Perfecting Habit: Guyana Callaloo and the Migration of "Poor People's Food" an Interview with Evelyn London

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PERFECTING HABIT
Guyana Callaloo and the Migration of "Poor People's Food"
An Interview with Evelyn London

by Shona N. Jackson

This interview was conducted July 27, 2006, via telephone between College Station, Texas, and Bloomfield, New Jersey.

JACKSON: I'll start with this "Callaloo Jumble" recipe in the Guyana cookbook.[1] I remember that on Fridays, you used to make hamburgers for the kids and for the adults, you made salt fish with spinach and sometimes that nasty caryla.[2] [*Laughter*] I wondered if your saltfish and spinach recipe was a variation of this callaloo recipe.

LONDON: I saw that recipe, but that is something different.[3] On Fridays in Guyana and even here [New Jersey] we never went to the market to purchase things to cook. We used whatever was available at home. Also, on Fridays, during Lent and out of habit, I wouldn't cook meat but a lot of fish, either fresh or salted. Saturdays and Sundays were the big days for cooking.

JACKSON: And shopping?

LONDON: Yes. You shopped on Saturday and so you would have a nice meat for Saturday and a nice meat for Sunday. And the rest of the week you buy, you know, whatever you could afford. Fridays is always like cook up rice and some greens and some shrimp or codfish or whatever you've got. Sometimes we didn't even eat meat, we'd eat porridge. Usually, at the end of the week you have leftover scraps and you use that. There wasn't a real recipe. You just cooked whatever you had money to buy. Sometimes you just had money to buy some salt fish and some callaloo and that's what you use for that day. It was poor people's food.

JACKSON: When would this have been?

LONDON: Well, when I was growing up. That's what my mom used to cook.

JACKSON: What was her job?

LONDON: She worked with people doing washing: washing and ironing clothes.

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JACKSON: Were a lot of people like her in terms of their employment?

LONDON: Yes, that's what they had to do, you know? You had children, you had to be home to look after them, and so, that was the easiest thing. You go and pick up the clothes on Monday and wash them and have them back by Thursday or Friday.

JACKSON: And this was well before Independence?

LONDON: Yes, yes, yes. That was long before Burnham came into power.[4]

JACKSON: So when did you start to keep your household?

LONDON: When I got married in 1963.

JACKSON: And were things any better then?

LONDON: Well, I only lived in Georgetown, Guyana, for one year after I was married. I went to live in the Rupununi in 1964 and stayed there until 1966 when I came to the [United] States. That time was good for me because, you know, in the Rupununi you had the means to eat whatever you want.[5]

JACKSON: So things were better, economically, for you in the Rupununi.

LONDON: Yes, for me because it was a meat place. They used to slaughter the meat that would be sent to other places inside and outside of Guyana. You had all the ranchers, like the Melvilles, and others. They used to slaughter in the night, from about midnight to four or five o'clock in the morning and then they would take the meat to Georgetown or Trinidad or wherever. And if something happened and the plane couldn't come, then the meat had to be given away because there was no wide scale refrigeration. Only those who could afford to, and the hospital, had fridges or freezers.[6]

JACKSON: What about other people who lived there, the aboriginal inhabitants?

LONDON: Well, the Amerindians would fish and they would eat a lot of meat or they would catch a lot of wild meat, but they were poor, too. They would eat whatever they had. When they had meat, they would "tasso" it. When that meat was given away by the ranchers, the Amerindians took it and then they would spend all night salting it and then they'd hang it out to dry on lines like clothes. They'd leave it out there like three or four days to dry it, and then they'd stack it in storage. So when they were ready to cook it, they'd soak it, and it would come back to what they wanted; and then they'd cook it. They used to do that regularly.

JACKSON: Did you eat that meat or did you always have fresh meat?

LONDON: No, I had fresh meat because I had a refrigerator.

JACKSON: Because of Uncle Basil's job?[7]

LONDON: Yes, we were living in government houses, so we had refrigerators.

JACKSON: When you were there, would you say their economic situation was better than for example, yours growing up with your mom in Georgetown?

LONDON: No. They were poor people and many weren't working anywhere. They just lived and would sell what they had, you know. They would plant things and sell them. They had chickens and cattle that they would mine and sell and that's how they lived. Some of them were working for the government, you know, doing things like cleaning up or driving, and things like that. Those were in a good position. But the others were living just like they normally lived up to now.

JACKSON: Do you know if they had a dish that was similar to the callaloo you made with leftovers?

LONDON: I don't really know their foods very well. All I remember is that they used to barbecue food; they would cook food on a fireplace outside. They'd build a fire outside on sticks and they would cook the meat or chicken. I don't about greens and things like that. What I do remember is not the greens but something else. The same thing we call yogurt here now, I saw that there. The Amerindians used to make it, and they called it "qualiad." They used to make it with milk and I would not eat it because it was so different but when we were leaving, several people were invited to dinner and we had it with fruit for dessert. I don't know how they made it but it was the same as yogurt here, except it's refined here.

JACKSON: Now you say that callaloo itself was what you'd call poor people's food.

LONDON: It wasn't poor people's food, it was food. In those days we just thought that was normal. We'd eat a lot of greens; callaloo, boulanger, okra, squash, pumpkin, bora. Every day was a different green.[8]

JACKSON: Did you grow the greens yourself or did you have to go to the market?

LONDON: Some you grew yourself, and some you bought at the market. And in those days they were cheap and plentiful.

JACKSON: Now I know you went back recently for a family reunion. How is the price of the vegetables now compared to when you left in the sixties and even before?

LONDON: Horrible. I couldn't believe it. I can't understand the money ratio.

