



# Breaking Bread:

## a community cooking project with refugee families



# Introduction

In 2022 The Institute for Policy and Engagement at the University of Nottingham worked with the Nottingham and Notts Refugee Forum and the local education charity Ignite Futures on a project called Aromas That Nurture. This was organised as part of the University of Nottingham's civic campaign, responding to issues being addressed during COP26 in Glasgow.

A series of workshops were held where women and their families from refugee and asylum seeking communities came together to cook and share food, and to talk about the importance of family recipes and preparing meals in helping them deal with the uncertainty and precariousness of their situation. These initial conversations led to the creation of a storytelling event, a 'performative picnic' held on Saturday, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2022 (that moved inside because of the weather), at the Lakeside Theatre, for Refugee Week.

A year on from that moment this online publication revisits the three women who told their stories to recap their tales, reveal how their refugee journeys have moved forwards (or not), and to share their recipes for the food they cooked and served to the audience last June. Alongside this Dr Roda Madziva, who set up the project and performed with the three women, reflects on her own experience of undertaking research over the past 15 years and the role of food in building authentic research connections and relationships with refugee women.

The text was shaped by playwright Andy Barrett, who has worked with the women and their families throughout the project, and the photographs are from the initial workshops, the Lakeside performance, and from the lives of the women involved. We hope that you find it interesting and that, in a spirit of support, you prepare these four dishes which, when cooked together, will provide a very full and satisfying meal.

We would, of course, like to thank all of those who have helped us with this project, those who shared their (often very difficult) experiences with us, and particularly the three women you will learn about here – Ada, Nasreen, and Matagari – who have invited us into their homes and been so willing to trust us with this work. We wish them and their families well and hope that the process that they, like so many others, are going through will ultimately allow them to build their lives successfully here in the UK so they can contribute to their local and wider communities as we know they wish to.

Refugees have voices, just like any other human being. However, what they often lack is the platform to speak from and the audience to listen to their stories and messages. We hope this resource will reach as many people as it can, to allow the voices of these women and mothers to be heard.







# Ada

My name is Ada. I live in Nottingham, and I have been here now for two years. I am from Nigeria and food is very important to me.

I am going to give you the recipe for Jollof Rice and you should put it somewhere safe and take it out whenever you are going to have a party because, trust me, a party is not a party without Jollof Rice. There are lots of ways to make Jollof Rice and there are different kinds of Jollof Rice. We have over three hundred languages in Nigeria, and many different tribes (I'm from the Idoma tribe, a smaller tribe from Benue State), but Jollof Rice cuts across them all. You can have Village Jollof Rice, you can have City Jollof Rice. The Village Rice is made with Palm Oil and is what we call Bush Rice. That has smoked dry fish in it, cray fish, and you can mess it up and get bits and pieces of different things; shrimps, smoked meat, whatever you want. It's rich, really rich. But the main Jollof Rice, the one that everyone knows, is Party Jollof Rice. When people go to a birthday party or a wedding, they are really only going for the Party Jollof Rice.

I love cooking Jollof Rice. There is a smoky flavour that you need to get, that's the main thing. Basically the food needs to burn to get the proper flavour; but not too much. The bottom of the pot is always the best bit. When we were little, we had a maid and would say 'aunty can we have that bit' and we would beg her to let us eat the burnt bits at the bottom of the pot.



We came from a middle class family and my stepmother never liked cooking. I was the first daughter, so that meant I had to clean the dishes and I became interested in the maid and would watch what she was doing and what she was cooking. My father moved to Lagos, and I went to live with my mum in another state, in Abuja, with my brother and sister who wanted to be with her. Then we didn't have so much money. One day she went to the market to buy some meat and vegetables and when she came back, I had cooked a meal for us all: soup and pounded yams. I remembered what the maid had done, and I saw the things that I needed to cook with in the cupboard and I just did it. And my mother said to me 'Ada, you have magical hands'. She still tells me that story.

When I went to Secondary School in Abuja, I did Home Economics. In the practical exam we had to do some cooking and all my classmates did something really simple. But I went extreme and made soup and pounded yam again; like I had for my mum but much, much better. They took my food away into the Principals Office and all the examiners came in and ate it and said it was the best food they had ever had at the school.

Then I went to university to study Sociology and in my First Year I took part in something called University Week, where all the classes are cancelled and the students take part in sport and carnival and activities like that. There was a competition with teams representing different part of Nigeria; my team was representing the South and I was doing the cooking. My table was full of food, mainly recipes from Calabar. There were lots of soups: Vegetable Soup, White Soup, Ogbono, which you eat with Fufu. There were stews and meats and fish and vegetables; everything. And we came first. The Vice Chancellor and the Chaplain ate it all; everything I had cooked. And I came to realise over my years doing Sociology that whilst I was learning about people's needs and desires the best way I could contribute to society was to cook.

