



Transculturalism and Culinary Fiesta in Adeola Osunkojo’s *The Life of a Nigerian Couple*

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Abstract

When the Canadian Professor, public intellectual and philosopher, Herbert Marshall McLuhan, prophesied that “the world is fast becoming a global village”, man did not realise how fast this would be. Multiculturalism, Interculturalism, Transculturalism, Technological advancement and other socio-cultural processes and innovations have made this possible. In Nigeria, the multiplicity of cultures has culminated into an influx of traditional values, and norms. These norms and values include the culinary traditions. The culinary tradition is an aesthetic experience that is pleasing to the senses and also in the transnational space. Transculturality stems from the convergence of various cultures. It is not a rarity to witness a marriage of foods from different cultural backgrounds. Varieties of foods are fully captured in culinary fiestas in ceremonies such as weddings, burials, birthday parties, among others. The *Amiedi*, *Owho-ewwri*, and *Usi* of the Urhobo people of the Niger Delta, the *Amala*, *Ewedu* and *Gbegiri* of the Yoruba people, and the *Tuwo Shinkafa* in Northern Nigeria do not only portray the multiplicity of foods in Nigeria, they also mirror the complex nature of determining one’s taste, especially in homes where couples are from different cultural backgrounds. Consequently, this paper advocates transculturality in the Nigerian culinary traditions. It uses content analysis methodological investigative approach to examine polemic(s) of preference of food among couples in Adeola Osunkojo’s short film, *The Life of a Nigerian Couple*. The paper is anchored upon Fernando Ortiz’s 1947 theory of Transculturalism, the phenomenon of merging and converging cultures. This research reveals that food is an art and as such can only be evaluated within the context of the culture from which it emanates. We conclude that the advocacy for a transcultural Nigerian society will not only facilitate peaceful coexistence, it will also serve as machinery that would improve culinary processes in Nigeria and beyond.

Keywords

transculturalism, multiculturalism, culinary fiesta, *Amala*, *Ewedu*

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Introduction

Food is a societal construct. The society defines the taste of man. When the Canadian Professor, public intellectual and philosopher, Herbert Marshall McLuhan, prophesied that “the world is fast becoming a global village”, man did not realise how fast this would be. Multiculturalism, Interculturalism, Transculturalism, Technological advancement and other socio-cultural processes and innovations have made this possible. In Nigeria, the multiplicity of cultures has culminated into an influx of traditional values, and norms. These norms and values include the culinary traditions. By culinary tradition, we refer to the sum total and processes of the culture of the consumption of food. These include the culinary triangle, culinary fiesta, gastronomical marketing and tourism, and others. “Culinary is a Latin word *Culina* meaning kitchen or cooking and is used also for meal, food, and dish and it refers to ingredients, foods that are prepared, beverages, production process” (Guzel and Apayden 3). In the same vein, the culinary triangle is a concept described by Claude Lévi-Strauss, an anthropologist, involving three types of cooking; these are boiling, roasting, and smoking, usually done to meat and all of these cooking processes have been on ground since pre-modern times. Frying has also become part of the cooking corpus.

The culinary tradition is an aesthetic experience that is pleasing to the senses. Culinary tourists attest to the fact that food facilitates a better understanding of the culture of a people. As a cultural construct, gastronomy is a medium through which the social, economic and even spiritual environment of a people can be better understood. In fact, Culinary tourists “receive a greater engagement with the environment where the visit takes place, far from the role of simple observer traditionally associated with tourist visits” (Jimenez-Beltran 1). Food also defines the social status of a people. In a nutshell, the bourgeoisie and proletariat dialectics can also be better understood in the context of their gastronomic tradition as “People who eat with you and what you eat describes your social status” (Guzel and Apayden 1).

