

What is Amala? Some Myths about an African Cuisine by Saheed Aderinto

God no go shame us. There is a Nigerian restaurant, named Mama Put, in Dakar, serving amala. They have been delivering my daily dose to the hotel. As in Johannesburg, I wasn't expecting abula (ewedu and gbegiri). I asked for something slippery—ogbono—to aid swallowing. You can say whatever you like about my Dakar amala. All I know is that the most mediocre amala is better than the best pounded yam, eba, fufu, and wheat, among other swallowables.

Some people, in their mind, would ask--did you go to Dakar to eat amala or speak about African studies at Florida International University and on the African continent at the invitation of the United States Agency for International Development? My response--Is amala not worth traveling to Dakar for? Another subconscious mind question: Is there a place you cannot go because of amala. My response: Absolutely NO. I will cross the ocean for amala—as long as my dignity is not compromised in the process.

There is nothing I have done because of amala that people before me didn't do. It's on record that one of my ancestors, name unknown, followed a funeral procession, from Ibadan to Oyo--all because of amala. Yes. Everyone belonging to a certain generation in Ibadan have heard the story of this legend. Exact date is unknown, but it was before the advent of motorized transportation. So, if someone could travel on foot for days, against the avarice of predatory jungles, crying and claiming to be grieving for the dead, all because of an amala happy-ending, I don't think I'm doing too much for my gluttonous addiction.

Worst still, one family compound head in Ibadan, around 1993, compelled his entire kins people to vote for a candidate after eating amala in the house of a politician. Way before former governor of Ekiti State Ayo Fayose popularized stomach infrastructure, people from my home town have been building roads, hospitals, factories, schools, in their stomach—using morsels of amala, consumed in the homes of political godfathers.

In another case, a husband sponsored a big amala feast on a random Sunday afternoon for uncles and aunts he doesn't like. He then got his most senior aunt to do the audacious job of unveiling a second wife to the first. The sin of the first wife—she only serves rice, not amala, during family meetings. In the gradation of gendered domesticity, labor, and good wifery, preparing a kokoless amala with its three-piece soup, ranks higher than boiling rice, ordinary rice, for the so-called distinguished in-laws.

Similarly, people, especially kids, are warned not to wash their hands in a waste water collecting bowl at amala buka so their destinies wouldn't be stolen by the witch buka owner. If this is correct, I wouldn't have even graduated from primary school much less become a professor of history.

One patriarch, Haji Yellow, reportedly built a house for his mistress, Abeni Elepo, after eating amala in her house. It was rumored that Abeni Elepo kayamatized the amala. It took the entire community a decade to realize that Abeni Elepo actually built the house with her own money and that Haji Yellow was a faworaja—a broke ass dude—broker than a village church rat. It was quality bedmington, not kayamatized amala, that sustained Haji Yellow's affair with Abeni Elepo—it later became obvious when Haji Yellow began to suffer age related prostrate palaver.

From the foregoing, amala is probably the most scandalized, feminized, politicized, and metaphorized of all African cuisines. Is it not inspiring that the edible amala, on whose head all these accusations are landing, has remained unpretentiously real, despite all the dangerous accusations leveled against it? Very inspiring. Figuring out why the fantabulous stories on amala exist in the first place is more valuable to me than trying to determine if they are correct. All narratives exist for a purpose.

After checking into my hotel room at Radisson Blu, the resort staff proudly remarked-- "Professor, this will be your new home for six nights. Lovely view of the Atlantic Ocean. What do you think?" In my mind, I was like—Alaye, f'oro le. Se l'oka? I would pick a good amala over a hotel room overlooking the Dakar end of the Atlantic Ocean. Who ocean view help?

Yours Sincerely in History,
Ìşòlá Ojúrábẹ̀màsàá