And so when I finished university that is what I did. To start with I went from office to office in Abuja and offered to cook food for the people who worked there. They said 'why should we order from you? What makes you so different from all the others?'; so I started to look for new ingredients, for new herbs and spices to use, and I became interested in Jamie Oliver.

I began to cook food for private jet airlines, adding lots of parsley to the sauteed potatoes whenever I was asked for a Full English Breakfast.

It was my brother who helped me open my own restaurant. He was a pilot like our father and invested in me so I was able to open The Zuri Kitchen, a Swahili Restaurant in Lagos. Not in the posh part but in the Computer Village where people sold computers and phones. It was a lively place with lots of noise from people arguing over the price of what they were buying, and we cooked for the shop owners who loved it and would come every day to eat my Akara and Moin Moin and Nkwobi (which is spicy cow foot served in a thick peppery sauce). And, of course, my Jollof Rice. When we opened the restaurant the chief of the Ebo tribe arrived in all his regalia, with his bodyguards around him, and said he wanted the owner to cook and serve him food, that he had heard about my cooking. I served him for three days, one after the other, and at the end of each day he would make me pack up some food to take with him.

*Ada's sister clearing her plate at the Zuri Kitchen*



But when I became pregnant, I couldn't keep it running and I had to shut it down. My sister bought all the stock and opened her own restaurant in Abuja, the Jenielda, which she is still running. I miss it; and this is what I want to do, as soon as I can, to get my papers and be a cook again. Now I only really cook for my children. My older son Zane loves Jollof Rice, and we eat it together. And I want to cook everything for him that I remember from being back in Nigeria. But there is one thing I don't think I'll ever be able to cook. A smell and a taste that I can never get back.

On special occasions we would go to the village to see my grandmother, my mum's mum. You have to drive for six to eight hours to get there from Abuja; and as you went through the different towns and states you see the vendors at the side of the road. Hunters with freshly killed antelope and bush rats; people coming from their homes and setting up by the roadside to sell crickets on skewers and cassava and plantain, cooking roasted yams and sautéed onions in palm oil with a lovely smoky smell that is everywhere. I just wanted us to stop the car so we could jump out and buy everything. And when we got to the village my grandmother would make Oneebay, which is a dish

that is made only in places where there are no fridges, and you must find other ways to preserve your yams once the growing season is over. And this dish is made with a special yam flour and cooked on a pot that sits on a fire which gives it this lovely flavour. Any time I went to the village I looked forward to eating that. In the city we don't use firewood so you can't get that proper smoky flavour and I know that I'll never be able to recreate it, that the only way I can taste it is to go back to that village. But my grandmother is dead now and it's been many years since I've had it. But I can remember that smell, and it reminds me of being younger. I miss the environment of my family and my cousins. I miss being there, with my mother and sister.

I speak to them on the phone all the time and tell them that I am lucky because just down the road from where I live, here in Nottingham, there is a shop where I can get everything that I need to cook with so that I know I am eating the same food as them. It's a lifeline. There was a vegetable soup that I wanted to make but I needed fresh pumpkin leaves, and they aren't easy to get here; and then out of the blue the shop rang me to tell me they had some. They understand, the people there, how important this is. And even though they

were expensive, and I don't have much money, you have to try and get the right things. It's very important; cooks know this. The ingredients have to be right.

I have a good little kitchen here, on the sixteenth floor of this tower which has good views across some fields. I like it, I'm lucky; even though there are often problems with the lifts and I have to struggle with my children. I can see the clouds coming in, bringing their rain. My neighbour Esther is also Nigerian, and also likes to cook, and helps me with my children too because I have been trying to make a life for myself, trying to support myself. It is difficult but it is important to better yourself, to work hard and to learn different things and to see where life takes you. I didn't expect to be living here in this country, with my two young children, but now that I am I want them to be happy here and to make something of their lives as they get older. I need to make sure they have a good future.



I work in a care home; mainly at nights doing twelve hour shifts. It's difficult trying to juggle the work with looking after my kids; I'm often exhausted and feel as though I could just drop. Although I am still an Asylum Seeker, waiting to find out if I will be allowed to stay here, there are certain kinds of jobs that I am allowed to do. I studied an online course and had to do all these modules on a computer. It was very confusing at first, and I failed a few times, but I kept going and eventually completed them: Epilepsy; Falls; Food and Safety Awareness; Mental Health; Moving and Handling; Record Keeping; Safeguarding, and nineteen others. But when I arrived at the Care Home to start work they were very confused; they weren't sure if I was allowed to be working there, to be providing care for those at the end of their lives and people who are suffering from dementia. But I am; although if my status doesn't change within six months then my job will be terminated; even though by then I will have got to know the people who live there and understand their needs.



