

BEANS WITHOUT KORKOR?

Ekow Manuar Smith (Ghana)



Dawn in Dzorwulu was always a dazzling affair. The orange hue from the horizon reflected on its many highrises a transcendent cool of colours. The blushing pink of the Adu-T Building for Fashion, blue of the towering Stanbic Bank Heights, and jade from Green Ventures' Blocks, were but a few standouts on the main street.

On the street level, pedestrians made their way to their daily business acting as the fillers in this geometric glass work of art. Every so often a procession of runners would march past, soldiering through the middle of the road. Bikers in commute, and some for sport, were also in motion. All the while the autonomous trams had the unpleasant business of stopping and waiting for long periods to accommodate this movement.

Sister Mercy watched this show every morning, munching on her chewing stick as she inserted commands for the automated hoovers to sweep the floors of her inherited *waakye* spot. Often times she stopped, as she did this morning, to wonder when her mornings would be for herself. From dawn to dusk her every exertion was devoted to her patrons. To fulfilling their needs.

Just thinking of her patrons, a sharp chill ran down her spine. Today was going to be a heated day! Not in terms of temperature (well

that too). How was she going to tell her patrons that her famous red-red was finished?

Every morning she had a devoted and dedicated clientele that simply could not begin their day without her mouth-watering red-red. It had been declared 'the finest in the land' by Mayor Smith, and a 'splendid dish' by the visiting UK Prime Minister. Mercy's mother, the late Aunty Grace, had forged the recipe from the annals of their family's ancestors. Crafting the perfect blend of stews to cook the beans in. Fashioning the finest slices of plantain ever known to man. Crisped black at its end, absorbingly red on its body.

However, ever since the flows of plantain had reduced from the hinterland, she had had to seriously ration her portions and increase the price. The clients weren't happy with this. It caused her most devout customer, Sammy the fitter, to threaten that he would go to Ama's *Slammah Cuisine* if Mercy continued to increase her prices. But these were empty threats. All of them knew that they were dependent on Mercy's, and Mercy's red-red alone. Nothing else would suffice.

It wasn't just the red-red. It was the ambience of the place. The white palladium that shielded you from the scorch of the sun. The deep seaters and long couches one sunk into to feast. The mist-fan cooling the immense heat of the day. The subtle afro-jazz melody vibing from unknown and unseen speakers. The drums of Blue Skies' *asana*, *sobolo*, and fruit blends standing patiently in the corner, waiting to be drank. The monitors rolling through a selection of clips from which the customers could pick. Old videos of Ghanaians back in the day dancing to *One Korna* or sending goodwill messages from abroad. The leg rests positioned tactfully to transition the heavy eaters

from satisfaction to sleep, as seamlessly as possible. And the smiling customers themselves as part of the experience. Food-friends sharing in the common love for Mercy's red-red.

Then there was the certainty of service, knowing that no matter how long the line was, or which bogger tried to cut in front, waiting at the end was a hearty bowl of red-red to feast on. And Sister Mercy would be there to scoop healthy amounts until your eyes were bigger than your mouth, stomach and nose put together.

But today, Mercy would have to disappoint.

It had happened before, the plantain drought. Back then, she supplemented with a lower grade plantain from the Local Foods Association. The Association always had reserves for their respective sects. But the Association had sent out a message that plantain was finished and there would be no more for the foreseeable future. In fact, there had been increasing talks about the possibility of plantain becoming entirely extinct! Mercy had felt the reality of the gossip impact her pocket. Over the months the quality of the plantain she sourced kept reducing and the price increasing. She hoped that those suggestions of extinction would turn out to be just whispering voices with stories to tell and conspiracies to spin. But there were also those who talked about climate and how it was shifting and turning everything inside out.

