

Cookery as Artistry: The Nsukka Example

by

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Abstract

Art is not only a product but also a process, the doing. Some interesting steps are taken to arrive at a finished art work. A similar creative ritual performed to get a finished art work could also be seen in food preparation. Right from the farm to the dining table, a routine of creative steps is experienced. The cook gives special attention to the visual appeal of food (aesthetics) through garnishing, frying, baking, parboiling and so on. So, what shared attributes, with art, accord Nsukka food the possibility of being Art forms? The argument of this paper, through visual analysis, is that the similarities in both process and product between art and food are worth- exploring. Beauty is crucial in cookery while also being the centre of artistry. Food is art; edible art.

KEY WORDS: Artistry, cookery, aesthetics, process, product, Nsukka and Iconography

INTRODUCTION

Nsukka is the geo-political and cultural area under discussion. It is located in Enugu State at the outskirts of the North-East zone of Nigeria sharing borders with Benue, Kogi, Ebonyi and Anambra states. For a better appreciation of the above topic a little delve into Nsukka's history could help. Nsukka is made up of Nkpunano, Nru and Ihe-Owere. Its origin is embodied in a couple of myths and legends. Although oral traditions exist in varying presentations, it lacks historical clarity. Enquiries into the origin of Nsukka suffice two unresolved controversial accounts.

One account of the origin of Nsukka has it that Nsukka people originated from Igala in Kogi State. According to this historical source, the legendary King of Igala land Asadu Atta had four sons. These sons of his dispersed to different areas. The reason for this migration is not yet known but could likely be quest or search for peace. Okpuje, Obukpa, EhaAlumona and Nsukka are the first, second, third and fourth sons of Asadu Atta respectively. These four sons go by the name of their ancestor "Asadu". This further maintains that "the slight cultural resemblance of the Igala and Nsukka could have come to be only in a situation of direct or indirect political subjugation:" (Afigbo in Oformata

1978:27). Unresolved still, the rotatory mythical staff which assigns every Nsukka village the ancestral approval to host the Omabe festival is said to have its background from Idoma.

Postscript information indicates that when the mythical staff said to have traveled all the way from Idoma to Nsukka is taken down from Ezeokpume hill, it is handed over to the next village that is going to celebrate the Omabe festival. From there, it is handed from village to village until its cycle of movements in all the Nsukka villages is completed. It is then returned to Idoma from whence it began its journey". Aniakor (in Oformata 1978: 305)

This view, Aniakor suggests, needs further investigation. The above account links Nsukka to Igala-Idoma version of origin and also gives a glimpse into the complexity of its ancestral source.

The other account of origin traces Nsukka's origin to "Nri" town in Anambra State. The son of EzeNri 'Nshi' called Ezeoguda refused to observe the "Ichi" mark which his people observed. He migrated from Nri and settled at Nguru in Nkpunano. This Nguru till today is known as the eldest village in ideke- Nsukka town. This stubborn Ezeoguda had a brother-EzeOkpakaNwaNshi' who migrated with him. The latter founded Eha-Alumona a neighbouring town to Nsukka. These two towns have 'Alumona' in their names. Thus we have IdekeAlumona and EhaAlumona.

Writing on this, Afigbo claims that "the socio-political evolution of the people of Nsukka was reached with the incorporation of the region into the spiritual hegemony of the Nri people" (in Oformata 1978:27). Afigbo's proposition smacks off a refutable notion imbued with the tendency of linking Nsukka to the Nri dynasty.

The remaining task is how can these two accounts be married? Each contains elements of truth especially in Nsukka culture. But, there is a fusion of the two specifically in the areas of title taking and cuisine. For instance, food items peculiar to both areas are commonly eaten by the Nsukka people.

Also, this could explain why there are a number of Nsukka traditional cuisines that are neither found in any of the places it traces its origin. Perhaps the convergence of all gave rise to the introduction of new dishes peculiar to Nsukka.

In Nsukka, the visual appeal is a major quality of food. Every attempt is made to enhance the aesthetic harmony of food. This arouses the appetite of the onlooker and suggests palatability. In Nsukka dialect:

'imi ne enyaneri, onubiari' (the nose and eye eat before the mouth)

The above aphorism sees food not only as visual artwork but also an aggregate of sensual art. One of the major aims of the cook is to let the food look appetizing. In which case, both elements and principles of design are incorporated to achieve such aesthetics. The adding of the food condiments with their varying natural colours makes the food look painterly. On the other hand, good smell of food intensifies hunger and keeps the mind in a state of expectancy. It also fills one with hope of quenching tormenting hunger. So,

food does not stop at satisfying the sense of taste but goes further to appeal to the senses of smell, sight, feeling and hearing.

