

THE ART OF CULINARY: EXPRESSING CONSTRAINTS AND INHIBITIONS IN THE *AMIEDI* CUISINE OF THE URHOB0 PEOPLE

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Abstract

The Amiedi (Banga Soup) cuisine has attained international recognition due to the diversity of its preparation. But a critical look into the preparation of the Amiedi soup unveils several constraints and inhibitions. This is the focus of the paper. Through the use of literary food studies approach, this paper argues that the culturally established constraints and inhibitions by the people of Urhobo, the original owners of the Amiedi soup, have continued to dictate the recipe of the Amiedi soup. These cultural constraints in the form of availability of the palm fruit, taboos and prejudices are embedded in several art forms of the Urhobo people. Drawing illustrations from proverbs, myths, legends and aphorisms, the paper discovers that food imagery and symbols represent deep meanings that are expressed in artistic forms. These imageries which appear in the form of taboos or inhibitions are codified to symbolize issues pertaining to the preservation of group identity and resistance to cultural filtration from other groups. The paper also discovers that the issues of acceptance, history, relationships and consumption are also expressed through the nuances of food. This paper established that food is a metaphor for social identity, resistance, sexual desires power and gender relations which are expressed in various art forms.

Keywords: Amiedi Soup, Palm Fruit, Taboo, Inhibitions, Deprivation

Introduction

The popularity of the Amiedi soup also refers to as Banga soup among the Urhobo and Isoko is undisputed. Several factors are responsible. Chief among them is the availability of palm trees in the area they inhabit. More so, the Urhobo and Isoko people of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria are regarded as kindred in both political and socio-cultural affinity. This also applies to the cooking of Amiedi soup. Amiedi soup in Urhobo, known as Izuwo

ibiedi¹ in Isoko is a soup “made from palm fruits with assorted meat and fish (fresh, dried or smoke)” Other condiments are “...scent leaves or bitter leaf; pepper, crayfish, beletete or rohojie flavours; onion and salt” (Opuruiche, 2018, p2)². It is worthy to note that all these ingredients can be locally sourced in Urhobo and Isoko areas.

However, in the preparation of the Amiedi soup, there are several constraints and taboos which the non-native may not be aware of. This is the preoccupation of this paper; this paper argues that the internationalization of the Amiedi cuisine has not diminished the constraint and taboos associated with its preparation among the Urhobo and Isoko people. As such, the paper identifies some of the constraints and taboos in both Urhobo and Isoko communities and how they are documented in the indigenous knowledge system. Illustrations are drawn from myths, legends, idioms and proverbs of the Urhobo and Isoko people to buttress the argument that documentation of several constraints and inhibitions in the oral arts of the people have continued to influence the preparation of the Amiedi food and its recognition as an international cuisine.

The Metaphor of Hindrances

The Urhobo and Isoko people are neighbours in Delta State in the South-South region of Nigeria. They are considered as one group until 1950 when they began to separate politically (Obaro Ikime 1982, p.59)³. The popularity of the Amiedi soup among them is hinged on the fact that apart from the near year-round availability of the palm fruit, the “palm nut oil extract is rich in heart-friendly, low saturated fat and is cholesterol free” (Opuruiche, 2018, p.5)⁴. These characteristics of the palm fruit from which the liquid used for the preparation of the Amiedi soup is derived endear the soup to the owners especially, the adults of Urhobo and Isoko.

Amidst this advantage of having low cholesterol, as noted earlier, the palm fruit is readily available in its season. In the Urhobo and Isoko areas, the oil palm tree produces fruits in large quantities from November to early May every year. During this time, the palm fruit is readily available and consumers have choice of which colour and edible palm fruit to use in the cooking of the Amiedi soup. But during the rainy season, from late May to late October, the palm fruit becomes a scarce commodity, especially, the local specie which is very low in cholesterol. Therein lay the first constraint in the making of the amiedi soup.

¹ Chinwe Opuruiche. (2018). “Origin of Nigerian Foods: Banga Soup (Oghwo Amiedi)”. *Connectnigerian.com*

² Chinwe Opuruiche. (2018). “Origin of Nigerian Foods: Banga Soup (Oghwo Amiedi)”. *Connectnigerian.com*

³ Obaro Ikime. (1982). “History of the Urhobo”. In Onigu Otite (Ed.) *The Urhobo People*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books (Nig.) Ltd. Pp 43-68.