I came here on a plane, with a visa and my young son, to Birmingham to stay with some friends. I was pregnant and one day I started spotting and was in terrible pain. A passer-by called an ambulance, and I was advised by the hospital doctor that I should seek asylum here. I was told that I would be moved to Nottingham, even though the hospital wanted me to stay in Birmingham, so they could keep an eye on me. They gave me some reports and a scan, but I didn't really understand what was happening to me. My son and I were taken here, to Nottingham, and put in a hotel. It was a scary time. I didn't know anyone, I couldn't walk very well and was in a lot of pain, I didn't know where to leave my son, and I couldn't go to hospital until that had been arranged. A Ugandan lady in the hotel helped with him, and then a Social Worker came to my rescue and arranged for my son to be looked after.

I am a religious person and during the month I was in the hospital I was so holy; asking for God's grace to see me through the pain. My son was placed with different families, and I was told that whenever he was driven past the hospital he would look out of the

window and point at the building. During that time some people arrived at the hotel to move me and my son to Wolverhampton, but when they were told I was in hospital they said I could stay. And when my second son was born everything went to plan, there were no complications. I was discharged two days later, back to the hotel.

The food there was terrible, and I really wanted somewhere where I could cook the right kind of things for my son and baby. Zane wouldn't eat the food they served, and I had to keep to a special diet, which made things worse. But the hotel staff were lovely. They would take Zane out and play with him and buy him fish and chips and ice cream. People are good. We started to go with the Ugandan lady to her church and all the people there were so supportive. They even gave me a post baby shower months after Xavier was born, when I was finally really better. And this Christmas they gave me gifts and toys for the kids, although Xavier prefers to play with the kitchen utensils. He already has something of the cook in him.



And then one day, just after I had used my last bit of money to buy Zane some food he would eat, I found out that I had been given a place to stay. Here, in this tower. We arrived at three in the afternoon and the first thing I did was cook. I asked Zane what he would like, and he asked for spicy rice with chicken and plantain; so that is what I made. He was so excited when we sat down and ate together, 'Mum, mum! This is delicious!' The next morning I made egg sauce with bread and hot chocolate, and we were all so happy. This was the most important thing for us all, I think. Being able to cook and eat our food, together, in our own place. I was very thankful.

I want to set up a business cooking food. I know that's what I'm meant to do. The first Christmas I was here my old Muslim neighbours from Nigeria rang me. I used to cook lots of food for that day, for Christmas, and would take some round to them and they told me how much they missed me and how much they missed my food.

So when I get my papers, when I can start my life again properly, I will cook from home so that I can look after my children as well. I will cook Pounded Yam, Nkwobi, Peppered Goat Meat; and soups, lots of soups. I will make Bitter Leaf Soup and Egusi Soup, which is thickened with seeds, Pepper Soup and Okra Soup; and I can deliver my food through this app I have been told about. So my Jollof Rice can be sent all over Nottingham. And I can tell my mother that my magical hands have been set to work here in England.

But for now I must work as a carer and wait to find out if I can stay here; if my children can stay here. I don't know how long I will have to wait before I can do this. At least now I have a little more money even though it is so difficult to arrange everything. I am so tired, but we all know, all of us who love to prepare food, that a good stew may take a long time to cook but it is always worth waiting for.

## Jollof Rice (serves four to five)

### You will need:

4 cups of white rice (long grain) / 6 medium sized plum tomatoes / 2 red bell peppers / 1 hot pepper (yellow Scotch Bonnets are my favourite; you may want to use less hot pepper deciding on your taste) / 3 tablespoons of tomato puree / 5 to 6 cups of chicken stock / 1 large onion / 1/3 cup of sunflower, coconut or vegetable oil / 2 dried bay leaves / 2 Knorr cubes (I prefer Chicken) / 2 teaspoons of curry powder / 1 teaspoon thyme / salt.

Preheat the oven to roast the red bell peppers. You can miss out this first step but it is essential if you want to make extra smoky party-style Jollof rice.

Take a blender and add the plum tomatoes, roasted red bell peppers, onion, and a scotch bonnet pepper. Blend until you have a smooth, spicy paste.

In a large saucepan, add the oil and heat over a high heat. Once the oil is nice and hot, pour in the blended sauce and cook over a medium heat for 10 minutes, stirring throughout.

Add the salt, thyme, curry powder, tomato purée, and chicken stock. Stir, crumble in the Knorr cubes, stir again and cook for another 15 minutes.