The perception of the smell of delicious food keeps one happy and in suspense. The sight of neatly and creatively garnished food is both inviting and aesthetically satisfactory. Satisfactory in the sense that the well-prepared food with its good-looking presentation increases the degree of one's appetite. Food also satisfies the sense of feeling. The fiddling or kneading of pounded cassava or any other 'fufu' is synonymous with that of clay for modeling. This process of removing the foreign bodies and rolling it into a fine ball caresses the palm or tickles it and could, through the nerve cells, please the brain. This rolling or modeling of the fufu is an example of art in process. Equally, the sound made by boiling or frying food is musical. Someone could, through the sound and its accompanying aroma, detect what is being cooked. This is inviting. It engages one's thought.

"Everyone who's ever tried feeding a baby knows how important it is to make the food look nice and funny – especially if it's broccoli or porridge... This is because the looks of your food constitutes a great part of the overall pleasure of eating" Lina(2013:1)

The foregoing brings to mind a host of questions that this study wishes to address. An attempt is made below to outline them.

"If someone says it's art, it's art... advances in art are not necessarily formal ones" Stangos (1997:261). On the contrary, art should be seen "as a kind of logic and art works as analytic propositions concerned with the definition of art". Stangos (1997:261) Reiterating that art works should have distinct attributes, Cohen (1981) claims that "anything art should capture something of the human spirit or touch upon sensed but intellectually elusive meanings in life".

In the first premise, should art be seen as an open-ended discipline where anything comes in and is welcome because someone says it is art? As the later argument agrees that art works have characteristics or qualities, what test has food or to narrow it down, Nsukka edibles passed to be accorded art works?

FOOD AND PERFORMANCE ART

"Anyidakooohoyi o!

Anyidakoinene o!

Anyidakoutaraji" (continuously)

Translation

We are longing for ogbono (AvengiaGrandifodia) soup o!

We are longing for vegetable soup o!

We are longing for pounded yam (Continuously)

Exited by the euphoria of the luminosity of moonlight, Nsukka children use the above folk song in tasking every household they visit with the contents or items in their song. The joyous partakers in this cultural carol take whatever edible they are offered to quench their taste. Such offer does not have an orderly sharing format. Thus, every child helps himself, hurriedly, from the host's dish. Once it is finished the chorus of 'imee o! meaning "thank you o!" proceeds while the procession continues to the neighbouring

household. In chanting the above song, it could be accompanied with clapping of hands and beating of improvised drums using: 'Komkom' (empty tins). The synchrony of this musical composition is made more melodious with 'Opueka' (honing with stylishly clinched fist). This carol continues until the children's appetite for fun is satiated. Then, it is continued another day. It is worth-nothing that hunger is not the primary motive of these children. Some might be filled but join just for the fun of it.

Now, this has ceased to exist or is only practiced in interior areas as a result of stories of food poisoning, child kidnapping and robbery. However, this performance is important especially in area of character transformation. In such exercise, the children embark on psychological probing of personalities. For instance an unfriendly parent or one suspected to be a murderer is not visited in the carol. They could also, unintentionally, check on injustice. They only omit families with unfriendly parents and could visit families that are wrongly ostracized. Thus, they might bring hope to the hopeless or correct injustice. This performance sculpture brought about or into being by search for food could be likened to the installation or performance art of post modernism. Even the moonlight tales, folk songs and drama are examples of unconscious performance or installation done for years. Tapping of palm wine with headlights at night is an example of performance art associated with food. As the tapper climbs, his headlight/torch illuminates rays that punctuate the thick darkness synchronizing with his nodding head. The tapper could at times use "gogbo" (long transparent bottle) to collect the palm wine or alternate with "obele" (calabash). This has become a constant inspiration for most Nigerian paintings and sculptures.



