgy mix of their neighborhood. Think of Ridley Road market in Dalston, and it being enjoyed and consumed as 'little Africa' – at the same moment as the immigrant communities are dispersed from the area through gentrification, and as property developers hunt out the next Hackney.

HOW DO WE TAKE BACK THE NARRATIVE AND THE MARKET?

How do parts of London deal with this pressure whilst protecting communities and imagining a better food world for all, not just the new

residents who seek to live in the next Hackney? What does it mean for us to cook amongst this complexity, and make a living from an industry that makes us invisible and yet profits from our food knowledge in multiple ways?

I am consistently surprised by the imaginative ways in which diasporic communities survive and thrive despite the continual hardships and injustices that are enacted upon us. It's fantastic to see an increase in engagement in a food world that goes beyond the mainstream commodification of food for the enjoyment of the privileged few. Never more than in the pandemic, when mutual aid groups and food banks continued to meet the need of feeding our most vulnerable, have I been so impressed by the simple acts of kindness.

I look forward to working with Company Drinks: we share similar values in hosting and feeding people whilst attending to a politics of care, a politics which includes asking and acting on difficult questions that are raised by the unjust food systems that surround us. The cruelty of our political systems have been made more visible through this global pandemic. For me, it's worth remembering that it's through these acts of kindness, sharing of food and exchange that we find some semblance of solace in these difficult times.

1. Davia Nelson & Nikki Silva, 'A Conversation with Felipe-Fernandez-Armesto', The Kitchen Sisters, August 2014 <<http://www.kitchensisters.org/2014/08/07/a-conversation-with-felipe-fernandez-armesto/>>.
2. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, 'Situating Race', in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 959–64.
3. Kehinde Andrews, 'Racism Is Still Alive and Well, 50 Years after the UK's Race Relations Act', *The Guardian*, 8 December 2015 <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/dec/08/50-anniversary-race-relations-act-uk-prejudice-racism>> [accessed May 2017].
4. Carlos Vargas-Silva, 'Briefing: Migrant Remittances to and from the UK, March 2016', p. 5 <<http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Briefing-Migrant-Remittances.pdf>> [accessed May 2017].
5. An alternative term to 'developing nations' or 'third world' countries. Regularly used to denote countries that were previously colonised and are economically exploited through capitalism and the global economic world order, which privileges highly industrialised European / North American nations.
6. Black Book Org is co-founded by chef Zoe Adjonyoh, academic & food writer Dr Anna Sulan Masing and Food PR consultant Frankie Reddin. www.blackbookorg.com

ABOUT FOZIA ISMAIL

Fozia Ismail is a scholar, cook and founder of Arawelo Eats, a platform for exploring politics, identity and colonialism through East African food.

She has designed and delivered workshops/presentations for organisations such as Keep It Complex, Company Drinks, Serpentine Gallery, Jerwood Project Space, Tate Modern, Museum of London, National Trust -Colonial Countryside Project, Media Bounty, Barings Bank -Oxford Cultural Collective, Courtauld Art Institute, and the London School of Economics. In 2019, she was Bristol City Fellow for Arnolfini Contemporary Art Centre for her project Camel Meat & Tapes.

Her work has been published by Oxford Symposium on Food & Cookery (2017 & 2019), and she has designed lectures/seminar series on Food & Empire for London School of Economics and for Black Book a global representation platform for black and non-white people working within hospitality and food media.

She has been featured in *The Observer Food Magazine*, on BBC Radio 4 Food Programme, Oxford Symposium on Food & Cookery Ox Tales podcast, Food 52, London Eater, Vice Munchies, Vittles & Bristol 24/7.

She recently co-produced a podcast on Cassette Tapes with Caraboo Projects. When not critically eating her way through life's messiness she can be found plotting with her sisters in arms Ayan Cilmi and fellow Pervasive Media Resident Asmaa Jama as part of dhaqan collective, a Somali feminist art collective in Bristol.