Now add rinsed long grain white rice to the saucepan and stir. Add water to cover the rice and cook over a medium-low heat for 10 to 15 minutes. You may need to check the rice and add an additional cup of water as it is cooking. Make sure you stir every few minutes to prevent burning. You can also add a thinly sliced onion at this stage. Turn the rice down over a low heat until it is tender and flavour packed.

Once the delicious Jollof Rice is ready you can serve it with your protein of choice, with salads or plantains.



Ada



# Matagari

My name is Matagari and I am originally from the Ivory Coast, the Cote d'Ivoire. I do not want to tell you anything about my experiences before I came here as that is something that I cannot think about without getting upset but I have been in this country for a long time now, over nine years. I was first sent to Birmingham and was put in a hotel. We would all go to the canteen to eat. 8 o'clock to 9 o'clock for breakfast; 12 o'clock to 1 o'clock for lunch and 5 o'clock to 6 o'clock for dinner. But I couldn't eat the food. It didn't agree with me. It was often cold and I would look at it and sometimes I would try to eat it because I was hungry but it made me feel ill.

I moved to a house and then I was sent to Norwich and I liked it there very much. It wasn't too big; I don't like big cities. I made some friends, became part of the community, and my son was born. Time passed and he started school and made friends. If I was ill my neighbour would take him to school or pick him up for me. He was doing well with his learning and was in a football team and I would wash his shirt for him and hang it up to dry and I was so proud of him. However hard things were I would look at him and even though I was still waiting, we were still waiting, year after year, to know whether we would be allowed to stay here, I knew that he was a good boy and that I was being a good mother to him. I was thankful for the help we were being given. It was not much of a life but it was something.

*Ali performing his 'Salad Rap'*



*Home cooking*



And then, just like that, the Home Office said we must move away from Norwich. Away from our friends and school and community and life and go to Nottingham to start all over again. I was rung on a Friday by SERCO, who were the ones who told us this, and when I asked when we would have to pack up, to leave our home and neighbours, the voice on the phone said 'Wednesday'. I tried to ask why we had to move so suddenly, why they needed us to go to another city, but they would not say, and I knew that without my papers I had no choice. It was so upsetting, knowing that all the progress that we had made, the small life we had built, could be taken away just like that.

When the van came to take us away, I didn't say anything to the driver. I just cried and thought 'everything is broken'.

Money is tight. But I know that my job is to keep my son healthy and so I make lots of salads. It has become very important to me. Not just the eating of it, but the making of it. Buying the right ingredients; chopping and slicing and mixing them all together. Ali and I eat salad almost every day, as an entrée

(you see the French influence of where I lived). It is only after we have eaten the salad that we eat the other food.

The food I like to cook is what my mother cooked; recipes handed down, from generation to generation. My parents grew a lot of their own food so what we ate was always fresh: tomatoes, okra, plantain. Sometimes I would go to the market in the village with my mother on a Sunday morning to get salt and red oil and milk and yams and plantain, if ours weren't ready yet, and rice which the lady would scoop out of a bag and let fall into the containers my mother had made me carry. The food she cooked was simple and very nice. There was always a good smell that filled up the house; tomatoes and onions, beef and sometimes lamb. When we had fish, little, little fish, Mum would take her time to take all the bones out.

Once the food was cooked the pot would be put on the floor, and we would all run to sit around it. My mother had seven girls; she was the second of my father's three wives and we called all of them Mummy. The other wives had children too, so there

were a lot of us to feed. The men sat apart, and the boys and girls ate separately so there wouldn't be any fighting. We ate in age groups, the little ones, those who were a bit older, and the ten to twelve year olds. You had to eat quickly, from that one pot or one plate that we were all sat around, scooping the food up with our hands, otherwise it would all go. There were always arguments: 'you took my rice!', 'you pushed me!', 'is there any more?', 'no!' Sometimes the soup would spill down your arm onto your sleeve; and because it was very watery, and you were so hungry, you would try and suck it up out of the material. I can still imagine myself doing that, I did it so often.

Because we were hungry. Sometimes we only had water and no food and my stomach would make these terrible noises. When you have three sisters sleeping together on one mattress if your stomach is loud from the hunger than you wake everyone up and they get angry with you.



Now sometimes I look at the food that I have, (I don't have money and I don't have papers, but I have food), and I think maybe my sisters need some of this. And I miss eating together, fighting to get that food, knowing that when it's finished there is no more, being told it's your day to wash the plates.

It is very different for Ali; it is just me and him. I do all the cooking and there is no fighting for the food, and Ali eats with me at the table when he comes back from school. Sometimes I put the food on the floor, and I sit there and eat the Attiéké or the Foutou, because I like to remember. Sometimes my son joins me and asks 'why are you eating from your hand?' and I say 'it feels natural'. He says 'I want to be like you', but I reply 'don't follow me'.