⁴ Chinwe Opuruiche. (2018). “Origin of Nigerian Foods: Banga Soup (Oghwo Amiedi)”.

During the period of late May to late October, there is scarcity of the palm fruit, especially the local hybrid. This is what leads to the coinage of the proverb among the Urhobo and the Isoko that “when there is no banga (palm fruit), change soup” (*a be mre edi, gbe wene owho*)⁵. Banga is the West African Pidgin rendering of palm fruit.

Most times, the scarcity of the palm fruit is occasioned by socio-cultural dynamics apart from the seasonal factor. For instance, in the Urhobo and Isoko areas, whenever there is a traditional festival, an embargo is placed on the harvesting of the local hybrid of the palm fruit. For instance, among the Ovu people of Ethiopia East Local Government Area, the celebration of the *Efa* festival holds every month of February. Therefore, on the eve of the festival, an embargo is placed on the harvesting of palm fruit till early March. This enables the community to focus on the camaraderie of the celebration and also enjoy the festival. At the same time, the palm trees also use the period of the embargo to blossom and produce matured fruits while being free from the hitherto constant harvesting of their fruits. Also, there is the need to allow the fruits attain maturity before harvest. In this vein, embargo is placed on harvesting of the palm fruit for some time. In an interview with some of my Isoko colleagues, they explain that in the Ozoro area of Isoko, an embargo is usually placed on the harvest of the palm fruit in the early November when the palm trees start to produce fruits till late December. According to them, this is to enable the fruits attain maturity. It also stops the harvest of the unripe fruits due to economic challenges. Whether, it is due to seasonal unavailability of the palm fruit or socio-cultural constraints that inhibit the harvest of the palm fruit, the argument here is that there are times that the palm fruit becomes scarce. So, when one cannot locate the fruits to prepare an Amiedi soup which is the best cuisine of the people, there is no choice but to change soup. This is the root of the proverb, “when there is no banga (palm fruit), change soup”.

It is worthy of note that this paper is focused on the variant of Amiedi soup prepared from the fruits harvested from the local specie (*elaeis guineensis*). In recent years, due to population growth and the introduction of mechanized farming to the Urhobo and Isoko areas, the need to cultivate biologically engineered seedlings of the palm tree has gained momentum. Presently, biotechnologically engineered species like the Tenera, Dura and Psifera are cultivated either for oil or kernel production. This is presenting a new challenge for the preparation of Amiedi soup. The biotechnologically engineered species are very high in cholesterol and fat. Therefore, when they are used for the Amiedi soup, the high level of fat is noticed in the thickness of the liquid derived from the crushed fibre of the palm fruit. This is an additional constraint on the preparation of Amiedi soup. One has to

⁵ This proverb arises from the seasonal nature of the palm nut fruit locally referred to in West African Pidgin as Banga.

search for the local specie of the palm fruit among the presence of other species. When one cannot locate the local specie, then, there will be no Amiedi soup. On the other hand, when one mistakenly procures the biotech ones, then the deliciousness of the Amiedi is compromised. This implies that the procurement of the local specie of the palm fruit means that one has surpassed the initial constraint.

The Amiedi soup is a conglomerate of the liquid derived from the palm fruit and other condiments. There is the need to complement the soup with the protein from meat or fish or both in order to reduce the fatty nutrient of the palm fruit. Therefore, as observed by Oporuiche (2018), the Amiedi soup is garnished with “assorted meat and fish (fresh, dried or smoked) ...” (p.2)⁶. It is in the selection of the meat and fish to add protein to the fat, including the “potassium and vitamin E” content that poses another constraint to the preparation of the Amiedi soup. This constraint appears as a traditional and cultural inhibition. It manifests in several ways. One of these is what the Urhobo and Isoko people refer to as *Egha* (taboos). Meyer-Rochow (2009) explains that the word food taboo is used to refer “(to “prohibitions”) to distinguish the deliberate avoidance of a food item for reasons other than simple dislike from food preferences” (p.3)⁷. In his study on food taboos with illustrations drawn from several ethnic groups worldwide, Meyer-Rochow (2009) lists several categories of food taboos. These include those aimed at protecting human health and the need to enhance “group cohesion and group identity” (Chapman M, 1985; Bolton J.M., 1972; Carlin J.M., 1998; Shifflet, P.A., 1976). Most taboos in Urhobo and Isoko fall into the need to preserve group cohesion and identity.

