

How to Cook Your Husband the African Way

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First published in Great Britain in 2013 by Psychology News Press, 95-97 East Road,
London N16AW.

First published in France by Albin Michel in 2000

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Translator's note

I have been very aware of the old Italian saying 'Traduttore, traditori' – translator, traitor' especially as Beyala's language is at times poetic, other times wry. I have inserted in italics a few additions which will make the text I think easier for English reader.

There are also a few cooking terms which I have had trouble with – mainly the different words for yams and messepe and ngombo. The only translation for ngombo I can find is slave. I have for now left these in the original

Once upon a time a man lived in the mountains among the animals. Cows gave him milk; sheep kept him company; birds fanned the air above his head, fluttering their many coloured feathers. Cats snuggled up to him, and on cold nights, of which there were many in the mountains, rabbits curled up at his side and made him feel cosy and warm.

The man was so happy in these mountains that he did not have the slightest interest in seeing another human being. Then, one day, when dawn broke, he found a woman on his veranda. She was looking at the rose bushes in his courtyard.

The rose bushes were blooming; their flowers were black.

“Are you Biloa,” the woman asked.

“I have no name among men,” he replied. Rather grandly.

“Odd, I was told that if I crossed the river and climbed the mountain, I’d come to the house of Biloa.”

The man looked at the woman, intensely would be an exaggeration, but he did look. Her eyes were as dark as midnight; her front teeth were gapped and she was holding a butterfly between her crimson lips.

“I don’t need anyone to share my future,” he told her. “It isn’t me.” That tone again. Self sufficient. Proud to be a loner.

“I expected you to say that,” she told him.

Then she explained herself. Ever since she was a little girl, a man came to her in her dreams. He called himself Biloa. He held her and told her she was his wife, his one and true wife. In the dream he showed her a birthmark on his left thigh. “That is how you’ll know who I am,” he told her, in the dream.

“It is not me,” the man said again. He was stubborn, as men are.

But when she first had this dream, the woman said, she had too much to do to bother with, or be bothered by, men or relationships. She had to look after her little brothers, milk the cows and feed the pigs. Still in her dream, she found time to tell him she was called Andela.

“It is not me,” the man repeated, endlessly stubborn, as men and mules are.

She knew how to find him, she explained, because she’d seen his house in her dream. And he was the man of her dreams. She loved him. She could never live without him, she belonged to him forever.

“It isn’t me,” the man repeated.

She knew he liked smoked fish, jugged hare and red mullet. She had brought some in a basket because a clever woman must always be prepared to meet the love of her life. You never knew when that might happen.

They said nothing, and stayed for a long while without speaking a word. Finally, gracefully, silkily, Andela took the lid off her basket. She had indeed come well prepared. The smell of dole?? made with meat and prawns filled the air. Its smell, her smell too, filled the man’s nostrils, troubled his thoughts, tickled his senses and, of course, titillated his each and every sinew..

“Maybe it is me,” mule man relented.

He bent down, picked the woman up in his arms, took her into his room and closed the door behind them.

That was the moment Biloa joined the human race and entered the labyrinth or, to put it more simply, the world we know and don’t know – with its laws, its rights, its wrongs, its joys and its terrors.

Dole

1 kilo of pre washed dole –

1 kg ox

250 gms fresh prawns

2 onions

4 cloves garlic

3 nicely ripe tomatoes –

500 – 600 gms peanuts

¼ litre palm oil –

Salt – pepper

The night before dunk the peanuts in cold water

In the morning peel the peanuts.

Put them in the mixer

Cut the meat in small pieces. Wash them

Wash and shell the prawns

Mince small the onions and garlic,

Stick the tomatoes in boiling water, peel and crush them

Brown the meat with the palm oil.

Add the garlic and half the minced onion, salt and pepper and brown it

Add the tomatoes. Cook for 5 minutes

Add the dole. Stir with a wooden spoon

Cook for 45 minutes adding a little water.

In a bowl, dilute the mashed peanuts. Then pour them over the dole. Stir. Add the prawns

Cook for 30 minutes, stirring from time to time to make sure the D does not stick to the saucepan

In a frying pan, brown the rest of the palm oil with the rest of the onions.

