

The Genre of Food Culture in My Life

By Aderonke Ayoknmbi

Aderonke attended my English 1301 course during the summer of 2016 and it was clear from the start that she is a dedicated student and hard-working writer. On numerous occasions, she visited during office hours so we could plan and discuss her various assignments. Though she has not taken a class with me in some time, Aderonke continues to stop by my office, update me on her life, and ask for my input related to her writing. She is a wonderful, enthusiastic, and positive person and her energy is infectious both inside and outside of the classroom. Her personality becomes part of her papers, and she shares a bit of her family and life histories in the assignment that investigates food culture. Aderonke chose to compare and contrast her parents' food practices as well as the influences from her time in Canada and in the US. She was open to the revision process at various points and her work reveals that dedication and commitment.

---English Professor Erin Ranft

Food culture is made up of the different foods, types of ingredients, serving habits, preparation, cultural influences and methods of consumption which make up a person's life. When asked what our food culture is, we may hesitate and say we don't know, but according to Richard Wilk, an anthropology professor at the University of Indiana and the head of its food studies program, "The first social experience we have is being put to the breast or bottle,," (qtd in Choi). Food is part of us because it makes us who we are: "food feeds the soul" (Choi). My own food culture has grown and changed over time and locations, but for each of those, my parents' food choices have contributed to who I am.

For my father's Yoruba food culture, which is about growing his own food, his favorite dishes are central-- Ewedu and Amala. These two foods serve as nourishment, and both are widely eaten by a tribe in Nigeria known as the Yorubas. The primary ingredient in Ewedu is a plant whose seed, which looks like mustard seed, is planted—then after two or three days, it germinates and grows into a plant with green leaves with several branches on the stick stem, which can be harvested after about two to three months' time. At the harvest, they are plucked and brought to the house, where the leaves are washed and cut into tiny pieces ready for cooking. The men will farm the Ewedu (seed, leaf) and yam until they are ripe for harvest, and then they will be brought from the farm for the family. The women do the preparation of the Ewedu leaves for cooking properly, preparation of the yam into yam pellets, drying of the yam pellets, grinding of the dried pellets into yam flour, preparation of the flour into Amata and serving the food at the table. The Ewedu may be served with Amala on one plate as the custom of the Yorubas, who traditionally believe the dishes are more delicious when served together on one plate and eaten with properly washed bare hands.

Other families serve these two on separate plates, but the cultural importance is that they are among the many delicacies suitable for festivals and ceremonies accompanying weddings, burials, namings, and more. If there were a ceremony by a Yoruba family or community and this meal isn't served, it means that the ceremony is incomplete—and yet each Nigerian tribe has its own distinctive food. Ewedu and Amala are eaten by Yoruba tribe, edikang-ikong soup is eaten by Calabar tribe, and Oba Soup eaten by the Igbos. Additional important dishes in my dad's food culture are created using ingredients such as green leaf, yam tuber, dried yam pellets, and ground yam flour. For a wedding ceremony, Gbegiri and Ikokore are served, and for a burial ceremony not just Ewedu and Amala, but Egusi and Eba as well—and for a naming ceremony, an important dish is rice and beans.

The Calabar food culture of my mother shares elements of my father's Yoruba practices, but primarily involves eating healthy. In an interview, she declared that her food culture centers on green vegetables. Calabar (Cross-river), where she comes from, has a lot of vegetable dishes with assorted seafood and meat eaten with pounded yam. The important element in her food culture are vegetables, pumpkin leaves (ikong ubong/ugwu), water leaf (mong mong ikong), snail, periwinkle, (mfi ikpok) stock fish, dry-fish, goat meat and palm oil and other ingredients. The Nigerian Calabar ethnic peoples cherish such green vegetable dishes—which are cooked with a lot of fresh palm oil. The men go to the market to get the food ingredients, while the women prepare food, then kneel down to serve the food if it is to an elder. In my mother's food culture there aren't specific foods prepared during different festivals, but there are signature meals required by the guest and the family members-- edikang-ikong soup, Afang Soup and ekpang-nkukwo. These are either eba (garri), amala, pounded yam, semovita, or fufu soups. Amala, interestingly, is also a part of my father's food culture although my parents come from different ethnic groups within Nigeria. I guess my parents are really meant for each other! My mother grew up with these foods and methods of preparation, which has impacted my own very unique diet and meal choices.

My own food culture is generally based on my own experiences. I don't really have a specific food culture because I come from a family with different backgrounds and meal practices. Food was part of who I was, growing up, because I was identified with both my parents' food choices, based on their own families and backgrounds. It was a lot to take in at that time, but because I am my parents' child and it is required to know

my cultures, I had to understand and act like them. I began to love both food cultures, but I loved and still love my mother's food culture best because it reminds me of how my grandmother cared for me. Later, my food culture gradually changed when I moved to Canada at the age of twelve. Gradually, I began to fall in love with foods like Poutine, Montreal smoked meat sandwich, bagels with maple syrup, Nanaimo bar, Tourtiere, potato chips, delicious ice cream, candy-coated bacon and a lot more. My favorite Canadian food for pleasure is ice cream with a bagel and maple syrup. I tried to eat healthy, was influenced by my brother's food culture because I had to eat whatever he cooked not to starve. He takes any ingredient and comes up with his own food. Finally, after changing and adapting to foodways in Canada, unexpectedly I moved to the United States, which is the country of junk foods. Here, I started behaving like an American and eating whatever food I could eat (like McDonald's) that is not stressful to cook. I started gaining weight and was influenced by fast food and convenience of American foods, but I studied about fast foods that cause obesity, and now I strive to eat healthy.

In conclusion, food culture makes us who we are. Whatever we do with food, we should know that it is related to food culture so that when we are asked what our food culture is we should know how to answer the question. Ron Finley argues that food is "the problem and food is the solution" to connecting us to our health and communities. In other words, food is a problem when it harms our health, but it can be the solution when it contributes to our health. I try to remember what I have been taught by my parents that eating healthy is the key to a beautiful life—if that thought is foremost to everybody, then they can enjoy a healthy lifestyle.

Works Cited

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