I never went to school I wanted to but my family didn't have the money. I learned my French from the street. I listened to people and worked out what they wanted and what they meant, and I copied their words. Now I think in French as well as in Jula. But not in English.

When I came here, I tried to learn but I didn't understand anything about what a school was or what you had to do there, only that you must bring a pencil. I did some courses in speaking and writing and reading, three days a week. But I am not very good. I promised myself and prayed to Allah that my son would get the best education; and he was doing so well in Norwich. Then we had to move, and he had to start again. To make new friends in a new school in a new city. I know it isn't easy for him. For many months I would hear him in his sleep calling out, asking where his friend is. I wash his football shirt that he has kept and hang it out to dry and know that his teammates are playing without him.



I make the salad because it is good for Ali; and I have become a very good salad maker. Sometimes it is very simple, just lettuce and carrots and tomatoes. Sometimes, if I have enough money, I add other things, kumquat and avocado, or green stuffed olives, but things are becoming so expensive that it is difficult. I need my son to stay healthy; I need to provide for him as best as I can. That is all I can do now, while we wait and wait. I watch him eat it, the salad, and think of all the goodness that is going into his body. Goodness which will help him to learn in his new school, where he will hopefully make new friends who are as close to him as those he had to leave behind.

He is doing well, better than me I know. He comes home and gives me these pieces of paper that say he is trying hard, or has got his sums right, and we put them up where I can see them. It was his birthday last week, he is already eight years old, and I made sure he had something to take to school to share with the other children; a vanilla cake, because all the children bring things like that when it is their birthday.

When he came home I asked him what he wanted to eat and he said he wanted to go to a restaurant, to sit down and have food served to us both. So we did. Even though we couldn't afford much we sat down and ate together, and he was happy.

When I think back over all this time, and how he has grown from a baby into a boy, I don't know what I have done, what I have been able to do, what he has seen me do, what I have been and what kind of person I haven't been able to be. I'm embarrassed. My life is controlled by people who don't know me, who don't trust me; don't trust us.

I volunteer at a church; they have a day where they provide food and cook meals for asylum seekers and homeless people, and I help with that. It's very busy and I don't have much time to talk to anyone. I'd like to, I'd like to find out about their lives and for them to find out about mine; but there is food to prepare and serve and pack and then there is the clearing away. And I don't want to share my troubles, so I just do what I can to help and then go and pick up my son.

And still we wait. Every day I wait to see if there is a letter, but it never comes. I had a meeting some time ago, to do my biometrics, to have my fingerprints taken. They saw me, they saw Ali; they know how long we have been here, and I thought now they will make their decision, now this can all finish, now I might be able to work, to live. Sometimes I think it is a punishment, for leaving my country. To show me that if I stayed, however bad it might have been, it would be better than this.

So for now we keep making the salad, even if it has very little in it.



## Ali's Salad

You will need:

Lemon(s) / olive oil / whatever else is available to you.

Making a salad is something that is both simple, but also something that requires imagination. The salad I make for Ali changes every day depending on what I can find. What is important is how you arrange everything together; how you make something simple look appetising.

We always like to have cucumber and lettuce and, if we can, we add some tuna to it. Ali likes olives and grapes, and it is good to add tomatoes, maybe some carrots or sweetcorn, and, for extra protein, eggs. A really special salad would have a bit of chicken in it as well.

But what makes it an Ali salad is the lemon that I squeeze on top of it, along with a few drops of olive oil. Then it's about laying everything out on the plate or in the bowl so that it looks as good as it can.





# Nasreen

My name is Nasreen, and cooking is very important to me. In Lahore I was a teacher, but when I came here in 2014 with my family I had to leave all that behind me and start again. I did my ESOL courses to learn English and when my daughter, who was born here, went to nursery my husband said I should do a course. I wasn't very good at maths, which most of the courses needed you to be able to do, so I decided to take a course in catering.

I really enjoyed it. There were people from many different countries and most of the classmates were younger than me, but everyone helped each other. And the college provided everything: the ingredients, the aprons, even food vouchers for lunch. We could take the food we had prepared home, and they gave us containers to put it in and passes for the bus. I was so grateful to this country for providing something like this to me and my family. For offering us a place to seek refuge.

The first thing we cooked on the course was scones, which made me smile. Each year my family would have to go to Loughborough to sign the necessary papers; and outside the Immigration Centre the Red Cross would give people tea and a food coupon which you could use at the café at John Storer House. We would always exchange our coupons for scones.