Fig1. Akgh (Edible Termite)

Photo: Erasmus Onyishi

In most areas in Nsukka, matches and lighter have not been mastered by the villages especially the elderly. To make light, they send their children with either "ize"

(dried mountain grass) or “evuro” (dried palm nut chaff) to neighbouring households to get glowing splinters. As a result of the incidental fire outbreak which the fire sourcing is instrumental to, the women themselves, especially during dry-seasons, resort to this Nsukka version of candle procession. They could even scratch out the fur-like back of palm frond stocks and mix it with palm oil to make local candles called “Uriri”. Uriri is used in either fire sourcing or lightening the house at night. Once the fire is sourced, it is fanned so that the glowing splinter rekindles. If the woman does not have enough energy to blow the splinter with the mouth, she could resort to moving the “ize” or “evuvo” speedily from left to right. This to and fro movement is similar to the movement of thurible or censer by Reverend Fathers in Catholic churches. The pot is placed on the “ekwu” (stone tripod). Almost every household in Nsukka has at least one grinding stone and its roller made still of stone. Later, cement versions of the grinding stone emerged. Grinding of any food items is similar to kneading of clay.

“NRI UMU” (CHILDREN’S IMPROVISED COOKRY)

It is a common adage that when the she-goat eats devil-been leaves, its kids look at its mouth. “Nriumu” is the children dramatic emulation of the cooking done by their mothers. Usually, a thatch house is erected to serve as the kitchen. In this ‘house’, these kids imitate or dramatize their parents’ cohabiting manner of, either friendliness or quarrels. Charged with innocence, they give the roles of father, mother, children and house helps to themselves. The little boys imbibe jejune masculinity learnt from their fathers. The little girls among them cuddle their toy babies like their mothers cuddle them. This performance could be a caution to parents who are indifferent to children’s vulnerability to bad habits. Art could be an accidental emergence of ideas. The person involved might not know the implication of his endeavour. One encounter is worthy of note. A group of children cooked with “nyo” (metal sieve). Grasses and sand were put inside the sieve. While the cooking was going on, the sand was dropping out of the openings on the sieve. The kids continued filling the sieve (their pot) with sand as the sand goes out. At a glance, one would laugh at the inexperience of these kinds. But, doesn’t this allude to the vanity associated with man’s craving for, eating and defecating of food? The belly is never contented with a meal as it continues throwing out and craving for more while man dies to fill it.

FOOD AND ART PROCESSES: A COMMON GROUND

The kitchen could be likened to an art studio where similar rituals are performed to arrive at visually-pleasing products. Some comparisons exist between food processing and art processes.

“To carve” is to “inscribe by cutting on a surface” or to “form something by cutting away material from a piece of wood or stone” as entered in Oxford Advance Learner’s Dictionary of current English. Still from this same source, the nutritionist notion of carving is seen. In this later context, to carve is to “cut up... into pieces or slices at or for the table.” Chiefly used in this catering art are cutlery like carving knife and fork.

In sculpture, carving is a common process used in subtracting a medium to realize a form. Carving entails several techniques. It equally demands a ‘high degree of

craftsmanship'. The media for carving are wood, stone, ivory, clay, marble et cetera. The common medium of carving in the tropic is wood. Wood exists in varying sizes, kinds and ages. Its nature has volumes to speak about it. For instance with regard to age, Anatsui (1997) opines: "New wood has poetry locked up in it, old wood is poetry itself time having worn out the prose."

The first aspect of wood work is sourcing of wood. After being cut into a required log, the intricate carving begins."The interest in a good piece of wood carving comes from the interaction between the wood's quiet will-to-be and the sculptor's active will-to-form". Andrews (1983:109). On the other hand, food has inviting will-to-be whereas man has appreciatory will to eat. Since carving could mean inscribing on a surface, the inscription made by the teeth on given food, is like the effect of gauge on wood.

Another multi-functional tool used in food carving is the finger with its nail. Fingers are arranged for different purposes. For instance, to form a spoon, they are bended in stooping or converging form to form a shovel-like arrangement faced by the thumb. The four fingers carve into the food like shovel in sand and the thumb loads it, preparatory for the final loading into the mouth. The use of chisel in carving out chips from wood is similar to the fuck-like function by fingers. The fingernail is like chisel.

Paraphrasing Andrews (1985:109), the sculptor cooperates completely with his wood and tries only to obey the character of the wood's grain. This cooperation with the nature of medium is evident in food carving or eating. In chewing sugar cane, the teeth are used to remove its bark in other of its concentric/annual rings. That is respecting its grain. A bite across or against the grain proves tough while that which obeys the annual ring is easier. Andrews still asserts that "wood is distinguished from the other sculpture materials by the fact that it began its existence as a living, breathing organism." Food items have the same feature as both enjoy common characteristics as life, grain, backs, annual rings and ability to possess a given form.

Once a part of food stuff is bit off, its form changes. This continues till it is finished. A look at left-over after meal reveals an assemblage of forms. Even the gathering of people around a meal gives an aura of love, togetherness and sharing.