For the last thirty years, Ghana's intensified exposure to the World had introduced her many foods to global mouths. And of all of them, the most popular was red-red. So invariably, Greater Ghana Alliance (GGA), the incumbent political party for the last twenty-plus years, streamlined plantain as a cash crop and inserted it into

its export-agricultural machinery. Plantain farmers became rich overnight. The industry was booming.

But over the last five years, those who study soils and crops and those who examine how climate keeps changing, said that in the near future there could be a sudden and permanent drop in plantain yield. This was due to changes in temperature and moisture to which plantain was very sensitive, they said. The GGA and the plantain farmers weren't going to give up a new-found golden goose so easily. So they bogged down and forced all local traders to sell to their lucrative offshore customers leaving very little produce for the local market.

Sister Mercy found herself on her knees shoveling through kitchen utensils searching for at least one misplaced finger of plantain. At least a single one. For the hope it would instill in her customers that more bountiful days were ahead. Without that red-red money, Mercy wouldn't be able to buyout her brothers shares from the chop bar. To give herself that breathing space to conduct her work in peace.

She didn't need to search hard. There it was. Cradled in the corner of the drawer. A lonely blackened yellow finger. Ripe and ready. Innocent and unsuspecting.

Mercy shoveled some more in case there were more but alas her search was in vain. The finger would only be enough plantain for one dish. It seemed that the prospect of serving only one dish was more treacherous than simply saying there was none. She couldn't imagine giving it to one person. Not even eating it herself. That was out of the question.

She could just imagine the look on everybody's face.

‘No. At least one person should be served,’ she resolved. That is how she would do it. That’s the way her mother would’ve done it. Aunty Grace had never seen a plantain drought. The closest she got were the times of the year when it wasn’t in season. But the era of seasons was long gone in Ghana. The widespread use of machines in farming had removed Ghana’s dependence on rain (thank God, because the rain was hardly predictable anymore). The country could produce at will.

Almost, at will.

Sister Mercy asked her Kitchen-bot, Ama, to heat the deep fryer and boil water as she began the arduous task of hand-grinding the spices for the bean stew. Aunty Grace always insisted that the toil and sweat were part of the recipe and so as little robot involvement was necessary. But she needed Ama since her brothers believed themselves above the work.

Before long, one of her newer patrons, Gonzalo, was stretching his limbs and lumbering up to the front of the stall having finished his morning workout.

“Good morning, madam Mercy,” he sang.

“Morning Gonzalo. How are you?” Mercy replied from behind the counter, looking up to see the young Latin American.

“I had a great run, and my stomach is ready for your red-red, please. No rush, I don’t have any deadlines for this month,” he said, rubbing his stomach and searching for Mercy over the counter.

“How nice. Work has been good?” The onions were stinging her eyes as she tried to find Gonzalo.

“Very good! Your country is so advanced with its urban association policies. There is local government, but it is just

supporting everyone to do their own stuff. And when someone needs a hand – pop – they support, then step back. So I am learning a lot.”

Mercy had many Latin customers, but Gonzalo was the most chatty of them.

“That is good to hear Gonzalo. Your friend, the animator, is he still around?” Gonzalo had brought a friend who was researching a new animated series idea. It had caught Mercy’s eye because it was her lifelong dream to start an animated series of her own. One chronicling how her mother started this business of selling red-red in the now World famous Dzorwulu Borough.

“Oh, no. He left, madam Mercy. Maybe he’ll be back for the Easter.”

The annoyed figure of Sammy had just dragged up behind Gonzalo.

“You haven’t even started cooking? Sista! Some of us get work, oh! I beg, do my own first before dis one,” Sammy said pointing his eyes at Gonzalo.

“Good morning to you too, Sammy. Please, you will wait like everyone else,” Mercy pleaded.

“Yo! I already told you, dat me dier, Ama’s red-red was very good. So I hope you are not going to mention dat your prices you were mentioning last time?” Sammy said.

“Hmmm.”

Mercy was sure to keep herself busy with her duties so as not to make eye contact with the ever discerning Sammy.