Cooking is a cultural experience. It is not a rarity to witness a marriage of foods from different cultural backgrounds. Despite this transculturality and transnationality, compositions and appreciation of food vary from one culture to the other. Varieties of foods are fully captured in culinary fiestas in ceremonies such as weddings, burials, birthday parties, among others. The *Amiedi*, *Owho-ewwri*, and *Usi* of the Urhobo people of the Niger Delta, the *Amala*, *Eweduan* and *Gbegiri* of the Yoruba people, and the *Tuwo Shinkafa* in Northern Nigeria do not only portray the multiplicity of foods in Nigeria, they

also mirror the complex nature of determining one's taste, especially in homes where couples are from different cultural backgrounds. Consequently, this paper advocates transculturality in the Nigerian culinary traditions. It uses content analysis methodological investigative approach to examine polemic(s) of preference of food among couples in Adeola Osunkojo's short film, *The Life of a Nigerian Couple*.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored upon Fernando Ortiz's theory of Transculturalism. In 1947, Ortiz, a Cuban anthropologist, submits that transculturalism is the phenomenon of merging and converging cultures. To have a full grasp of transculturalism or "cosmopolitanism" (Grosu-Radulescu 107) it is pertinent to be conversant with its antecedent, multiculturalism. N. R. Khadpekar's multiculturalism is a portmanteau word for *multi* and *cultural*. While 'multi' refers to anything that exceeds the singular, 'cultural', derived from the word 'culture', is the whole gamut of the way of living of a people. Ehrentraut (2004, p.5) submits that:

The term multiculturalism is used to indicate a specific social and cultural school of thoughts that adopts the liberal and all compulsive policy of cultural amalgamation. The phenomenon of multiculturalism is not new to the world and thus not new in academics but it gets a new air in the period of colonisation.

It is pertinent to note that there is nothing such as Theory of Multiculturalism. What there is, are Theories of Multiculturalism. Various Cultural theorists adopt various perspectives in examining the question of multiple cultures, found in a single geographical orbit. N. R. Khadpekar, the proponent of the term 'Multiculturalism', defines it as "the appreciation, acceptance, and promotion of various cultures in schools, businesses, cities or nations" (Kymlicka, 2003, p.150). In *Multiculturalism or Transculturalism: Towards a Cosmopolitan Citizenship*, Donald Cuccioletta examines the transition from Multiculturalism to Transculturalism. Using the multicultural Canadian society as a paradigm, he expatiates that transculturalism is the solution to the weaknesses of multiculturalism. While multiuculturalism calls for peaceful coexistence among people of different cultural background, transculturalism goes a step further to advocate that man should see himself in the other. Transculturalism takes us beyond multiculturalism. In fact, it "takes us beyond Johnson's original notion of culturalism through the integration of a political aesthetics with a cultural civics" (Lewis 15). Thus, the criticism of the

multicultural process culminated into the birth of transculturalism. In a country, such as Nigeria, where more than 250 ethnic nationalities (these ethnic nationalities include Yoruba, Hausa, Fulani, Izon, Isoko, Itsekiri, Igala, Urhobo, Igbo, Ebira, Idoma, Nupe, Tiv and many others) still find it difficult to coexist, it is pertinent to adopt the transcultural perspective even in their culinary traditions to engineer positive change and development among the citizenry.

A Survey of Transculturalism and Culinary Fiesta

The term ‘transculturalism’ continues to echo in numerous discourses in the humanities, cultural studies and the social sciences. Jeff Lewis’ *From Culturalism to Multiculturalism*, Lucia-Mihaela Grosu’s *Multiculturalism or Transculturalism? Views on Cultural Diversity* and Donald Cuccioletta’s *Multiculturalism or Transculturalism: Towards a Cosmopolitan Citizenship*, aptly define the transculturalism as a concept and in praxis. Transculturalism as a postmulticultural (a term that tries to overshadow multiculturalism) concept, is gradually dominating the theoretical construct of multiculturalism and the landscape of cultural studies.

While transculturalism could be said to be a result of postmodernism, migration, and media convergence, it is also a product of globalisation. Although it is a recent terminology, its praxis has been there from time immemorial. We must understand that the French Policy of Assimilation in their African colonies such as Senegal is a paradigm of the transcultural process. Donald Cuccioletta makes us understand that “with accessible rapid means of transportation at our disposal, *time* and *distance* have been shortened. The electronic media (such as the internet) provides us with an instantaneous contact with the *other*” (2). But what is transculturalism and how does it intersect and deviate from multiculturalism and interculturalism?

