

Anani Loved Sweet Potatoes

Fernando Conceição, Ph.D.

Researcher and Full Professor at Federal University of Bahia, Brazil

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Over time our relationship had become so unceremonious that on a visit made by Anani Dzidzienyo to Salvador, in 2009, we disputed which of us would get the biggest piece of the sweet potato that was part of the dish served at lunch. He had never visited the restaurant, located in the popular neighborhood of Saúde, part of the Historic City Center of Bahia's capital. City, to which Anani (let me refer to him by his first name) first came in 1970, residing there for almost a year.

The meal we were about to eat, a typical dish from Salvador and the region known as Recôncavo Baiano, was called "Cozido" (*coozeedo*). It is made of meat, savory beef and pork, chops, bacon, and smoked sausages. After seasoning, the meats and by-products are stuffed and cooked with water filled until the middle of the pan, a variety of vegetables is added during fifteen to twenty minutes to the cooking broth. Black potatoes, carrots, plantains, chayote, okra, gherkin, scarlet eggplant, pumpkin, cabbage, kale, and sweet potatoes.

Anani was on a quick visit through Salvador. He got in touch and I made an invitation to lunch at 1 pm. I took a good partner with me: Bartolomeu Dias Cruz, president of Omi-Dùdú - Center for the Rescue and Preservation of Afro-Brazilian Culture. Lively conversation and also a lot of laughter could be heard at the table. While we waited for the dish, I asked a waitress for Anani to try three doses of mashed ginger. This is an alcoholic drink made with cachaça, horseradish, ginger, and a little bit of sugar. He sipped his dose. He liked it. The cold beer came next.

I and Anani met for the first time in 1994. I had received a Fulbright scholarship for a three-month exchange, giving lectures at Northeastern United States Universities, stretched to Maryland and Howard State University, in Washington, D.C.

The famous Brazilianist Thomas Skidmore (1932-2016), at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, helped me with accommodation asking a disciple, then a Ph.D. student named Walter Dávila, to accommodate me for a few days. Skidmore organized a lecture for me at the Brown University Brazilian Initiative, to discuss the situation of racism in Brazil. Anani, Skidmore's brotherly friend, attended. Then Anani invited me to participate in a class at the Department of Africana Studies at Brown, which he coordinated.

Thereafter, we were always in touch. The last time we chatted, in an email message sent from his iPad at 7:44 pm on Sunday 17/09/2019, he answers my concerns in the following terms:

Dear Fernando,

Many thanks for your note and concerns. I have not retired. I was on medical leave during the first semester, but I have been back since January.

I am moving along on the health front.

How are you and your family?

My warm greetings to all of you.

Later,

Anani

I was on the American East Coast in the harsh winter of 2011. Once again, with his generosity, Anani organized a new lecture for me to speak to his students and colleagues at Brown University.

The theme was the timeliness of a Brazil that, at that time, seemed to meet a prosperous future in economic terms. That was before the 2008 mortgage crisis, which started in the United States, collapsed late on Brazilians, due to governmental misdirections. It is the Afro-Brazilian population that suffers the most to this day.

When I installed myself in 1998, now as a visiting scholar at New York University, in Manhattan, where Anani lived with his family, we even went together for the premiere of “Beloved”, a film by Jonathan Demme based on a novel by Toni Morrison.

It was at an alternative cinema on the Upper West Side. The lobby was packed, mostly with African-American spectators, almost all of them with clothes, costumes, necklaces, and headdresses that reminded them of an idea of an ancestral Africa.

Always well-humored, in his usual costume - pants and a long-sleeved shirt - Anani did not miss the opportunity to comment. Those black Americans looked more African than he, a native African born in Ghana in 1941. With sarcasm, he observed: there in that busy and colorful lobby was the photograph of an idyllic Africa, already surpassed by the reality of the times. Contemporary Africa is quite complex. Even for the understanding of a native African whose job is to reflect on such complexities. The real Africa most Americans, including African Americans, are almost completely unaware of.

Anani, who wrote his first comparative essay on the situation of blacks in Brazilian society - The position of blacks in Brazilian society - after leaving Salvador in 1971, became in the following decades a bridge between Brazil, the United States, and the African continent.

Speaking good Portuguese, which he learned as a doctoral student at University of Essex (UK), he came and went to the country colonized by the Portuguese in the South American tropics. The last time, he came at the invitation of the Brazilian Senate, in partnership with Ipeafro, in 2015. For two weeks he was fulfilling an agenda of official activities between Brasília, Brazil's capital, and Rio de Janeiro. He took the opportunity to give a quick visit to Salvador, as he always did.

On that occasion, I prepared a dinner especially for him at my house. He arrived with a multicolored "capulana" strip, a gift he had brought from his native country. He informed that he had just spent a few months in Ghana visiting his village and his relatives in an emotional dive. This time I served another type of dish, but we remember our dispute over the sweet potato from the "Cozido" years ago. Ah, the sweet potato! It certainly brought us olfactory, tasting, and affective memories from our ancestors.

Everything was solved by dividing the delicacy into three equal parts for the three diners. We called the waitress and ordered yet another sweet potato. Anani Dzidzienyo, who died of cancer this October 2020, returned to the land, as we will all return, from where the disputed delicacy of that "Cozido" comes from.

Fernando Conceição.
e-mail: fernconc@ufba.br
www.fernandoconceicao.com