We used to have to go there every two weeks until my daughter was born, and then we only had to go once a year. But we didn't realise how many years we would still be going there; how many scones we would end up eating; how long we would have to wait to find out if we could stay and really begin our lives. My daughter began to walk and still we waited. My eldest son took his GCSE's and still we waited. My youngest son became a teenager and still we waited. My eldest son took his A levels and still we waited.

We appealed many times. Each time we went to Birmingham, and we would feel positive that this was the time they would understand and would give us our papers. Each time they would ask about our paperwork, even though it was the same as the last time, and then ask all of us many questions. Each time we answered them. And each time they turned us down. So we had to wait and to make do with the £5 a day we got for each member of our family from SERCO. Which meant I had to be careful with what I cooked.

One day I woke up and thought I wanted to make tea like my mother used to make. I don't know what made me think about that; maybe I had been dreaming about her. We usually make tea with a kettle but that day I



took a pan and put two teabags in it. When the water started boiling it reminded me of when mother made tea on a fire made with small sticks where the flames would jump up and she would tell me to be careful not to burn my hand. It was a thick tea that she used to make from tea leaves out of a tin. She would boil up milk to make a skin and then put that on the tea. I would ask her to put it in my favourite bowl, a cracked porcelain one that had no handle.

I put double cream in the tea I was making to try and get a skin as well. When my son saw what I was doing he asked me why I was smiling. So I told him, that the smell made me feel like my mother was beside me; that she was giving me the courage and strength to help me with my waiting.

It was a long time between her death and me making that tea in my kitchen in Broxtowe, nearly thirty years, and so many changes to my life. When I got married my husband had a proper stove, because his family were much wealthier than mine, and the tea I made on that tasted different. We worked, had sons, made a life, and then we had to leave Lahore. That was when the time of waiting began. Three years, five years, seven years. My sons got on with their lives, even though it has been



difficult for them; but they are strong and clever and have achieved so much already. Our church has been so supportive, and people are kind. I know this is a great country, but I couldn't understand why the government would not believe us. I did not understand what we were supposed to do.

But I had my cooking which was so important to me. To be in the kitchen with my pots and pans and my herbs and spices. Over the years I thought when I get my papers I am going to go back to school, not to be a teacher but to be a Dinner Lady. I know they have to cook well on a budget, and I have a lot of experience of that, as I made food for my family that we would all eat together. But I also made food for myself, not just for me to eat, but food that reminded me of my life before the waiting began; when I was young and I could never have imagined being in a situation like this.

I was the fourth child, the middle of seven. My mother was a widow at an early age, and I became a close companion to her. When she cooked I would sit beside her, and she would tell me little stories about her life. I would watch and listen and that is how I learnt to cook. She died in 2010, when I was still in Lahore, on the 18th of April.

*Arriving in the UK, 29th November 2014*



Every year on the anniversary of her death I cook two dishes; things that my mother cooked, that were her favourite things to cook: chicken rice and sweet rice. Neither have any special ingredients; my mother liked to cook simple things using simple methods. Just keep an eye on the taste, and the flame, and the salt she would say. That is all you need.

We were finally given the news we have been hoping for. The letter telling us that we won't have to go to Loughborough anymore and get our vouchers for scones. I should be happy because of that, but I am not; not as happy as I wanted to be, as I imagined I would be. Because after all this time we have only been granted leave to stay here for two and a half years and then we must apply again; and this time it will cost us £2500 a person. For me, for my husband, who is now working nights in the Boots warehouse, for my younger son, who is doing so well at school and who wants to be a dentist ever since his braces were taken off and he marvelled at how his teeth had been straightened, for my six year old daughter who needs so much help, and for my eldest son who was wanting to go to university, having been such a good student throughout his school life, but who cannot now get the

finance he needs from the government because of this letter that says we can stay, but only for these two and a half years. I was so upset for him, but he told me not to worry, that he was going to get a job straight away, that we had to keep going, that I should remember what the Lord had said: 'I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten'.

And I am in a kitchen now, at the church which has supported me for so many years. I used to volunteer there, but when a lady had to leave because she was pregnant, they asked me if I would take her place, knowing that I had completed my course. I make a lot of tea and coffee for toddlers' groups, and I cook simple meals for when we have the food bank. But they all know that I can do more; and so sometimes church members will ask me to cook for them, or if there are special occasions I may be asked to prepare some of my recipes.

But it is different at home. We used to eat together, now everyone is out at all hours, working so hard to make a success of things. Now we only eat together once or twice a week, and I must prepare food for whenever somebody from my family comes in and

needs to eat, however tired I am from looking after my daughter. The kitchen feels different to me somehow and I look forward to the days when I work at the church, and especially those moments when somebody comes up to me and asks if it is possible for me to cook them some of my delicious food.