JACKSON: The current exchange rate is about two hundred Guyana dollars to one U.S. dollar?

LONDON: Yes. When I was young in Guyana, you could buy a bunch of bora for, you know, fifty cents or a dollar. If I go to the store here [New Jersey] to buy bora and I pay fifty cents a pound, and I buy three pounds, it's only $1.50. But when I go to Guyana and buy a bunch of bora, they charge you between two to five hundred dollars in Guyana money. They say it's cheaper there but to me, five hundred dollars is still five hundred dollars. And in the States you won't pay no five hundred dollars for a bunch of bora. When we left there in the 1960s, you could still go into the market and buy a bunch of bora for fifty cents. Now, there is a vast difference in price, a two hundred percent difference. I can't get it. Everything is different. You can get here now everything they have there but when you look at the price, $1,000 for this, $1,000 for that, it's unreasonable. I can't get it.

JACKSON: Now when you came here could you find callaloo itself?

LONDON: No, at that time they had no callaloo. When I came here, I lived in East Orange first and on Central Avenue you could go to the fish market and everything was reasonable and plentiful. When I came here, those fish markets never used to sell the fish head. When people bought fish they would say take the head off so the fishmongers kept them in containers by the door and they were free. But not now, they don't do that anymore. Now they're selling it because people are buying. So I guess we brought our culture here, and it has changed the market. Lots of things that they never used to sell, they are selling. That's how they started selling blood and the things for the black pudding, and how they started selling oxtail. They never had those things when I came here but they started carrying them by the late seventies or early eighties.

JACKSON: So you'd say as the West Indian population grew . . .

LONDON: Yes, as the Caribbean population grew into every area and they started getting wise and bringing and selling those things.

JACKSON: What about the saltfish. When you buy it here in the States, it's more expensive now than it used to be in Guyana?

LONDON: Oh yes, it is. Cod fish is a luxury now. When I came here, saltfish wasn't something that you could get just anywhere. I used to take the bus to 42nd street [New York City] to get plantain and things like that. In New Jersey they didn't sell those things, but they did in New York because there was always a bigger West Indian community there.

JACKSON: And can you find the callaloo leaf in the States or do you still use spinach?

LONDON: Yes, you can get callaloo now. The West Indian store that I buy from on Orange Street in Bloomfield sells it during the summertime. The owner gets it shipped from Guyana and you get it fresh.

JACKSON: What's the difference between the callaloo leaf and the spinach leaf?

LONDON: Oh, it's different; it's different. The callaloo leaf is a shiny, thick, succulent leaf, even the stems. That's why it's called "thick leaf" callaloo.

JACKSON: How large is the leaf?

LONDON: Well it depends. If you've got a good plant and you fertilize it a lot, it may grow maybe as big as your palm, not bigger than that. The eddo and the dasheen leaves are even bigger.

JACKSON: So do you buy callaloo or do you just use the American spinach?

LONDON: I use both. When I go to the store, if they have callaloo, I'll buy it but the spinach is easier to store and I never use the frozen kind.

JACKSON: There's a Jamaican company that sells callaloo in can.

LONDON: They say it's callaloo, but I don't believe it's the same thing. What the Jamaicans call callaloo is something different from what we call callaloo, just like what they call pepper pot is something different than what we call pepper pot. What they call pepper pot is something like a soup while ours is a dark, sweet meat dish with casareep which comes from the Amerindians. In Guyana we used to make a crab or callaloo soup with crab and dasheen or eddo leaves, okra, shrimp, and saltbeef. You could put anything in it. Here, though, they call it gumbo. We made it on Sundays.

JACKSON: Was crab expensive?

LONDON: Crab was reasonable in Guyana. It had its season and you could afford to buy it. In a really rainy season you would see them marching, you know. You could buy them in the market but if you lived in the country, you could dig them up yourself.

JACKSON: How did you make the soup?

LONDON: You would put your onions, your tomatoes, and fry them up with salt beef. The dasheen leaves had to be put in and fried up first because they were big, hard leaves. Then you could put in your eddoes and other things and let them cook. At the end, you put in the crab and shrimp, you know, almost at the last.

JACKSON: How long did it take to make?

LONDON: Not long. About an hour or two.

JACKSON: So where do you think they got this "Callaloo Jumble" recipe from?

LONDON: I don't know. I just think they made that up. [*Laughter*] This recipe has salt fish, garlic, celery, onion, bacon, pork, prawns but I never knew it. Our recipes are things you make up as you go along, you know? Most of the things we made were not recipes that anybody had. They just would make things up as we go along.

JACKSON: Was it just what you could afford?

LONDON: Yes, and sometime you might try something and then it became a recipe.

JACKSON: So it's not the callaloo soup and it's not the leftover callaloo dish, it's just something different?

LONDON: Yes. It's something that they made up. In those days we didn't used to cook from no recipe and the older people knew how to cook and they would cook things as they were taught. People just tried things out and after a while, they perfected them and they became recipes.

NOTES

1. Carnegie School of Home Economics. *What's Cooking in Guyana*. Universal Development Company. Georgetown, Guyana, 1994.
2. Caryla is a vegetable with a bitter taste.
3. Evelyn London is the interviewer's aunt with whom she lived in New Jersey between 1989 and 1992.
4. Linden Forbes Sampson Burnham led Guyana from 1964 until his death in 1985.
5. The Rupununi is an area in the southeastern portion of Guyana which is home to many different native peoples.
6. The Melvilles were one of the largest ranchers in the Rupununi.
7. Basil London, Ms. London's husband, served as a medical doctor in the Rupununi.
8. Bora is akin to a yard-length string bean; boulanger is eggplant.