If we compare transculturalism to multiculturalism the essential difference between them stems from the way we perceive their outcomes. Cultural diversity is seen either as a melting of cultural markers (transculturalism) or as a gathering of multiple and distinct contributions to the mainstream culture (multiculturalism) (Grosu-Radulescu 108).

Transculturalism is a cultural intercourse—a marriage of various belief systems and norms, as well as seeing oneself in the other. It is a place where diverse traditions meet. Paradigmatically, in this postmodern era, a locally made Hausa fabric is used to create a western style suit. It is a process of sharing, accepting, and adopting common values

among people from diverse cultures. Transculturalism is cosmopolitanism. It is a marriage of global and local processes. “Transculturalism is the mobilisation of the definition of culture through the expression and deployment of new forms of cultural politics” (Richard 26). The beauty of transculturalism stems from the fact that culture is in a constant state of flux. Traditions are prone to modifications and remodifications. Modern and postmodern cultures are not monolithic. There is a gradual graduation into a cosmopolitan world-where all boundaries and borders are being broken, a world where man is fast becoming a global citizen. This is a transition into a world of deculturalisation. Citing Donald Cucioletta, Grosu-Radulescu notes that in 1965, Fenando Ortiz, the proponent of the term ‘transculturalism’ defines it as

A synthesis of two phases occurring simultaneously, one being a deculturalisation of the past with a métissage with the present. This new reinventing of the new common culture is therefore based on the meeting and the intermingling of the different peoples and cultures. In other words one’s identity is not strictly one dimensional (the self) but is now defined and more importantly recognised in rapport with the other. In other words one’s identity is not singular but multiple (108)

Thus, transculturalism is antipathetic to a static culture. It advocates that the *Other* and the *Them* should be discarded for the *We* and *Us*. Food, clothing and shelter are the three primary necessities of man. Of these three, food is the most imperative. For every living thing to survive, food is needed. Transculturalism has created spaces for the marriage of foreign and local meals and also given room to innovation(s) in the preparation of these meals. African foods can easily be found in markets in the United States of America and Europe. Transculturalism allows the Westerner to see African meals being sold in his country as his own meal. He does not see it as the other. It gives him ample room to explore diverse culinary spaces.

In Nigeria, food is serious business. This is exemplified in culinary fiesta found in marriages, burial ceremonies, birthday parties, harvest thanksgiving services in churches, salah celebrations, child naming ceremonies, admission and university convocation parties and other social events. Most party-goers do so purposely to eat. It is not a rarity to see people refer to the term, *Item 7* (the Nigerian slang for food) whenever the need arises. Furthermore, foods are sometimes cooked to entertain mourners. The food enterprise is so lucrative that popularly known Nigerian fast food eateries and restaurants like *Captain Cook*, *Pepperoni*, *Mr Biggs*, *Portofino*, *Shoprite* among others have their

patronage running into millions of naira on daily basis. Due to the preference in taste, African menu and intercontinental dishes have entered the encyclopaedias of numerous restaurants and eateries.

Every Nigerian society has its culinary practice. One finds problems in homes where married couples are from different cultural backgrounds. Such domestic problems stem from the choice of gastronomic culture to be adopted in the family. While as the head of the home, most husbands prefer their indigenous meals to dominate the menu, some wife do not succumb to their husbands' desires thus creating spaces for argument and counter-argument. It is in the light of the above that the next section of this paper examines the polemic(s) of preference of food among couples in Adeola Osunkojo's short film, *The Life of a Nigerian Couple*.

Synopsis of *The Life of a Nigerian Couple*

This short film narrative is set in Lagos, Nigeria. Kofoworola, the wife of Emeka Agukoronye, goes to the market very early in the morning to ensure that her husband's food is ready for the afternoon. In fact, she stays at home to make sure she cooks delicious meals for the husband before he returns from work. On this particular day, she makes *Amala*, *Gbegiri* and *Ewedu*. Her husband, after work, headed to the local restaurant to get *Ofeowere* and *Fufu*. Kofo is not happy with the food her husband buys and she prevents him from eating it. The couple call Dr Gerald, Emeka's friend, to settle their difference but he is unable to. Dr Gerald later returns to settle the problem amicably. At the end of the film, Emeka catches Kofo eating the *Ofeowere* soup ravenously, in the kitchen.