I know that the year brings blessings for us; that I have better clothes now than I did before, that my children have better shoes, that my eldest son is getting driving lessons from his friend. That there is some money coming in and that we will, we must, find a way to save. Because there is so much money we will need to ask again if we can stay; if we can make a life and my husband and sons can become engineers and dentists and lawyers.

And when they do we will sit down, across the years to come, our family growing and our troubles behind us, to eat this sweet rice that reminds me so much of another time.

## Sweet Rice (serves eight to ten)

You will need:

500g rice / 500g sugar / 1 cup of oil / nuts - almonds and cashews work well / coconut / raisins / 3 to 5 cardamom pods / 1 cup of milk / food colouring (I use yellow or orange).

To start with bring some water to boil in a large pan and add the food colouring (only a little; small, small drops) and cardamom pods. Wash the rice and add it to the boiling water, straining it when it is almost cooked. In another pan add the oil and heat it up, stirring in the nuts and sugar (making sure the sugar doesn't brown). Add the cup of milk.

Once the sugar has melted add the boiled rice and stir gently. Cover with lid and cook through on a very gentle heat for 15 minutes. The rice should be nice and fluffy and ready to serve.





# Roda

**My name is Roda Madziva and I work as an Associate Professor in Sociology at the University of Nottingham. My research involves working with families and women in a similar position to Ada, Matagari and Nasreen.**

When I started to work in this area, about 15 years ago, I observed that every time I visited refugee families, the women or mothers would tell me that they had spent considerable time preparing some food with the expectation that we would sit down and eat together before we could talk about my research. Initially, I struggled to accept these women's gift and hospitality as I found this at odds with the research ethics that govern my work, which stress the need to maintain a distance with research participants to avoid both the development of asymmetric power relations and discussions that can potentially cause them harm or open their 'healed' wounds, maybe through the recounting of intimate painful stories. In order to avoid this, I came up with a number of tactics which I used as excuses for not eating the food offered to me. I told the women that I was in a hurry but that I hoped to be able to take some time from my busy work schedule in the future to visit again so we could sit down and eat together.



One day a mother challenged me when I said this:

*You're an African woman, aren't you? Imagine that you have spent the whole morning preparing special food for a special visitor who then when she arrives turns round and tells you ... straight in your face ... 'I don't have the time to eat your food'. How would you feel? ... Do you know something ... you're the only person who has visited me since the time I was moved by the Home Office to this town ... that was about six months ago ... If you refuse to eat my food I take it as a sign that you don't want to have a relationship with me ... so I am not going to tell you a lot about my life.*

At this point I remembered a popular Zimbabwean and Shona proverb which says '*ukama igasva unoazadzikiswa nekudya*', loosely translated as 'true relationships are cemented by sharing a meal'. I came to the realisation that by offering me food, the women were wooing me into a process of relationship building that would eventually enable us to share lived experiences and not just mere research stories.



In a context where their lives and identities have been tarnished by the media and public discourse that frames refugees as objects or less than human, the women were yearning to have a meaningful relationship with someone who could show them some respect as human beings, and sympathise with them, at least by acknowledging that it was not their own fault that they had been displaced from their places of origin by events that were beyond their control. So by inviting me to eat with them, what the women were offering wasn't just food, but something deeper than this – an invitation to enter their world, as driven by the deep seated desire to be accepted, loved and respected by others, just like any other human being.

Furthermore, in a context where they are treated as asylum seekers first and parents later (if ever) making food for their families and the people who visit them, has become such an important experience that brings out the mother instinct in them and affirms this important identity.



When I began to relate with the women, not as just research participants but normal and relational human beings who I could sit down and eat together with, I was able to enter their world and connect with them at a deeper level. As we ate, the women took the opportunity to 'interview' me before they could trust me to interview them. So frequently they asked me questions like, 'where are you from?', 'do you have children?' and 'what brought you here?'

While I customarily introduced myself as a researcher, I later found out that these initial conversations opened up the opportunity to relate with the families at a more personal level. I discovered that I carried many identities as the families, especially the women, found it easier to relate with me as another mother, a migrant and/or an African woman. I have observed that these are the identities that have helped me to connect and establish meaningful research relationships with my research participants.



Through talking with them, I came to question the general assumptions about refugees as people who suffer painful experiences in their countries of origin and whose arrival in the host society marks the beginning of their healing process. Indeed, the lived experiences of the women suggested the lives of people who were being re-traumatised and re-wounded on a daily basis as they navigated the British asylum system.