Among the Isoko people, especially the Ozoro clan, the eating of the snail is forbidden. This taboo is clearly embedded in a myth related to cohesion and identity. According to the myth, it is believed that “the snail protects against enemies, because during the war period, it was used by a female traditional doctor as a sacrifice to the gods of the land known as “Odimodi” to protect the people from enemies” (Ekokoruwe 2019, p.7)⁸. Other Isoko communities like Olomoro and Irri also give similar reason for forbidding the eating of snails. Meanwhile, the snail is “highly priced due to the rich nature of the collagen ...” (17)⁹. The snail is a rich source of protein which when combine with the Amiedi soup becomes a delicacy with a balanced diet. But the eating of this rich source of protein and

⁶ Chinwe Oporuiche. (2018). “Origin of Nigerian Foods: Banga Soup (Oghwo Amiedi)”.

⁷ Victor Benno Meyer-Rochow. (2009). “Food Taboos: Their Origins and Purposes”. *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine* 5: 18. P.61

⁸ Michael Ekokoruwe. (2019). “Features: Why Some Communities in Isoko Land Forbids Snail”. *Blank NEWS Online*. www.blanknewsonline.com/features-why-some-communities-in-isoko-land-forbids-snail/

⁹ Michael Ekokoruwe. (2019). “Features: Why Some Communities in Isoko Land Forbids Snail”.

delicacy is regarded as a taboo in these communities. Therefore, when preparing the Amiedi soup in these communities, this inhibition is taken into cognizance.

In the same vein, in his study on food prohibition among the Urhobo people, Anyanwu et al (2015) observe that the people of Orogun clan of the Urhobo ethnic group “prohibits the killing and consumption of Iguana lizard. The eating of dog meat is also forbidden in the area. These inhibitions that prohibit the inclusion of the meat of these animals which are highly rich in protein as condiments to the preparation of the Amiedi soup in this area is clearly articulated in several myths and legends. For instance, Anyanwu et al narrate “how some bush dogs led some trapped warriors who were engaged in an inter-tribal war out of the battle front to safety” (176)¹⁰. The myth continues that “this action was subsequently tied to a deity and the dog as the physical manifestation is still being worshipped. So, all wild dogs and domesticated dogs are not to be killed for meat under any circumstances (176). As a result of the prohibition of the Iguana and dog meat in the Orogun area in Urhobo, those handling the preparation of the Amiedi soup for Orogun people face the constraint of the appropriate selection of meat to garnish the soup in order to avoid the associated taboos.

The meat taboo also extends to the indigenes of Uvwiamia community in the Agbarho clan of Urhobo. In this community, the eating of the meat of the tortoise is a taboo. In the words of Anyanwu et al, “this community has a river running through it and this animal thrives and multiplies freely around this area ... due to some stories from the past the people living here cannot hunt and eat the meat of this animal” (p.176). The prohibition of the tortoise’s meat in Uvwiamia is tied to a story of an event that happened in time past. According to the version of the legend narrated by Anyanwu et al, at one time, there is an inter-tribal war between the people of Uvwiamia and their enemies. The battle becomes so fierce that the soldiers of Uvwiamia are trapped between the river and their foes. With no hope of crossing the river to their side of the divide, and the enemies closing in on them, the soldiers of Uvwiamia give up hope of survival. “Suddenly”, according to the legend, “a big tortoise appeared out of the water and ferried the surrounded warriors to safety across to the other bank” (p.176). In order to reward this favour, the people of Uvwiamia begin to revere the tortoise as their “mother”. Shrines and altars are erected for the worship of the tortoise and it is decreed that “the tortoise must never be killed nor eaten by any son or daughter of the community” (p.176)¹¹. Thus, the myth of the tortoise as the savior of the Uvwiamia people

¹⁰ E. B. Anyanwu, Harrison Abedi O., & E. W. Edafiadhe. (2015). “Food Prohibition among the Urhobo Nation: Ethical Consideration”. *American Journal of Public Health Research*. Vol. 3, No. 4. Pp 174-179.

¹¹ E. B. Anyanwu, Harrison Abedi O., & E. W. Edafiadhe. (2015). “Food Prohibition among the Urhobo Nation: Ethical Consideration”.

becomes a constraint that prohibits this delicacy from the necessary condiment required for the preparation of the Amiedi soup in the area.