A Critical Reading of *The Life of a Nigerian Couple*

In indigenous Yoruba societies, foods that abound include *Amala*, *Gbegiri*, *Iyan* or pounded yam, *Ishapa*, *Ewedu*, *Ewaala Agbado-Adalu*, *Ekuru* among others. One of the most popular of all these foods is the *Amala*, *Ewedu* and the *Gbegiri*. Apart from being delicious, the *Amala* is also cheap to prepare. While the *Iyan* or pounded yam is seen as an occasional delicacy or food for the elites, the *Amala* is food for both the rich and the poor. The *Amala* is made from yam flour that has been peeled, sliced, dried and blended into flour. This is called *Elubo*. The *Gbegiri* is beans soup while *Ewedu* is made from the vegetable with the same name.

On the other hand, *Ofeowere* is one of the most expensive and delicious soups from the Eastern part of Nigeria. The soup is named after its place of origin. *Ofe* means

soup while *Were* is a place in Eastern Nigeria. It is, therefore, clear that this soup originated from the *Were* settlement in Eastern Nigeria. It is cooked with vegetable and other ingredients like stock fish, precooked meat, smoked fish, *uziza* leaves, and *ugwu* also known as pumpkin leaves. It can be eaten with *Garri* (solid made from cassava flour), *Fufu* among others.

In African societies, it is traditional of women to prepare meals for their husbands. While the man is at work, the woman makes it her duty to prepare her husband's favourite before he returns. This is what leads Kofo into questioning Emeka on why he brought food into the house. She sees it as total disrespect. It is not the custom for the man to buy cooked food to the house-except snacks and a few other light foods. Emeka had gone to the local restaurant to get his local food – *Ofeowere*. Despite the high spate of globalisation, local restaurants popularly known as *Mama Put*, still abound in commercial cities such as Lagos, Abuja, Port-Harcourt, Warri, Benin and Calabar. The frequent patronage of these local restaurants, even by the *bourgeoisie*, stems from the fact that while their foods are cheap, the manner of their cooking is visible and almost naturally made. Local foods like *Eba*, *Starch*, *Fufu*, *Iyan*, *Banga Soup*, *Owo Soup*, *Ewedu*, *Ogbono* and others are well prepared in local restaurants. Although what Kofo prepares is also an indigenous African delicacy, it is that of the Yoruba people-one that largely differs from that of the Igbo people. Kofoworola vents her anger on Emeka thus:

Kofo: While I am roasting myself in the kitchen making *Amala* for you with sweet *Gbegiri* and *Ewedu* with nice *bokoto* (meat) to go with it, excuse me, you are not having this.

The above comment reveals that Kofo's anger is not actually from the stress she passes through in preparing the food, it is from her dislike for any food that differs from her indigenous food-that of the Yoruba people. As a Yoruba woman, Kofo is of the belief that all there is to food in her world is the Yoruba culinary tradition. The belief of the superiority of one's food over the other is a support for the pure tribe theory. "Throughout history the misrepresentations of cultures, the hatred of different cultures, coupled with an ignorance of cultures have always been the underlying reasons for human conflict" (Cuccioletta 2). Beyond the framework of food, humans have the natural belief that their culture is superior to that of others. We must understand that this should not be so because culture is unique and as such, cultural norms of other societies should not be looked at in disdain. Kofo believes the Yoruba tradition is pure. But she is mistaken. Emeka warns her not to come between an Igbo man and his *Ofeowere*. To Emeka, his

Ofeowere is as important to him as Kofoworola's *Amala* and *Ewedu* are to her. Emeka further challenges her to mention the number of foods the Yoruba have. The scenario is fully captured in the conversation below:

Kofo: My darling husband says Yorubas don't have food. Eh? We have *Gbegiri*, we have *Ewedu*, we have *Ome Obe*, we have *Ila*, we have *Eforiro*, we have....