Also, some formalistic sharing rituals are performed at home especially on meat. In case of a hunted animal, the hunter takes the head. If it is a domestic animal that is slaughtered, the child or parent to whom the animal was leased takes the head or the father in case of family-owned ones. It is the right of the father to own the gizzard and one meat-filled leg of a fowl. The mother owns the 'Ukwuokuko' (the hip of the fowl). Funny enough, as oral tradition has it, this harmonizes with the peoples belief that as the mother bears children, her hip weakens. So, the meat and bone from the fowl's hip go straight to the woman's hip to reinforce it. The children own the rest of the fowl. This is just theoretical formality as the parents eventually share their 'Ochoro' (custom-endowed share) with their children.

FORMS AND PRESENTATIONS OF FOOD

The look of farm crops shows a dispersal of varying colours. This consequently forms an interesting design. Take a species of beans 'ekidi' for instance, has coils like

Chauffeur of plaited hair. The individual coils genuflect. On the surface, the maturing, the matured and ripped ones have different hues. These green, orange, yellow and spotted brown compose an interesting representation. Even yams in their staked stands in farms are good to look at. This plant has coils like chauffeur of plaited hair. The individual genuflect. On the surface, the maturity, the matured and ripped ones have different hues. These green. Orange, yellow and spotted brown compose an interesting representation. Even yams in their staked stands in farms are good to look at. In their pyramidal stands, they look like the “Ijere” masquerade. There is this calmness, density and relaxing feeling they arouse in the onlooker. The composition is dominated by shades of green colour complemented by sports of yellow. The yellow which is introduced by malnutrition or shedding of leaves, throws light in the cool representation. Also, animals in their free-range around households embody ranges of colours. At times, the spotted fowls mix with the predominantly black, brown and red ones. Then there emerges a spontaneous design. In this representation, the different heights or sizes of the cocks, hens and chicks distinguish the depth in the design. We can say the taller fowls are embossed whereas that of the chicks are incised; therefore, forming various cameos and intaglios.

‘Orji’ (kola) with alligator pepper, cocks, cows, yams and Okpa (baked ground pea) are the common edibles used in Nsukka in sacrifices. The smallest in size- orji with ‘Ose Orji’ (alligator pepper) is morphologically infinitesimal but commands greatest cultural reverence. Orji exists in different forms. The number of sub-seeds it has has volumes of symbolism to speak. This range from Kola of no sub-seed (Amaolu) to Kola of even seven sub-seeds (Orji ibeesaa). ‘Okwa Orji’ (traditional Kola plate) with middle apartment for Ose Orji reveals a monochromatic pointing of tinted pink and brown colours. The natural scarifications on the different seeds have oval brown lines which add thickness to the light, fading colour. Balancing the brown colours, is the alligator pepper at the center. In a whole, the ‘Okwa Orji’ not only has an appetizing but also an aesthetic look.

The cock exists in different forms and species. It could have shaggy feather (avuke) or very colourful colour-composition dominated by red. The plucked feather and blood as left on the deity after ritual or sacrifice look painterly. Cows are sculptural in their herds. In Nsukka, the local and not the exotic breed (namah) is used in sacrifices. A critical look at cows reveal interesting anatomy and colours. Okpa (baked ground-pea) is a special food kind that earned the Nsukka Omabe Masquerade its name- Ori-Okpa (eater of ground pea). It is rapped with banana leaves or put in Kom-kom (small tins). Recently, transparent water-proof materials are mostly used. In the case of being rapped with banana leaves, Okpa has interesting folding like drapery of cloths. It keeps the eye in a state of expectancy by ‘revealing through concealment’. It is served to the gods in deities during Omabe season.

The shrine itself looks painterly with these sacrificial edibles. For example, rituals are performed during new yam festivals. The dispersed chips of roasted and oil-soaked yam, on the brown earth, provide a design of contrasting colours. Also, when slaughtered or sacrificed, the cow-meat (beef) and the blood show dominant red colour

and shades of brown colour. This is moody. It has scaring look that leaves melancholy in the audience's psyche. This could be titled 'Massacre' as could be seen on war scenes.