Pour this mixture on the dole. Stir, Leave to simmer for 10 minutes

Serve the dole warm with batons of cassava

Chapter 1

I'm writing at a time when human beings are too busy to give themselves time to be fruitful and multiply. We're too distracted, too attracted by dissipation and at the mercy of excitement and sheer madness. Food is the greatest problem because people have come to fear that eating is a sin. The fat will never be pure.

Let me tell you something about myself. As I'm sharing this slice of my life with you – you see I can't avoid food images, a slice of cake, a slice of ham, a slice of life.

I left my country because there is a time to lose oneself and a time to find oneself, a time to leave and a time to find one's roots.

My roots are black. I'm a black woman, but being away from my roots has confused me. Let me be honest. I embraced dissipation. I abandoned myself to it as you abandon yourself to a heavy fog. Your eyes may be wide open but you only see murk. I look at the sky and do as the whites do, because I think they have fate on their side. And because I believe they have a better understanding of what is right and wrong, of what is just and unjust, of what should be punished and what should be forgiven.

Of how far to go. Of when to stop.

I don't know when I turned from ebony to ivory, but I do know that I smear my hair with a product called White Glow. Guess what it does.

I am, as I said, not sure when I became white. I now smear my skin with Venus de Milo and other cosmetics made for whites. That isn't the end of it, though. Because to be white you've got to be thin. I've tortured my body to make it as small as possible. So now, I don't have any breasts and my thighs are flat geometries - all because the mirror of the world requires that I make my body pleasing to white men. A beautiful woman is flat as a pancake, thin as a rake or a slice of Melba toast. Melba toast snaps easily. Crackle crackle.

I measure my life by my waist, *unlike Prufrock who used coffee spoons.*

And you could say it works. On the beach, I see it does, as Sun worshippers on hot sands breathe hotly when they look at my body. They sweat at the sight of me. I don't have ripe breasts like the much sung pomegranates of the Song of Solomon and no tits are a la

mode. I smile in titless triumph though I also have a job cleaning the toilets the beach owners provide in the forlorn hope that bathers will not piss in the sea.

Let me describe the men who use them – and none of them are much like Solomon the harem lord, who managed to have 600 wives and still survive and appear wise.

First there are the beautiful old men who think they know all the ways of the world and of women and men. They promise to teach you the galaxy of exotic and erotic tricks. Follow me girl and I'll show you fucking! But you learn nothing from them because long before they stop talking, they clamber on top of you hoping that what *you English call a shag fest* will shield them from the ravages of time.

There are the fat men, who stink of shit and piss but they don't see that. The clientele at the toilet are trying to forget how podgy their bodies are. Generously, they offer you the chance to explore their flabby manhood. So tempting.

Women come to the toilets too – women with fat or thin legs, rich women, poor women who seem to hold the umbilical cord of the universe in their mouths. They say nothing because they seem to suggest, with an air of mystery, that you share their fate.

I don't know when I became white because that's the way of time. We live in time and time passes us by, the days pile up, one day fades and shades into the next and you lose all sense of the tyranny of time. One day is fine, the next is grey and we're white women, black women as the moments of summer and moments of winter trickle by. We keep our eyes fixed on the ground to avoid the dog shit on the pavement. Sometimes if I lift my eyes up and spot some yellow in the clouds and even some black in the sun.

Time passes, much time is to come, and we only care about the time that is to come and what it will bring. We live for our future. Time past is time forgotten.

Our hopes for the future make us sweat in gyms, steam in saunas, lard our skins with oils, unguents and ointments so that we can catch men even though, of course, the male is a dog. Men pant with desire and, when one of them manages to ensnare one of us – a fit girl whose tits and arse fit the current fashion - they show her off at top dog parties. For their friends to ogle.

“You know my new woman, Top totty. Top model,” the man boasts, more peacock than mule now. He might as well carry a banner before him with a phallus rampant.

I must be just, for women have a passion for justice, and admit that I've known moments of exaltation too. Moments when having a new lover makes the lilacs bloom blue and I've felt as happy as a rabbit chomping on a juicy carrot.