The ludicrous is portrayed by Kofo who continues to mention the names of soups that do not exist. She mentions *Eforiro with four leaves*, *Eforiro with seven leaves*, *Eforiro with two leaves*. She is halted by Emeka who realises her game. He mimics her that in fact there is also *Eforiro* with six packs. Kofoworola does not want to give in. She realises that her husband has mentioned more foods. She still remains strong willed as Emeka mentions the soups in Igbo land thus:

Emeka: In my place, we have *Egusi*, we have *Ogbono*, we have *Oha*, we have *Sala*, we have *Ofeowere*, *Okazi*...

Kofoworola quickly cuts in to prevent Emeka from mentioning more soups. She feels intimidated by the numerous foods he mentions. The filmmaker seems to be subjective in his utility of musical score. Whenever Igbo foods are mentioned, Igbo musical scores accompany them. Igbo musical scores usher in the mention of the Igbo foods. The major shots the filmmaker uses are the Close Up as well as the Extreme Close Up Shots. This is for the consumer (film audience) to fully comprehend the actions in the film. The Extreme Close Up reveals the aesthetic appeal of the foods as well as how passionate Kofoworola and Emeka are about their respective indigenous meals. The couple call Dr Gerald to help them settle their differences. While the young man tries to, his attempt at initiating peace is scuttled by Emeka and Kofo as they continue to indulge in the blame game. The young man finally helps them strike a truce. Below is Dr Gerald's verdict:

Dr Gerald: It's all about understanding. I understand both of you. This is what I would suggest. For tonight, we will eat *Amala* because she has gone through a lot in making it. And tomorrow we will have the *Ofeowere*.

The couple adopts Dr Gerald's suggestion. Normalcy is restored. That night, Kofo who goes to the kitchen, picks up the plate of *Ofeowere* and decides to have a taste of it. To her outmost surprise, *Ofeowere* is a very delicious meal. She is so engrossed in eating it that she does not see Emeka enter the kitchen. She is ashamed of herself as Emeka shakes his head and leaves.

Before the *Ofeowere* incident, Emeka had always eaten the *Amala*, *Ewedu* and *Gbegiri* prepared by his wife. He did not complain of eating only Yoruba foods. He is a transculturalist since he sees himself in the other. Experiencing culinary delights of other societies that are different from ours “create a self illusion that we have attained a level of cultural awareness of the *other*” (Cuccioletta 2). Kofoworola does not think this way. She refuses to accept other cultural culinary practices when her husband attempts to have a change of cuisine. Kofoworola is not only a paradigm of women who always dominate the culinary space in the home, she is also a metaphor for those who are monolithic and refuse to accept other people’s cultural mores. Kofoworola later realises her mistake when she sees that the food she condemns is not as insipid as she thought.

There is no exterior action in the film. In other words, all the actions in the film are shot in the interior. Apart from the good use of light, the fast paced film also utilises the everyday costume of the average Nigerian. The Aristotelian unity of place, time and action are held sacrosanct in this film. The home of the Agukoronyes serves as the setting of the film. The kitchen, dining place and living room serve as the locale. In the same vein, the action does not exceed twentyfour hours. This is evidenced in the same costumes the couple wear from the beginning to the end of the film. The well tucked in long sleeve shirt worn by Emeka to and fro his place of work as well as the dress worn by Kofoworola to cook for her husband serves as their costumes.

Conclusion

This study foresees the birth of a world where man will say, *I am not of citizen of Canada, not of America and not of Britain. Rather, I am a citizen of the world*-a world where cultural bias would become history. While some people would infer that this is mere utopia, we must understand that transculturalism is gradually making this a reality. In a country like Nigeria where more than 250 ethnic nationalities (these ethnic nationalities include Yoruba, Hausa, Fulani, Izon, Isoko, Itsekiri, Igala, Urhobo, Igbo, Ebira, Idoma, Nupe, Tiv and many others) still find it difficult to coexist, it is pertinent to adopt the transcultural perspective in their culinary traditions to engineer positive change and coexistence among its citizenry.

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