

Negotiating African Dish Politics

Salawu Olajide
October 27, 2021



Nairobi, that October.

The year is 2019; shortly before the Covid-19 must force the world to a compulsory holiday. We sit at Mama Asante’s restaurant—a cosmopolitan Ghanaian delight in the heart of Nairobi. Three of us; young homegrown African scholars from different parts of Africa unwinding after many days of rigorous intellectual labour. I sit under the giant basket of yellow lights, opposite a row of window blinds made of straw, sipping the dregs of my smoothie slowly and watching it gradually disappear from the boba cup. On my right is Ben; the Zimbabwean with the big biceps; an apparent result of many days of athletic vanities and on my left is Nancy, a Ugandan belle with the characteristic East African big frontal signature. Waiters soon approach; two of them, with trays containing white rice, jollof rice, grilled cat-fish, salad, palm oil stew and other peppered assortment. And there is fried plantain—fried to an overly brownish colour, brought in three separate pans. I recognize fried plantains even if I were looking out from faraway Pluto.

Heaven knows I love my job, but I doubt if this is to the degree to which I love my fried plantains. By reflex, three of us make one simultaneous jiggy-move towards what we all thought was the best serving on the table—the fried plantain. “What’s this?” Nancy grumbles in between a bite. “Plantains. You don’t know fried plantains?” I probed casually, partly amused, partly uninterested and abruptly dismissive of Nancy’s ignorance of this supposedly common African delicacy as a poorly-staged prank. “But who fries plantains,” Ben interrupts, with a puzzling look that confirms the legitimacy of Nancy’s ignorance of what I had thought was a popular household African delicacy.

This duo from different regions of Africa had in fact thought they were being served roasted gizzards. By and large, it dawned on me that the knowledge of African cuisines in general is largely insufficient across the regions of Africa let alone other parts of the world. More significantly, what resonated more was the irony of finding out that such obliviousness resides in the bellies of two homegrown African scholars. I definitely cannot claim to know the origin of fried plantain locally called *dodo* across many Nigerian tribes. But, let's take for example: I represent Nigeria, West Africa. And if Ben and Nancy represent Zimbabwe and Uganda—Eastern and Southern Africa respectively, this assumedly West-African-domiciled fried plantain either does not or is negotiating a rather laborious border-crossing into other regions of Africa and possibly the rest of the world.

In my opinion, the mobility challenge faced by African cuisines in an increasingly technological age is unacceptable. So, when recently I stumbled on a writing about a certain food app called DishAfrik, with its ambitious catalogue of curated African cuisines, with a real-life cooking feature, I was overjoyed and inadvertently remembered Ben and Nancy. Had DishAfrik existed back in 2019 and known to us, we probably would have had a more memorable culinary moment in Nairobi. I'm not really sure if fried plantain as referenced in my story above is or should even qualify as a serious West African delicacy but I definitely know that this development serves as a metaphor for the shortage of knowledge of African delicacies within national and international spaces. There is no doubt that having such a one-stop-shop for African cuisines is proposing a borderless movement of the African culinary experience.

But then, I became even more curious—the idea of an app of African delicacies curated from over fifty-five African countries didn't sound very realistic to me. Who owns this idea? How exactly do(es) the owner(s) intend to execute it? I don't think I have a problem believing in miracles as long as I am given adequate reasons to believe in it. So, one Friday evening in September, Omobayo; my culinary alter ego—one friend with whom I share a relatively parallel level of food-enthusiasm, sends me a link about DishAfrik, followed by the email address of the app creator; one Dadepo Aderemi. Omobayo and I share what I describe as *culinary telepathy*—because we think about food; especially African foods in very similar ways. So, beside what I had known, I put an email forward to Dadepo and heard from the horse's mouth. He says to me that DishAfrik, in addition to curating hundreds of African recipes, now has in-house chefs whose duty is to facilitate online cooking classes with users. This way, I wouldn't need to travel to Zanzibar to learn about her *Urojo* soup—a borderless crossing of the African delicacies, right?

Growing up, I have friends; quite a number of them jocularly insinuate that the Yorubas—the Nigerian tribe I belong to, do not have many culinary varieties (soup, in this case). I doubt if this is really the case, for my father once told me about the different soup recipes (now unpopular) that my late grandmother cooked. I'm talking of delicacies my father himself partook of as a Nigerian child in the 1950s and 60s but can now hardly be found on the tables of any Yoruba family. Yet, this cook—my grandmother, is Yoruba. So, pray tell, being Yoruba, from where did she get her recipes and to whom did she pass them upon her demise? I think the issue here is more of a painful and needless extinction of the African recipes in the absence of a modern curative system. So you see why it is mind-blowing what Dadepo is doing with DishAfrik? It is within this context that I relate more with this particular Chef-Access feature on the DishAfrik app.

The DishAfrik project is big and is still a work-in-progress. Therefore, I think running an Indiegogo campaign for its development is both a great and smart idea. I also think that the possibility of getting non-fungible tokens is a good reward for being a part of the campaign. With these, one is sure to grow a new generation of literates of the African delicacies among Africans in Africa, Africans in the diaspora and indeed among non-Africans who would ultimately learn about Africa through her food.

Ayokunle Oluwawehinmi is a multipurpose writer, editor, researcher and teacher of English language and literature. He is interested in contemporary representations of child soldiers narratives in African fictions.



OLONGO AFRICA