Fig.2. SLAUGHTERED COW

Photo: Erasmus Onyishi

EDIBLES IN FIREPLACES

Cone-shaped mud fireplaces, three-stone fireplace (both called ekwu) and iron tripod stand (oshite) are commonly used in Nsukka area. Edibles like maize, yam and meat are kept direct on the flame or glowing splinter. When corn is being roasted especially in the night, rays of red light reflect on the mild-yellow corn and produces tints of orange and red of varying intensities, on the yellow corn. As the corn roasts, the yellow turns to shades of brown and black in gradual or at times abrupt gradation. Contrasting these shades are dots of white and light yellow introduced by pops. Yam roasting also has similar effect. In preserving meat by smoking, a metal mesh shaped like colander with a cover (Ngiga) is used. Ngiga on a fireplace makes a nice composition. As the smoking goes on, the raw colours of the meat becomes mild as it is shaded by both heat and smoke. Cocoa yam is also smoked. It is spread on a woven platform called 'Opepe' which is elevated above a hearth. A cloud of smoke is sieved by the opening on the opepe. As a result of this, strips of sooth in print-like black rays reflect on the mild brown cocoa yam. Animals as meat constitute worthwhile designs in fireplaces. While its fur is being removed, goat or any other animal posses attributes of sculpture or painting.

COMMERCIAL DISPLAYS

In this context, the quantity of edibles is greater as more persons are targeted. To this effect, the appearance captures the idea of installation especially as regards quantity

and space encompassment. A heap of vegetables is painterly. It is monochromatic as shades of greens fade into one another. Also yams of different varieties and hues in mound form a good landscape intercepted here and there by traders and buyers. The umbrellas or shelters could be seen as representing trees in this context.

EDIBLES SET FOR EATING

As already stated, Nsukka women believe that “imi ne enyanerionubiari” (the nose and eyes eat before the mouth). As a result, visual appearance is the prime objective of the cook. Anything meant to be eaten must look beautiful. Take for instance, Ayarayaoka’ (a mixture of maize, pigeon pea and vegetables) has visual appeal. An onlooker would not mind rushing the food when displayed. The dominant calm yellow is complemented by the brown hue of the agbubgu(pigeon pea) and dull green colour of the steamed vegetables. It could be called a painting as both elements and principles of deigns are present here.

Conclusion

“We all need food to survive, but we should all, at some point in our lives, have the opportunity to experience truly gorgeous food that not only nourishes us physically, but inspires us visually, emotionally and creatively”Bendersky(2013:7). In the Nsukka context, “Ithomaenya” (optical beauty), is crucial in Cookery. This arrests the audience’s attention. It could push one to eat even when one would have not. The inference is that there is high dose of aesthetics in cookery. Art works appeal to man’s tactile and emotional senses. Food does it better as it not only keeps the senses alive but also possesses the attributes which arouse feelings as exemplified in the foregoing discourses. Fundamental elements of design like line, colour, form, texture and tone, and principles of design like proportion, harmony, balance, focus etc are some aids to appreciation of works of art. There are manifestations of these in food as seen in Nsukka edibles. Art could be an instrument of according a people an identity. This identity touches upon the people’s socio cultural behavior. Such names as Nok, Igbo Ukwu, Benin and Ife in Nigeria and Ashante in Ghana are now common. Art works produced (or discovered as westerners would pejoratively say) in these areas have brought them these hard-earned popularity. In the same vein, food performs the same function by labeling a people with lasting identity. OfeOweri, Ofensara, Okpa, edikaikong and Ose Nsukka have made Owerri in Imo State, Onitcha in Anambra, Ngwo in Enugu, Calabar and Nsukka areas of reference in admiring any of the edibles associated with each area.

A critical look at this study would tempt one to ask, what durable form is arrived at after the cookery and the artistry of eating, considering the fact that every edible is meant for the stomach? Isn’t the last product-feces denied visual longevity by its uninviting smell and modern way of defecation?

An attempt to do justice to this question could lead us to the study of the morphology of faeces as edibles for dogs and plants, and the achievements artists have made using faeces. But, the discourse has been restricted to the stage within human consumption.

One could ask, must it last forever? James Turrel introduces light and people experience it for minutes and that is all. Also, Agnes Ress planted and harvested Rice and

that was all, visually. This is a work of a-year-lifespan. Selz (2005). However, the modern documentation using photography can make durable the ephemerality of edibles. Linking this to the historical perspective, must it be seen before being appreciated? Some deteriorated wood works of olden days, lost time immemorial; the insignia and regalia of aborigine African traditional chiefs like the Obi of Onitcha, were not recovered in their original contexts. They are now charged with appreciation as they are enjoying historical reconstruction. This is the power of literature. In literature, words as imageries or mental pictures are used in drawing or having imaginary photographic grasp at certain no-more-existing things. Recent development in art surface intangible cum invisible phenomena like smell and air charged with the qualities of art. Art works could be visually over but mentally not.

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