The argument here is that the preparation of the Amiedi soup is a technical and sophisticated piece of culinary activity that demands knowledge of the local tradition and custom. This foreknowledge is grounded in the Urhobo proverb that “having a basket is not a license to collect palm fruit (*odię a da mrę obere ke kpę okọ ọọ*)”. The implication is that before embarking on the preparation of the Amiedi soup, there are some ethical considerations to observe. Some of these considerations are tied to group cohesion and identity and non-adherence to these customs and traditions carries the death penalty. So, when these prohibitions are broken, there is need for redemptive recompense by the culprit. For instance, the people of Orogun cherish the Amiedi soup as other people of the locality. When the dog meat is used to prepare the Amiedi soup, people of Ovu in Ethiope East will have no problem cherishing the meal and savouring the delicacy of the dog meat because there is no taboo forbidding the eating of dog meat in Ovu. But for the Orogun people, the Amiedi soup with dog meat is never to be touched; eating it becomes a source of poison due to the inhibition associated with it.

So, as they say ‘one man’s meal is another man’s poison’ and this aphorism is clearly associated with the Amiedi soup, even in its international dimension. This is because, when a prohibitive element is joined in the preparation of the Amiedi soup without the knowledge of the one eating it, it is believed the one who eats such a meal will suffer the consequences of the taboo that is broken. This is what is observed by Anyanwu et al when they narrate a true story of an Uvwiamia woman who is married in another community. This woman unknowingly used some firewood that has been used to roast a tortoise to cook for her family. After some time, she falls sick with “itchy rashes all over her body”. Due to her ignorance that the firewood has been used to roast tortoise meat, no one associated her case with her community’s taboo. But as orthodox medication fails to heal her, some spiritualists diagnose her case as resulting from the Uvwiamia’s tortoise’s taboo. The story continues that “a trip to her village to see the local chief priest was made. After some sacrifices were carried out, she reportedly got well over-time” (p.176)¹². As the Amiedi soup is one of the most popular cuisines among the Urhobo people, it may be safe to assert that the woman has used taboo firewood to cook the soup. This is the argument of this part of the paper; taboos regarding the consumption of certain condiments like the choice of meat, fish and vegetables constitute inhibitions in the preparation of the Amiedi soup among the Urhobo and Isoko people.

¹² E. B. Anyanwu, Harrison Abedi O., & E. W. Edafiadhe. (2015). “Food Prohibition among the Urhobo Nation: Ethical Consideration”.

In the Niger Delta where the Urhobo and the Isoko people dwell, other ethnic groups surround them. These include the Edo, Ijaw and the Itsekiri people. Due to limited political and economic opportunities occasioned by petty rivalry and colonialism, ethnic prejudice is prevalent and the need to protect group's identity becomes more imperative. The high level of ethnic bigotry in the area also impacts on the acceptance of the Amiedi soup as an international cuisine. As the Urhobo and Isoko people are closer than the rest of the groups in the area considering that both groups are only separated politically in the 1950s, the acceptance of the Isoko and Urhobo brand of the Amiedi soup between their people is without prejudice. But between the Urhobo and the Itsekiri people, there is acrimony in the acceptance of each other's brand of the Amiedi soup. In the preparation of the Amiedi among the Urhobo people, there are some secret recipes that are added to the Amiedi soup in the course of its preparation to distinguish it from Amiedi soup prepared by other groups. These recipes may be connected with the quantity of spices and vegetables to be used to garnish the Amiedi soup and localize its taste. Also, of serious concern to the Urhobo people is the fact that the Amiedi soup has to contain the liquid and the condiments in equal proportion; there must be amiedi soup (cooked palm fruit liquid) to rob the "usi ... eba, fufu, wheat, semo or cocoyam pudding" (p.3)¹³. It is imperative that the Amiedi soup, the spice and vegetables and the meat and fish have to be served in equal proportion to foreground the aesthetic look, taste and the delicacy of the cuisine. Anything short of this is not acceptable among the Urhobo and Isoko people for some curious reasons.¹⁴



¹³ Chinwe Oporuiche. (2018). "Origin of Nigerian Foods: Banga Soup (Oghwo Amiedi)".

