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March 2009 Newsletter

Local Memoirs of a Slave Field Culture: The Socio-Cultural Significance of *Frijol*, the African-Brazilian Easter Food Heritage in Lagos

By Alaba Simpson*

The Slave-Born Community and its Effect on the Culture of Lagos

The trans-Atlantic slave trade relating to West Africa in particular has presented opportunities whereby a vast terrain of human interaction patterns in which groups, sub-groups, and communities came to be established during the period of the enslavement of Africans. In cases where identities were lost, new forms of social identity came to be formed as the people mingled with each other on slave plantations. Specific identity labels were tagged on individuals within such community formations and these persisted while the people were in bondage. The abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade led to the reintroduction and re-absorption of the descendants of slaves into the African social system to which many of them returned upon departing the terrains of the slave fields. It is important to draw attention to the significant depiction of slave trade experiences among the people of African descent, particularly of Nigerian heritage with the typical example of the Egun “Freedom Dance” in Badagry of Lagos state (Simpson 1992, 2008). As I observed previously:

Stories of slave experiences and the later abolition of slave trade were transferred across generations to current descendants and have made it possible to have today in Badagry the popular commemorative performance called the “Freedom Dance.” The dance, which continues to serve as local depiction and reminder of the experiences of slavery even in modern times, is usually performed on important occasions and celebrations in Badagry (Simpson, 2008:11-12).

Just as “Freedom Dance” is widely celebrated among the people of Badagry as a reflection of slave experience from the Trans Atlantic slave trade period, *frijol* is noted as a major contemporary Easter related food type that was imported into Lagos from the African Brazilian community.

Group Living on Slave Fields and After: The Birth Places of *Frijol*

Concepts and practices of corporate spirit, shared beliefs, and group living have been major components of African societies throughout history. It is therefore not surprising that a notable feature of the experience of the dispersed Africans who arrived on the unfamiliar terrains and grim conditions of the slave fields in the New World was to form themselves into groups and communities. These were expected to enable them acquire some sense of belonging in a strange and strident land. Such need for human comfort and re-assurance also came to be reflected at their return, in their coming together to form a separate group on the island of Lagos. As far as the case was with the African Brazilians who settled in Lagos are concerned therefore, they came to constitute the group that was variously referred to as the “Brazilian Community,” “the Aguda,” or “Amaro.” As a group, the indigenous toponym for their settlement area on the Island of Lagos was, and still very much remains, “Popo Aguda,” which means “The Brazilian Quarters” in Yoruba parlance. Oral history accounts relating to the Diaspora settlements in Lagos have indicated that the returnees came to be truly conceived as a separate sub-group within the existing Lagos “community” and that they experienced some initial difficulties of integrating with the larger community as they marked their settlement trajectory on the island. This traditional source of information has often stressed the desire by the Diaspora group to experience a collective sense of belonging, which was couched in past records of culture related memories. Thus, they believe that such experience would serve to sustain them even as they gradually began to integrate with the Lagos community. This brought about the unfolding of different cultural practices that added poignant elements to their past and their recollections of common experiences on the slave fields, including the food culture of *frijol*.

Such cultural aspects, although commonly associated with the African Brazilians in Lagos, have come to hold important positions in the overall cultural repertoire of the people. The *Frijol* tradition was therefore reconstituted on Lagos Island by the African Brazilian community in the area. Like the *Fanti Caretta* carnival, its use has since spread beyond the geographical enclave of the Lagos island to other areas in the larger Lagos state. This has made the food type a household name in the history of the food culture in Lagos.

Recent Ethnographic Notes on Easter Celebrations

Observing what people do during the Easter period in Lagos has drawn fresh attention to the point that *frijol*, as an African Brazilian food heritage has kept alive the memory of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in this region of Nigeria. Recent ethnographic investigations concerning how time is spent during the period of Easter in the area have revealed that activities that add colour to the Easter season in the Lagos community have been increasingly dominated over the years by inputs from the African Diaspora perspective. This is particularly portrayed through the regular performance of *Fanti (Caretta) carnival* (Simpson 2007) and the Easter related communal sharing and eating of *frijol*. The latter forms the main concern of this paper. The celebration of Easter among the people of Lagos in Nigeria has thus evolved over the years to reveal what has statutorily become a seasonal observance of feasting that is built essentially around the *frijol*. Over the years, in Lagos therefore, *frijol* has come to be synonymous with Easter and continues to serve as a binding force for the promotion of social and cultural integration which cuts across Diaspora settlement issues on the island. This paper suggests the need for increased and careful documentation of the contributions made by the Diaspora community to the thriving culture of the Lagos community. Indeed, there should be resources of readily accessible information on Diaspora contributions for the important purpose of building up and promoting historical and scientific research related to Diaspora experiences in the region.

