

MY MOTHER'S DAY IN DENMARK

By Kwesi Yankah



Mother's Day sprang upon me when I was distracted by fatherly matters; but my 'Mother' made sure she had given me an early morning caution on Mother's Day. 'Daddy, today is Mother's Day, I am not cooking o!' she threatened. 'That's fine,' I boasted, 'I will either cook or take you to African Regency (near Accra Mall), for a great brunch.' We agreed to go together in the interest of world peace. There, we met several families where Mothers had issued similar threats. And they had all reported at the Restaurant to ensure that Mother's intimidation would have no effect.

Except for the African Regency brunch, my family would have risked eating from Daddy's cooking on Sunday. The hazard of eating from Daddy's hands recalled my encounter in Denmark years ago, when a Legon-Copenhagen collaboration sent me to Denmark, courtesy Vice Chancellor George Benneh and Danish geographer, Henrik Jeppesen. To cut down costs I was to live for two weeks in the guest house of an 85-year old lady, Ms Damgaard Nielsen, who startled me one day with a request I would have been ashamed turning down. The year was 1990: I was a young lecturer. Listen to my right hand when I first narrated this delightful tale.

'Kasi, Kasi, one day I want you to cook for me African food, and sing for me African song.' I started panicking.

Before this I had caused a major accident in her kitchen, that had led to the amputation of one saucepan. Later I had to rely on my goal-keeping reflexes to

save another accident in the kitchen. A bottle of granulated sugar tilted over from an accidental heckle by a neighboring bowl. Once again, not my fault – the fault of the sugar. The bottle was carelessly wedged at the tip of the cabinet looking for trouble, and it didn't take the neighboring bowl more than a slight push to disturb its balance. But my magic hands were there. From a distance of one yard I sprang and saved the careless bottle in a manner Goalkeeper Odum would have envied.

But Ms Nielsen's quest for African food, kept echoing: From those words, she was apparently testing my sense of patriotism; and I began wondering which song from my motherland would be the most appropriate. If she insisted, I said to myself, I was going to sing her the Ghana National Anthem.

On that accident-free day, I toured the city of Copenhagen in all its magnificence. In a country where there are no signs of poverty, any stray Ghanaian would have felt the same sense of loss. The shipyards, textile factories, theatres, Town Square, the great Tivoli Gardens, Amalienborg Castle, the Royal Library – I feasted my eyes on all these, and was even lucky to set eyes on the Queen of Denmark at a very close range. Queen Margaret II was her name – a queen of tremendous popularity among her subjects. That day she had just arrived from a visit to one of her territories.

My tour of the city in the company of Kwesi Aning (now a professor in Ghana), was quite thorough. The sight-seeing over, I thanked my companion and headed for 61 Moltkesvej. I had in my hands three bagfuls of grocery items in readiness for a cooking expedition. The assignment was haunting me, but I had taken up the challenge all the same. "Cook for me African food." There was I on my way to defend the image of my motherland – the flag of Ghana. I was going to defend it with my culinary skills.

I had sat down the previous night trying to determine which Ghanaian food would be suitable. Plantain, my favorite, was not available in the grocery shop. That would have been simpler and safer since all white people seem to like red plantain. Jollof rice would have been fine, too – after all rice was available; except that I was not too sure how to change the white rice to yellow.

My best bet was fufu and soup. I would make the fufu with mashed potatoes and potato starch, the way Ghanaians in *Aburokyire* make it. All my ingredients were set – pepper, onion, tin tomato, fresh tomato, fresh fish, salt, etc.

The fufu process itself was not the problem. If there had been a consultant around, I would only have asked a few questions about light soup: what quantities of water, salt, onion – and what order the ingredients should proceed on their way

to the master saucepan. And in any case at what stage in the whole process does the fresh fish come in – before or after the soup is cooked?

The food scientist in me emerged as I tried one formula after another. All this while, Ms. Nielsen sat in the living room reading newspapers, apparently waiting. Was the African food from me all she was going to have for dinner? I started panicking. I wished somebody had advised her to consider a few alternatives apart from mine... just in case of kitchen circumstances beyond my control.

Soon the fufu was ready, but the soup had a few minutes to go – I could tell from the manner the fishes were diving. I took a sip with a spoon, and realized it had a longer way to go than I thought, for it was nowhere near the normal taste of light soup. Fifteen minutes later, I tried again; it was not yet ready. “Kasi, Kasi,” she called, “is your food ready?”

I began worrying, for that soup was in its second hour of boiling. I added a little more salt to see what magic salt could perform in emergency situations. The trick didn’t work. The rest of the tin tomato, onion, pepper were all there peering at me, and pleading to be tried. I obeyed the pepper, “Kasi, Kasi, Kasi.”

I replied and made sure the food was ready in the next minute. I served her a small ball, and gave her two servings of soup. A quarter fish lay at the base of the fufu quietly resting. “Here you are!” I said with confidence and handed it over.

“In Ghana, we normally eat with our bare fingers after they have been washed,” I instructed and she complied.

As Ms. Nielsen made her first attempt, my anxieties couldn’t have been mistaken. She dipped a small ball in the soup, tossed it in and started chewing!

“Not that way, not that way,” I intervened; “we swallow the fufu without chewing... please don’t chew.”

But it was too late. A second attempt would do. My hostess took another bit, added fish, and in compliance with my correction, started swallowing outright – fufu and fish together!!

“No, no, Ms Nielsen; chew the fish; it’s only the fufu we don’t chew!” I tried to save the situation, but too late. Both fufu and fish were on their way down her throat, as Ms Nielsen started choking.

She coughed uninterrupted for the next two minutes, and panic found me rushing to the kitchen for water. Cough, cough, cough, cough. When she regained her breath, Ms. Nielsen was unsparing in her remarks:

GHANA FOOD NO GOOD.

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Ms Nielsen Awaiting Kasi's Cuisine



Tivoli Gardens, Copenhagen



Entrance to Tivoli