Little Cynthia was also just tip-toeing up as well. Her eyes glued to her palm-screen. Her finger flicking from side to side. She came every other week to get red-red for her and her ailing grandmother who was an old friend of Aunty Grace.

“Little Cynthia, how is your grandmother?” Mercy asked, hearing the girl’s squeal from across.

Without looking up Cynthia responded, “Fine, thank you. She sends her regards. Oh wait-wait, I win, I win! Can I use my gold coins to buy?” The little girl said in a rush.

“We haven’t installed that one into our POS yet, my little bofrot.” This time she did spare a glance but quickly turned away as she saw Sammy trying to make eye contact.

A small black kantanka pulled up by the stall. Soon, the strapping Joshua Prempeh, the Deputy Coordinator of the Dzorwulu Borough, stepped down. All sister Mercy’s usuals had arrived.

“Aye Sammy, you de? Little Cynthia darling? Sister, wassup? Please the usual,” Joshua announced, filling up the line further.

“Don’t be mentioning my name like dat, Mr. Joshua. I haven’t eaten dis morning and Mercy is playing some sort of games. But anyway, you, I get mattah with you!” Sammy said agitatedly.

“What matta is this?” Joshua said, chuckling to himself then looking amusedly at the others.

“You don’t know what I am talking about, eh? You aren’t on the platform?” Sammy continued.

“Please, I am here for my red-red, the time and place for our discussions is during association meetings.”

“Oh, you don’t worry. Beh, I go see you?” And with that Sammy continued fidgeting about himself.

Then there was a calm silence among the patrons. Each preparing themselves for the experience they went to bed dreaming about the night before. The deliciousness of the caramel-like plantain, eaten with a mouthful of steaming peppery beans. The burn of the dish hardly detracting from the temptation of getting that first bite of heaven. Yes, the patrons waited for sister Mercy in silence. Waiting for their dreams to come to reality.

Sister Mercy was feeling the heat of the kitchen and the eyes of her customers. What on Earth was she going to do about this? Four hungry expectant clients, all wanting red-red. Needing red-red.

Thinking it couldn’t get any worse, Shin-Shin, the neighbourhood alcoholic, stumbled into the line bringing with him his trademark smell of oriental liquor and Chinese soy.

“Ago-Amen!” he said and responded to himself. “Today, I have my money saved specifically for Aunty,” hiccup. “I mean sister Mercy’s red-red. No alcohol, oh! Today my money is especially for Sister’s red-red. Aye, Chale, I will eat like a fool today. Hip-hip-hip?”

No one in the line minded Shin-Shin who was not affected by this coordinated affront.

“Hip-hip-hip, hurray!” he bellowed happily.

“But you, when will you go back to China?” Sammy spat at the drunkard, finally acknowledging his presence.

“Please, my friend. Do not bring yourself. I am more Ghanaian than you,” Shin-Shin pointed at Sammy.

“I beg, sister Mercy, hurry with my order so I don’t have to stand with this buffoon,” Sammy said, shaking his head at the drunk.

There was no response from Mercy, who was switching over to slicing the plantain hoping everyone was too distracted to notice it was only one finger.

“But do you know, Sammy, that you owe me? Do you know who built your... your... your little fitter shop? My late uncle, Mr. Steven. What a great man he was! From the countryside in China, to the bustling booming metropole of New Accra. Glittering like the Blackstar she is. My uncle came and made this place his home, and home for many others – including your father, Sammy. So do not come here telling me to go back to my country. You should go back to your village. Stupid mackerel!”

That induced a laugh or two. Sammy wasn’t pleased at all. But he thought it unwise to argue with a drunk. The wise saying playing in his head, ‘When you argue with a mad man, no one can tell who is mad or not from afar.’

But Shin-Shin wasn’t done.

“Ah, and look who is calling me a buffoon? Can you imagine?” He appealed to the small crowd. “Sammy, the one who left his wife to marry the bountiful Auntie Grace, only to be rejected without even getting to his knee. Oh! Can you imagine?”