¹⁴ Chinwe Oporuiche. (2018). *Banga Soup* [Picture]. Retrieved from *Connectnigerian.com*

Among the Urhobo and the Isoko people, there is a timeless mutual suspicion of their neighbours, especially those from other groups. Thus, in the acceptance of the Itsekiri brand of the amiedi soup for food, the prejudice for the ethnic group has created inhibitions. This prejudice arises from two factors. First, in the preparation of the Itsekiri variety of Amiedi soup, the addition of certain spices has created inhibition for the Urhobo people. It seems the amount of spices and vegetable added to the soup are not according to the secret recipe of the owners of the soup. Thus, among the Urhobo people, there is proverb that “*o faro kufia kerę Amiedi rę Irobo*” (looks spectacularly worthless like the Itsekiri Amiedi soup). As one elder explains, the Itsekiri amiedi soup glitters with ingredients but it is tasteless to the Urhobo people. This is what gives rise to the saying; though the saying is mostly used to describe someone who dresses gorgeously but has no inner virtue.

In another vein, as noted earlier, the Urhobo and Isoko people believe in the addition of the right amount of meat, fish, spices and vegetables like the bitter leaf and lemon grass to create a balanced recipe with the right quantity of the palm fruit liquid. But most Urhobo and Isoko people abhor the Itsekiri Amiedi soup because the ingredients added to the palm fruit liquid are deeded to be too much. At the end, when condiments such as meat, fish, periwinkle, snails, crayfish, crabs, spices and vegetables are added to the palm fruit liquid, these soak up the liquid and the Amiedi soup becomes one big cake. The Urhobo calls this brand of Amiedi soup as “ugborekokomiyo (a forest of ingredients)”¹⁵. In the Itsekiri variant of the Amiedi, the earthen pot (*evwẹrę*) used to thicken the soup is full to the brim with ingredients and condiments. This creates a suspicious mood among the Urhobo people. As the bottom of the pot cannot be reached without first devouring that congregation of ingredients and condiments, the Urhobo see the whole soup as a cuisine meant to trap them instead of a delicacy to be enjoyed. This is especially tied to the amount of affection displayed in the course of serving the meal by the women who prepare the soup. This argument is reinforced by a description of the Itsekiri Amiedi soup by an Itsekiri woman. According to Storyteller (personal communication, August 17, 2020), “egbelekokomiyo” means “the fowl does not reject corn ... Egbelekokomiyo is a combination of love, character, good food and sex ...”¹⁶.

¹⁵ Chief Ewwaraye, an octogenarian, argues that due to the superabundance of condiments, Urhobo men suspect that elements constituting taboos among the Urhobo people can be inside the soup and therefore, there is express danger in consuming what one cannot see the bottom.

¹⁶ This is the contribution of a WhatsApp contributor named Storyteller in FOA Seminar and Publication Group Chat.



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Due to mutual suspicious and distrust the Urhobo people has for the Itsekiri people, a hindrance is created in the acceptability of this kind of Amiedi soup, though it is a conglomerate of all that a man wants in life, even among the Urhobo and Isoko.

Conclusion

The culinary of the Amiedi soup among the Urhobo and Isoko people is highly sophisticated even though it is woven with rules and regulations. You don't collect palm fruits because you have a basket. The rules and prohibitions must be adhered to so that the resulting cuisine will be acceptable to all. Thus, in international circles, meat and fish generally acceptable among all Urhobo and Isoko are regularly used in the preparation of the soup. This is why there are cases where restaurant owners prepare special Amiedi soup to cater to the need of certain group of customers. Generally, when an Urhobo or Isoko person is offered an Amiedi soup that does not conform with the rules, they always react with the saying that

¹⁷ Matse. (2014). "Banga Soup". Retrieved from www.matsecooks.co/banga-soup-itsekiri-way-2/...

“*Qba gha idu*” (The Oba forbids cocoyam). This means that the eating of such an Amiedi soup is inconceivable.

This paper has shown that food is not just about a menu or culinary idea. There are several imagery and symbols in both the preparation of food and its consumption that represent deep structures that are often expressed in artistic forms. This imagery which can appear in the form of taboos or inhibitions are codified to symbolize issues pertaining to the preservation of group identity and resistance to cultural filtration from other groups. I have shown in this paper that the issues of individual and group acceptance, history, relationships and consumption styles are configured syntagmatically through the nuances of food, especially the Amiedi soup. This paper has also established that food is a metaphor for social identity, resistance, sexual desires power and gender relations which are expressed in various art forms. So, whenever, you order an Amiedi soup and you are offered one, remember that that Amiedi has surmounted several challenges and inhibitions, and also that you are unknowingly conforming to the deep structures guiding the preparation and consumption of the Banga soup among the Urhobo and Isoko people, the original owners of the Amiedi soup.

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