The Period of Easter

Easter is the period that immediately follows the end of the Christian observation of Lent, which usually falls between the months of March and April. Immediate post-Lent calendar dates for Easter are between the Friday that signifies the day of crucifixion of Jesus Christ, popularly referred to as “Good Friday,” followed by “Easter Sunday,” the day associated with Christ’s resurrection, and eventually culminates in the day of ascension to heaven, generally referred to as “Easter Monday.” These days characterize the season of Easter and are thus symbolic in the Christian interpretation of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Easter period in Lagos thus elicits the community’s deep and fervent beliefs in local social relations that cut across the boundaries of the Diaspora or host settlement issues as may be occasionally nuanced at ordinary levels of social relationships. Thus, *frijol*, as an Easter related food heritage of the African-Brazilian community in Lagos, has come, over time to have a

transparent and almost palpable cultural hold on the people, denoting characteristic features that cut across social, religious, and cultural borders. Its link to African-Brazilian heritage and consequently to the perceived experiences of the African forefathers on the terrains of slave fields has kept alive the memory of the trans-Atlantic slave trade among the people of Lagos. The celebration of Easter with *frijol* therefore serves as a reminder of the historical legacy of common ancestry that was typical of the condition of Africans during the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the area. Incidentally, the important position that is accorded to *frijol* during the period of Easter is very closely related to the performance of *Fanti (Caretta) carnival*, which is also a remarkable and indispensable cultural feature to the celebration of Easter in Lagos. However, while the eating of *frijol* is culturally associated particularly with the period of Easter, the performance of *Fanti (Caretta) carnival* spans the periods of Christmas and Easter. Essentially, the two cultural practices have become remarkable in the cultural history of the people in Lagos.

Recognition of Common Ancestry

It is important to note that the socio-cultural contributions of African Brazilian descendants in the Lagos area of Nigeria have been shaped by the interplay of many factors. A major influence in this regard has been the recognition, which is sometimes only cautiously admitted, that there exists a common ancestry which serves as footing for such cultural events and practices. There is therefore a combined commitment by groups and individuals in Lagos to maintain shared cultural values that are embedded in the Easter celebrations like Fanti (or 'Caretta'). The celebrations include the observance, for example, of tradition of eating *frijol*.

Scholarly acknowledgements of the food pattern in Lagos have generally treated with scant regard, the serving of *frijol* as a primary meal in the Lagos community during the Easter festival period. Rather, the literature relating to *frijol* has simply been viewed as a meal associated with Spanish and Hispanic origins and use.

The Easter season is thus very significant in the Diaspora settlement history of the people and inhabitants of Lagos and requires more attention than it is presently accorded to it.



***Frijol* dish served in Lagos
(Photograph by Isaac Adekunle Samuel).**

Food Culture: Origin, Preparation, and Significance

The preparation of *frijol* is believed in popular Lagos conception to be loaded with a flurry of activities that eventually culminate in a delightful and socially presentable meal. Based on this belief, there exists a popular saying among the people of Lagos that makes allusion to the case of the ever-busy and ceremony-conscious African Brazilian woman (*Iya Aguda*) “*Ceremony l’ on pa ‘ya Aguda*” (the Brazilian woman is very often encumbered with ceremonious details that can even be costly to her life).

The preparation of *frijol* as an Easter delicacy begins with the careful purchase of the basic ingredients that are used in its cooking. The principal ingredients are beans, coconut, and spices. The tiny, coffee coloured beans, are also known among the Yoruba, the predominant ethnic group in Lagos, as *ewa ibeji* (the traditional beans for the spiritual honouring of twins), and *ewa dudu* (black beans). The coconut is known as *agbon* in Yoruba and *Aganke* in Egun, spoken among the people of Badagry of Lagos state. Spices used include *Iyere*, *sukuni*, *kafura pelebe*, *cinnamon*, and other spices of individual choice.

As soon as the Easter season is near, those who intend to prepare *frijol*, and these are usually made up of families within compounds and private domains, as well as commercial caterers in Lagos, would begin to identify sources for the black beans and for coconut. Usually, they would go beyond the immediate providers of these main ingredients to some major market

centres in order to engage in bulk purchase. Hence, major markets in Oyingbo, Badagry, and Daleko usually are known to receive great patronage concerning the black beans and coconut during this period.



**Principal ingredients for the meal
(Photograph by Isaac Adekunle Samuel).**

Sometimes, trips are specifically made to the Badagry area, where there are abundant coconut plantations, particularly where coconut trees are being felled for building purposes around the time of Easter and freshly harvested coconuts are therefore dispersed at give-away prices. The coconuts are then de-husked, broken and diced for easy grinding, followed by eventual squeezing of the milk and consequent use with the cooked and mashed beans. The beans would have been cooked, mostly overnight, and ground into a paste form and then mixed with the coconut milk. The accompanying spices are usually tied in a white cloth of handkerchief size and dropped in the cooking mixture of beans and coconut milk. The dish is stirred from time to time until the mixture is formed and ready to serve. The spice cloth is then removed.

It is noteworthy that *frijol* is always and mandatorily served with fish. The objective here is the avoidance, or abstinence, from eating meat which is believed to be symbolic of the battered body of the crucified Jesus Christ during this holy season. Even where friends and relations around the Lagos area do not share religious affinity with the Christian celebrants, the food is dished and sent to them as love offerings during the period, bringing to mind the Muslim



**The author and a colleague collect coconuts in Badagry
(Photograph taken by Arc Otu Umoren).**

distribution of the *Sallah* meat to friends, relations, and acquaintances across religious boundaries.

Conclusion

Despite the notable contributions by African Brazilian descendants to the culture in Lagos, there is presently a dearth of ethnographic records on the area that may assist to commemorate such contributions. There is a need to record and highlight such contributions in order to build up the information system relating to the Diaspora component for which the area is richly endowed but scantily documented. The largely unreported presence of *frijol* in Nigeria, for example, particularly concerning its overwhelming use during the Easter season, coupled with its memory-refreshing aspects regarding the trans-Atlantic slave trade, have directed attention to potential areas in which the long term effects of the trans-Atlantic slave trade can be further evaluated.

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