But later the carrots of love go mouldy. My lovers shatter my dreams, as they do, because love is like time, it comes and it goes. Then I start to frown and speak with bitterness .

“Bastard, liar, fake, deceiver.” I tremble as I say the words.

The man in front of me is no longer the man I love but a lying devil, with a forked tongue, a forked tail, as well as the total Satan – clogs, horns, the claws of a leopard, every mark of the lying creep.

I slam the door. “Die shit head.”

Then I let despair overwhelm me and wail like a fox in a trap. I lick my wounds.

But only for a time. Time heals all wounds though it doesn't really wound all heels. If only. You might as well live.

Then I start to forget. I forget because time passes, because there's another day, another man, another round of the eternal dance. One day a thing is; the next it isn't, the will of the wisps of life.

My mother, may her soul rest in peace, would have asked me. “Did you give him a good time in bed?”

And then, and just as crucial, “Did you keep house well for him?”

What follows is her wisdom and, also, the deep wisdom of women. “Did you make him the best food?”

She'd take me into her arms to protect me and impart the profound truth. “A good ngombo made with paprika will make you see things straight.”

That is true - but I didn't know it then.

Paprika Ngombo

1 kg ngombo

1 soup spoon paprika

1 small box peeled tomatoes

1 onion

3 cloves garlic

3 soup spoons of palm oil

Salt and pepper

Light the oven

Uncumber the ngombos of their heads and tails.

Mince fine the onions and garlic

In a saucepan brown the onion and garlic in palm oil

Add the peeled tomatoes, stirring so as to crush them, Simmer for 5 minutes

Add and mix in the salt pepper and paprika

In an oven dish, put half the sauce. Place the ngombo on top. Cover them with the rest of the sauce.

Cook for 30 minutes in the oven, adding a little water if necessary for the sauce

Serve warm.

Chapter 2

I don't know when I turned white but all the knowledge I ever had has deserted me. I couldn't even predict my own thoughts. They bend or balloon to fit the latest clichés which decree what's beautiful even though I don't really agree with them. It's a question of common sense which my parents had so much trouble instilling in me. It's hard to remember that because daylight and twilight both cast shadows.

I worry that I don't know how to help a sheep lie down or in what direction to bury the dead so that they will awake in the dark

I am so perturbed because I don't seem to have fixed points to steer by so that my eyes sometimes don't perceive the world properly. I am confused.

Sometimes I'm joyful when I should feel sad, sometimes proud when I should feel humble.

Sometimes, I'm ashamed to say, I'm mean when it would be better to be generous

I remember a summer's day. Sweltering heat. A jumble of smells rises from the town. People on the pavements, coming and going, flixing and fluxing, bumping into each other in the human swarm. The metros spew out humanoids who react like dogs to a whistle. Shop doors open and shut. Cars splutter gunk, junk, fumes, noise fouling the air. I linger in front of the fancy shop windows. I'm broke. I go into a café; the dark is nice, soothing on the eyes.

Some blokes are standing at the bar, talking. When they see me, they dwindle into silence, a silence as deep as that of the tomb. Hungry looks follow me as I sit down at the back. I ask for a tea without sugar. The men start to talk once more but still spy me out. Even the coffee man who has hairy arms seems like a cop. A man raises his glass. Maybe he's after the blonde woman sitting two tables down. No such luck. He's heading in my direction. With authority, he pulls out the chair next to mine. He's not so bad looking but his teeth would make a wart hog flee

"May I?"

"You may not", I say because of his dilapidated teeth

“You don’t like white boys?” As he asks the question, his face contorts into a nasty sneer but he carries on regardless.

“You’re used to the big cocks of black boys, I expect.”

I lower my eyes. It’s not my destiny to fix the white man’s complexes, his phallic insecurity. It’s not my job to tell him that human beings have since time immemorial bestowed on each other the title of bad lover. He goes back to his mates and persists in looking at me now like some toff would sneer down at the workers. I sip my tea which tastes of ash, thinking if only he’d had decent teeth.