Sammy was having to replay the wise saying over and over again in his head. 'It wasn't worth it getting involved with this pathetic drunkard. It wasn't worth it at all, especially on an empty stomach.' He kept repeating this to himself, shutting off Shin-Shin's tirade.

"His sweet loving wife that dedicated herself to him and supported him through the recession, depression, se-session and all that. To leave her, to marry Aunty Grace. Only to be rejected. Oh-oh-oh." Shin-Shin was opening a virtually empty bottle of schnapps, tipping it over into his gaping mouth. "If I am a buffoon, then you, my friend, are a man with an imp's mind."

At that, Sammy flung himself at the drunkard, but Joshua had been reading the situation and used his large frame to block the fitter from attacking Shin-Shin.

"Sammy, Sammy! Calm down and listen!" Joshua pushed at Sammy. "You can take your red-red first then cool down, eh! The nice young man doesn't mind?" Joshua said of Gonzalo who had jumped out of the way of the wrestling men, but was in agreement to Joshua's suggestion.

"You will take your dish and go and work. Mercy's red-red will cool you down, okay? Okay!" Joshua's grip on Sammy was so fierce that the fitter wasn't able to get a look at Shin-Shin, who had stepped back almost colliding with a passing bicyclist.

"Foolish! Stupid!" he snarled and resigned himself to the compensation of receiving his red-red first.

Everyone in the group let out a collective sigh.

On the flip side of the counter, Sister Mercy was about finished preparing the one dish and was not any closer to knowing how she would resolve the issue of who to serve it to. Biding for time, she offered her clients the option of her other dishes.

“Aye, if anyone wants a change of flavour. We have yam and *kantomire*, fresh from the Dzorwulu farms. I even ate some yesterday. So sumptuous! We also have *eba* that you can have with the *bambara* bean stew. Or, or my *gari foto* deluxe, you liked that one the last time, bra Joshua. With the boiled egg, red snapper fish, *shitto!*” she exclaimed.

“Sister Mercy, please. We have all come here for one thing. One thing only. Do not try and distract us from our task. We are here for strictly red-red. We know that you have vendors across the city. I helped in that cause,” Joshua said pompously patting his chest and looking around for witnesses.

“So even though we can get red-red from any of your chop bars, or other chop bars, we flock here because yours has a special magic. There is something about your hand that turns this particular red-red to gold,” Joshua stated and everyone agreed. Even the little girl nodded, momentarily ungluing her eyes from her palm-screen.

“Sister Mercy, in fact, you have been very some-way today. What is going on? Be frank and speak. We won’t harm you,” Sammy said softly, cooled down from the earlier fracas. Mercy heard Sammy and lifted her eyes to finally meet with his and she dreaded having to tell them the truth. But there was no way around it.

“Mmm...” She started but stopped, staring at the crowd before her. How was she going to put this tragedy into words? How was she going to tell the simple and honest truth that only one

could have their beans with *korkor*? It was a truth that was harsh, possibly unacceptable to those who had gathered in front of her stall this morning. Was it not the hope of getting her red-red first that had calmed Sammy down? Was it not her red-red that had made Shin-Shin save his money rather than spend it on more booze? And for little Cynthia, her ailing grandmother. Gonzalo as well, being the first to arrive today. And big man Joshua providing so much support when her business needed it most. These were not merely customers. They were part of the DNA of *Grace's Grace* chop bar. It's lifeblood. Her mother would be disappointed of having such loyal patrons unsatisfied. Such was the gravity of the situation, but Mercy needed to find a way. The truth could not be held for long.

She stepped out from behind the kitchen counter, wiping her stained hands on her apron as she approached her patrons.

“Well. Mmmm. How do I say this?”

Full story on <https://abdallahsmith06.medium.com/beans-without-korkor-a-national-tragedy-575437f69fd4>