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2. THE WOMAN WHO COULDN'T COOK

Gloria Kiconco



I am African. I am Ugandan. This is what it says on my passport.

I am a woman. This is what it says on my birth certificate.

But no one buys it.

I am buying vegetables outside a supermarket in Mukono, central Uganda, and a woman from my clan, the Bazigaba, finds me choosing green peppers. You can cook? She asks. I have been back in Uganda for 7 years and two weeks. I still cannot cook, but I can feed myself. I have learned that these are two different things.

I am a mythical creature. I should be captured and put on display.

An African woman must learn how to cook at a young age. She must not read books at the fireside and burn the beans. A Ugandan woman must prepare *matooke* (mashed plantains) in banana leaves.

She must identify the correct banana leaves and strip them of their spine.

A Mukiga woman must know how to

prepare *kalo* (millet bread). What will her guests eat?

If she brings them food without *kalo*, she has not honoured them.

An African woman must, a Ugandan woman must, a Mukiga woman must...

I grew up in the United States. On the plane, during the winter of 1996, I ate an apple and thought it was too sweet. Over the next 12 years I discovered foods I had never dreamt of.

In the cafeteria at the high school I go to they serve pizza and fried chicken every day. The rich kids buy junk food with big brand names: chick-a-fillet and KFC. The richer kids eat organic foods, exotically prepared. They tell me I am eating junk food, no wonder I am fat. My face is marked by my poor eating habits.

At home we eat boiled beans, fried beans, refried beans, pinto beans, black beans, kidney beans. Torture by legume.

Sometimes we have a party for the Ugandans in diaspora. My mother sends for millet flour

from Uganda to make *kalo*. My sister and I sit in the kitchen preparing *samosas*, using supermarket tortillas in place of the flattened and stretched dough. I am quick and very neat at closing them after I fill them with meat, perfect triangles every time. My mother buys sweet potatoes and plantains at the Asian market. The *matooke* she prepares is pink because the plantains are different, but the other Ugandan women are impressed, they eat the hard mashed bananas and feel close to home.

One day my father brings home a cow tongue. We take turns opening and closing the fridge, daring each other to touch it. He eats it by himself. I don't know if I want to be a Ugandan. The foods we eat are not advertised on TV.

My father is finishing his PhD. At night we accompany him to clean toilets, because he is overworked. The church people give us canned goods. We eat unflavoured and artificially preserved corn, beans, peas, and unidentified meats. The summers are long. During the day we eat bologna and cheese slices on weak white bread. My parents dream of hot, soft, yellow *matooke*; rich ground nut sauce; fish from the lake; sweet potatoes with a powdery white core; and cold fermented *bushera* (sorghum beer). I don't remember

these things so I dream of brand-name sandwich meats.

My mother is tired of cooking for us after working all day. A real African woman must help her mother in the kitchen. I bake salmon for my mother and serve it with rice. I do this every few weeks and it makes her happy.

My sister and I are on a plane back to Uganda. We are packages being delivered. We are put aside at the immigration offices and marked Return to Sender. My parents elected to come back home to Kabale.

We are back in the land of fertile hills and fertile women. I overhear my mother tell her old friends that I am lazy because I wake up at 9am, not 6am. She tells them I cannot cook. I believe her. We live near a path. Everyone who walks by sees me struggling to peel and wrap bananas. I learn there is a difference between peeling *matooke* and peeling *matooke*. I do not have finesse. I am technical. I sweat when I cook from the prickle of shame.

My mother prepares the *kalo* and I am her assistant. I add flour as she stirs. I clean the *ekiibo* (basket) to put the *kalo* in. I sprinkle flour on the sides of the *ekiibo* to spread it evenly. I know how to flip the *kalo* in the baskets to cover it with



flour evenly so it does not stick to the sides. I cannot remove hot pots from the fire with my bare hands like she does. I am demoted. She asks me to prepare salads. I pick the lettuce and clean it.

Men and women alike touch the skin on my hands and wonder at its softness. I have never worked a day in my life. I start to believe that I am lazy.

I wake up at 6am to sweep and mop the house. I prepare millet porridge, milk tea, and boiled water then keep them in separate thermal flasks. I clean up after breakfast and begin to prepare lunch. After lunch I clean up and begin to prepare supper. My sister is away. When I eat with my parents, we all secretly wish she was here cooking. There is no love in my food. I can feed a family, technically.

I roast the meat, but my father cuts it. I refuse to cut and clean the intestines of goats that look like wet shag carpet. I look away when my cousin slaughters the Christmas goat. I refuse to eat the *ebiyenda* (intestines) and my uncles sneer at me dismissively because I am an American. I am too good for their food. I don't know the value of meat. I get food

poisoning and spend the entire day in the latrine. I dream of pineapple and boiled ginger tea.

At university, my classmates ask me if I know how to cook. I tell them no. I convince myself that if I set low expectations, no one will be disappointed. At school I walk around with a boy. We are friends. They whisper that he is after a green card. I want to tell him, I also want a green card.

One day I cook with my friend. She is very dear to me. She watches wide-eyed as I cut tomatoes. She does not believe I know how to cut vegetables. Even I am shocked. What else would I do with a knife? I could apply this sharp edge to parts of myself and forget this shame. I fail the first time I try. An African woman does not give up.

When we visit my parents during the holidays, sometimes we make pizza. It's fun to cook pizza with my mother. It's an experiment. Pizza is not real food so I can't mess it up. My mother is the patron saint of Rwandese girls where we stay. They flock to her for advice. She is Rwandese, speaks Kinyarwanda, and cooks *isombe* (cassava leaves). I realise there is an entire country full

of foods that I do not know how to prepare. I ignore one half of my heritage.

I make my own money now and my friends want to go to the new KFC. This is what well-off Ugandans do. I say no. This is over-priced junk food putting locals out of business. I am a stuck-up *muzungu* (white person).

I meet a lot of white people. They tell me how lucky we are to have organic foods that are very cheap. I know. At home with my brother and sister, we eat beans and potatoes almost every night, fresh beans, fried beans, refried beans, and French beans.

I meet a lot of white people. Most of them cook better than me. There is a difference between cooking and feeding

yourself. I can feed myself. They make cous-cous. They make chapati. They joke that they can cook better than me. In the kitchen where I am assisting cutting tomatoes, I blush embarrassment but they can't see.

I wonder if my whole life will be cutting tomatoes. I begin to believe I am not a real woman, a real Ugandan, a real African. Everyone wants to know if I can cook. I do not know how to prove this. The immigration officer wants to know if I will come back to Uganda. I do not know how to prove this either.

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Her works are available at rhymesbythereams.wordpress.org