

Amala Happiness (Posted on Facebook on September 2)

This photo is a tribute to a buka at Agbowo-express (along Lagos-Ibadan expressway), which went out of business, last year, after operating for at least 20 years. I took the photo there in 2012. Critics of my commercial amala addiction, including my own immediate family, will never be right for one principal reason—I have never been sick after eating commercial amala from any buka in Nigeria.

How could I fall sick from eating medicine, prepared from plants, not one synthetic material developed in one neoliberal capitalist pharmaceutical lab? How could hot food, made directly from never-frozen ingredients, make me sick? Something that is unapologetically authentic cannot give me sickness. Unlike humans, amala doesn't claim to be what it is not. Amala is amala. The chance of food poisoning in expensive and fancy restaurants, where everything from pepper to meat are always frozen, is higher than even in the most obscure buka. In late June, I ran into my vulcanizer flexing with a lady in a fancy restaurant called "Bite More" around Ojoo in Ibadan—three hours after I gave him 3k for fixing my bad tire. I went there to buy meat pie. On sighting me, he quickly introduced me to his date as "my professor uncle." Kia kia, I gave a disclaimer. "He is not my nephew. I don't know his house." I then advised the girl, "Wo, omo ele, alaye fe do e ni. Were fe gba pata ni die ni o."

This disclaimer is important. A lot of people are complaining about receiving strange calls from LAPO, among other life-sucking loan companies, where people put their names as collaterals, without their consent. If I don't want to be a loan guarantor for an unknown person, I don't want to be a punani collateral for my vulcanizer, either. Later, something told me I spoke too quickly. What if the girl wan collect nko? What if she is like Nkechi Blessing wey no dey wear pata? What if my status wouldn't have made any difference in operationalizing the punani affair? "Saheed, you talk too much—I reprimanded myself."

Buhari-era poverty is a unique one—unprecedented in Nigerian history. In addition to a record-breaking poverty across most strata of the society, this era has institutionalized a unique conception of prosperity that is inherently poor. I know this sounds oxymoronic. Unfortunately, it is what it is. The explosion in "eateries" and fancy restaurants (owned by Nigerians) is a neoliberal capitalist advancement that is deeply intertwined with the new wave of poverty in Nigeria. Even "poor" people must pretend to be "rich" in order to manage the psychological damage of poverty by eating in those eateries. That's the only reason my vulcanizer would associate running into a professor at a fancy restaurant as a sign of progress or upward mobility for him.

But what are his choices? In the past, most neighborhoods had bukas that catered for people's daily nutrition needs. Exorbitant rent is forcing buka operators to close down. The impact of this economic sabotage of buka operators, mostly women, is clear. For the first time in Nigerian history, mobile hawking of amala in transparent buckets has increased tremendously as many buka operators are unable to pay rents. Go to the big markets and commercial centers at 2pm, you will see people having lunch, practically on the streets, in the most unhygienic condition imaginable.

In whose interests are those "modern" shopping plazas constructed over the ruins of ancient markets and commercial districts by greedy property developers and government agents? Ibadan, one of Africa's most populous cities, has only one government public park, that is not

even free. This leaves people, like my vulcanizer, with two major socialization options—Shoprite and fancy eateries.

The impact of neoliberal capitalism on food socialization cannot be overemphasized. Even the most established bukas are afraid of being crushed out of business. Late last year, Iya Meta Buka, in the interior of Bodija market, upgraded to a “modern” eatery. Surprisingly, this major make-over didn’t lead to menu price increase. Iya Meta, for the love of her local customers, who are mostly struggling market men and women, proved neoliberal capitalism wrong. She used her existing surplus/profit to improve her infrastructure without passing the cost onto her customers. Another “only in Ibadan story” that convinces me not to trade my Ibadan citizenship for one spurious sub-nationalist agitation called Yoruba Nation. If you can’t give me Ibadan Nation, let me remain in the Nigerian Nation with all its tribulations.

A good buka offers more than food. That’s why a reflective assessment of the contraction of buka culture is important, not only for scholarly endeavor, but for popular conversation about the rarely acknowledged impact of poverty on socialization, mental health, and public wellness. A quintessential buka is a spectacle of many parts. To your right is a couple of live goats waiting for their turn in the pot. Opposite the live goat section is a group of women pounding cassava flour into highly textured amala with all their energy, joy, and artistry. Oozing from somewhere in the buka is aroma of vegetables and peppers at different stages of their readiness for consumption.

When we add the freedom to choose meats and the negotiation with the servers to the entire spectacle, a unique form of encounter is established—the one that we rarely see as integral to mental health and wellness. Some people do their basic shopping inside a buka—a space that offers interesting perspectives on gender and division of labor. Some aunts met the love of their life in a buka. You hear Uncle Yellow, “Please give that Sisi in red gown two amala, three ogufe, one abodi, five saki, two bokoto, two fuku, one edo. Don’t forget to add two Maltina.” You shouldn’t call yourself a man if you cannot declare amala surplus at a buka.

Yours Sincerely in History,
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