So for example, some had just arrived from their countries of origin, meaning they had no support networks in the UK. Others were like Matagari – they had been uprooted from the communities they were once settled in as part of the Home Office's dispersal policy. Overall, the women and their families were living in isolation as well as in forced limbo. As one woman told me one day – 'in Africa we say a person can only be a person among others'. Another woman told me that 'food is the glue that binds people and families together'.

Most importantly, it was apparent that what these women were telling me was not just any other story, but they were revealing and sharing their very lives. I began to understand why to refuse their food was indeed to refuse to enter into a true relationship.

This also demanded a reciprocal sharing of personal experiences. As the mothers 'interviewed' me, while we ate together, I often found myself going down memory lane, sharing my own personal experience of being denied a British visa in 2005 while I was still in my country of origin, and the complex process of appealing against this decision.

However, after sharing my own personal life stories (most of which have a happy ending) some took me as their 'hero' or someone who was capable of playing an intermediary role between them and the Home Office. As one woman put it:

*We feel privileged and honoured to be able to identify with someone who has already conquered the war we are in ... Can you please go and tell the Home office that we are not just statistics as they take us to be, but we are real people with flesh and blood ...?*

In as much as I was willing to help the women in this area, this was also an area that exposed my own powerlessness. I therefore had to be very honest with the women regarding my own limitations when it comes to dealing with the Home Office. Frequently, I told them about the time when I almost lost my right to remain in the UK whilst transitioning from being a Masters student to studying for a doctorate degree and how, since then, I have always dreaded dealing with the Home Office.

Yet having worked for many years with women in a similar position to the ones whose stories are presented here, I understand why they were so desperate to get someone who could directly speak to the Home Office on their behalf. Throughout their asylum seeking journeys, the women and their families mostly communicate through intermediaries such as solicitors (and interpreters), most of whom are impersonal, and whose key messages to their clients are that the Home Office is an entity that cannot be rushed, so individuals are expected to just 'wait'.

In a context where they and their spouses are forced to wait for many years for their asylum claims to be processed, the women wondered what kind of a person this Home Office is; surely one who doesn't care given the way they deny them the right to work in order to support their children.

For a parent to be granted the right to continue to live and breathe but not the right to legally belong, to freely sell one's labour, or to choose where one wants to live, looks very much like a condition of social death. As one mother told me 'I am biologically alive and yet socially dead ... could you tell me why the Home office uses its power and authority in ways that stab and hurt'.

This particular mother once went in person to the Home Office department in Croydon that was dealing with her case. This was after her son had died back home, not least because she had failed to bring him over to join her in the UK due to her prolonged asylum seeker status. She hoped that she would be able to speak face to face with the person who exerted such total control over her life to such devastating effect. But, as she explained, she was just directed from one office to another, and nobody working there admitted to holding the power over her fate. "I was told that the Home Office is a system and not a person" she said.

In grief and desperation this mother said to me:

*If the Home Office was a person, I could have demanded to see him or her. I would have wanted even to go to where he or she lives and cry out all my anger. I would have demanded to see how ugly and inhumane this creature is. Unfortunately, you cannot get to sit down with this thing called the 'system' and have a one-on-one talk explaining exactly what you are going through, asking 'Can you please do something about it?'*

The facelessness of the power of the state intensifies the women's experience of powerlessness. This, in turn, makes food and the sharing of meals very special. The mothers have increasingly told me that food is among the very few things that the Home Office has not yet withdrawn from them. As one woman said 'we should thank God because the Home Office has not yet issued a command for all food banks to be closed'.

As we ate together, the women often told me that, while talking about their painful experiences with me did not directly resolve their situations, they found the opportunity of conversing with another woman in a non-judgemental and supportive environment, extremely therapeutic and rewarding. And so I trust the power of these conversations, of simply being together, of sharing stories, of speaking and most importantly, of listening. And of the power of food to help in that process and to accept the gift of food that is offered.

What I have learned is to carry a drink with me every time I visit the families, to enter into a form of gift exchange relationship. There are so many things that we have exchanged as women and mothers. We have shared stories and lived experiences, some of which were really, really hard and painful. We have shared our powerlessness as migrants, especially when it comes to dealing with the Home Office. However, in our powerlessness we also have shared words of hope and encouragement, as well as sharing food and, after our plates are cleared we share this drink.

## Mazoe Punch (serves ten)

You will need:

1 litre Mazoe Orange Crush  
500 ml Mazoe Blackberry  
1 litre Old Jamaica Ginger Beer  
1.5 to 2 litres of water

Mix the Mazoe Orange Crush with the Mazoe Blackberry. Add the Old Jamaica Ginger Beer (which is key to getting the unique kick of the punch) and dilute with water (depending on your personal preference). You can also add mint or any fruit slices of your choice.



# **Breaking Bread:**

## **a community cooking project with refugee families**

**Photo credits:**

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