Then I think. Something’s not right with the world. Something is rotten – and not just in the state of Denmark. Why are human beings jealous? Why does there always have to be some detail, shadow, blot on the landscape?

“How do you manage to stay so thin,” the blonde woman asks me suddenly

I hadn’t seen this coming. I turn round and look into her eyes because the answer to this question has also been clear since time immemorial.

I don’t do anything, I say. But I think ‘you’re so thick you should be put in the stocks’.

“You don’t follow a diet?”

“The very opposite.”

And I turn the screw on her by giving her the full spec on the dishes I’ve loved since I was a born – coq au vin, washed down with a nice Beaujolais, shoulder of lamb with black mushrooms, veal with fresh cream mutton, couscous the Tunisian way. I add to my list till I see two tears form in his eyes

“As you can see dear it’s a matter of one’s constitution.”

“So it would seem,” she says thoughtfully, “I’m fat though I eat nothing.”

My attack has left her floundering. I pay the bill in the midst of all this couldn’t care less.. I don’t exist any more not even for the man with crummy teeth, I might as well have melted into the wall. I go outside and muddle into the street. It’s bright, noisy, all consuming and it consumes me.

Sun everywhere. Sun slaps down on the streets, flashes on the buildings. The sunlight sharpens my sense of irritation.

I see the blonde woman. She's in the butchers and buying her dinner. Her long long nails point at the beef, the veal, the pork, all hanging like frocks in a wardrobe. So the woman eats nothing and gets fat eating nothing, I smile meanly.

Who does she think she's kidding?

Childhood memories. In this heat, in these dog days, my mother would have been at home in front of her oven.

"No twiddling your thumbs. The chicken with lime must be ready for tonight," she'd have said.

She'd have lifted the lid of the pot and released clouds of steam. The hissing mist would have covered her head to toe. Quick pour some water before it sticks. She'd have wiped the sweat from her face with her forearm. She'd have bent down and breathed on the coals to get the fire going. She'd have stuck her head out of the little window to get her breath back. She'd have been dripping wet and covered in ash

These childhood memories make their way into my heart.

I get to the old building where I live. The stairs groan as I walk up. Soon it will be dinner time, then time for people to hold each other in their arms. I snack on three grated carrots while looking at the television because my meal is no more important than the wind billowing through wild grasses. And while car headlights sweep across the windows, my mother leaps into my mind. *The English poet Craig Raine speaks of the onion memory but my memories are warmer, embers in my neurons.*

Behind our closed doors – because the night belongs to spirits – mother clears the table and piles the plates up in the kitchen.

"To each day its troubles. We'll do the dishes tomorrow,"

Then she wanders around from one end of the house to the other, lost in her thoughts. I wonder, is her back hurting? She stays upright, taut as a wire. There's always something that needs doing, another chore that she's forgotten.

"A woman's work is never done," she has the habit of saying, "in the house." She opens a drawer or peers into the wardrobe unless she wants to start to make tomorrow's dinner

I am a white negro woman and food poisons my powers of seduction. I make my body sing by peeling my buttocks, by minimizing my breasts, convinced that if I make a martyr

of my stomach, I'll win a great prize. The pores of my trim body will exude divine sensuality

Till the day comes when I truly realize the old wisdom - there is a time to leave, a time to find oneself again, a time to lose oneself and a time to get back to one's roots

Chicken with lime

1 free range chicken cut into 8 pieces

1 kilo limes

6 large onions

2 cloves garlic

4 tomatoes

1 coffee spoon flour

Oil

3 soup spoons peanut oil

1 branch of thyme and some laurel leaves

Salt

Pepper

The evening before, make a marinade of the juice of the limes, chopped onions, the crushed garlic, the thyme and laurel. Add the chicken. Marinade all night

The next day, peel the tomatoes, put them in the mixer

Brown the chicken in oil with the onions and garlic. Salt and pepper.

Add the tomatoes. Simmer for 10 minutes using a wooden spoon

Add the marinade

Dilute the flour in a little water. Add it to the ingredients

Stir and add 2 glasses of water

Cook on a low heat for 30 minutes

Serve with rice made the African way.