More than just a fritter: Acarajé as edible emblem of Afro-Brazilian diaspora.

Fiona Frank

Written August 2025 as part of the Kings College London Masters in Global Cultures: for the module 'Connecting Cultures'.

You go as prisoners
Enslaved by bonds of chain
But still….in your thoughts
You're free

And in that moment,
And in that day
You grip on to something,
You won't let it go

This, this beanball
This fritter…
Is a piece of home
And in that moment,
You triumph
Over all evil.
You succeed…
In being free.

And in that hour
Again in that moment
When the first taste of Acarajé touches your lips….
Strength and salvation arrive
And victory over bondage is declared……
Come and eat Akara – 'Acarajé'!

Ozoz Sokoh (2010). (extract)

When Canada based, Nigerian author, poet and 'food explorer' Ozoz Sokoh heard about Acarajé - the Brazilian ground black-eyed pea dish, fried in Dende oil, she immediately associated it with the taste of her homeland, Nigeria, where the same dish is called 'Acara'. But for Sokoh, the nostalgic association of taste immediately fades to the realisation that the fact that this dish is available in Brazil is entirely due to the transatlantic slave trade: so she was moved to write the poem, and a longer blog about her discomfort. (Sokoh 2021).

I visited Brazil, arriving in late 2023, mainly to follow an Amazonian story (that of the murders of journalist Dom Phillips and Indigenous expert Bruno Pereira (a story told eloquently in a six part podcast by Tom Phillips for the Guardian, Phillips 2025). But when I arrived in Salvador in December, when the city was preparing for Christmas, It was impossible not to notice the Afro-Brazilian sounds, colours, and rhythms, and the 'Baianas',

women dressed in big white dresses with large headdresses, who were selling deep fried food that was all new to me. I realised then that Brazil was more than Amazonia, and that there was a lot to be learned about Afro-Brazilian history.

As Africanist scholar and activist Danielle Boaz tells us: “Brazil is a nation with strong African roots. During the Atlantic slave trade, more than 4.8 million enslaved Africans disembarked in Brazil. This number, which was higher than that of any other colony, represented approximately 45% of all the enslaved Africans who landed in the Americas. Today, people of African descent comprise slightly more than 50% of the population of Brazil and Brazil has the largest population of people of African descent outside of the African continent. Salvador da Bahia, a city in the northeast which served as Brazil’s first capital, is considered to be the second largest predominantly Black city in the world, smaller only than Lagos, Nigeria.” (Boaz 2022).

During an Afro-Brazilian History tour of Salvador with a local guide we met some of the Baianas de Acarajé in Salvador, and learned more about how the selling of acarajé – a fritter made of ground black-eyed peas – dated back to the first West Africans who were brought by force to Brazil on the slave ships.

In this paper I will tell the deeper story behind this innocent-looking street food. Beginning with an introduction to how food in many diasporic contexts has been shown to embody memory, nostalgia and identity, I will show how acarajé embodies the Afro-Brazilian diasporic memory, strengthens diasporic connection, and continues to represent a symbol of resistance, as much now as during the days of slavery. I will show how the descendents of the enslaved women who sold acarajé to buy their way out of slavery have organised in order to protect its connection to their remembered past and to resist attempts to sever these ties And finally I will examine a small number of contemporary online recipe sites listing Acarajé, and show that in some cases, online recipe sites can be a location where considerable attention is paid to the diasporic history, memory, and culture associated with Acarajé.

An article in the first edition of the journal ‘Diaspora’ by political scientist William Safran includes six key features to define diasporas: “a shared history of dispersal; myths and memories of the homeland; a sense of alienation in the host country; a desire for eventual return; ongoing support for the homeland; and a collective identity.” (Safran 1991 cited in Bela & Mierina 2025 p.5). Although others (including social scientist and Diaspora scholar Robin Cohen (2008) have added to this list and have been clear that not all the features need to be present in order for a group to be considered a diaspora, most discussions of diasporic groups refer to Safran as a key source.

Cohen, in a seminar about the changing idea of homeland and home in Diaspora, points out that no less than three of Safran’s conditions refer to the ‘homeland’. He goes on to discuss the ‘solid/tactile, liquid, or ‘soft/ductile’ ideas of homeland, and suggests that the ‘soft’ idea of home can be met by food.

“the “soft” version [of homeland] is not liquid and it's not solid but it is somewhere between the two, so you could you have some symbolic elements of home, that are real but they are

not necessarily associated with the “blood and soil elements” of the solid version of homeland. So, to give you some examples .... [you may have] symbolic objects that remind you of home, that are nostalgic of home so you may have food that you carry from home, recipes, cuisine, you may have poems, you may have songs, you have music, you may have stories that are narrated, an “orature” as opposed to a literature. So that helps understand the idea of home without necessarily that being a particularly clear territorial version of home”. (Cohen 2021)

Many writers working on a range of diaspora communities illustrate how food can slake the nostalgic longing for ‘home’.

As part of oral history research with Tunisians living in Italy, cultural historian Gabriele Proglio found many respondents used the Tunisian-Arab word “ghurba” to define their condition of being in diaspora – and expressed feelings which must have been very like those of the enslaved people from West Africa who had been taken to Brazil. Ghurba, he writes, “is used for describing the situation of being a foreigner, migrant, illegal, invisible in a land away from home. For this reason, it evokes a state of abandonment, loneliness, isolation but also it is used for yearning a reconnection and socialization with an idea of community based on memories of the past in Tunisia.” One informant told him “Ghurba is a tightrope around an emptiness that inhabits the chest, and which cannot be filled by anything. It is the condition of one who is elsewhere and remains anchored to a lying past, which no longer exists and perhaps never was.”

Proglio goes on to suggest that “Cooking some dishes of the past is the powerful antidote to ghurba: these plates bring the family together around the table, feeding the hunger for a past lost and a future never found.”

Vera Chok uses hunger as a metaphor for her nostalgia for home, saying: “It is Malaysia that I dream of, a land of coconut trees and equatorial heat, with its history of Malay kingdoms and a colonial legacy of Portuguese, Dutch then British rule. My nostalgia is for the mountains, seas and smells of this South East Asian country. My mouth is hungry for the shapes and sounds of Malaysia.” (Chok 2016)

Writing about her work with South Asian women in Huddersfield, oral historian Razia Parveen found that her informants express the same sentiments: “It is nostalgia, that sense of romance and loss, which makes the individual in diaspora want to recreate a small part of home 'out of place' through culinary practice. ... The connection between food and the past (or more specifically nostalgia) is intrinsic to the reverence surrounding these recipes. The value of these dishes works as one communal thought in the nostalgic memories of a group of people. Culinary practice becomes a kind of cultural tissue that binds a community together” (Parveen, 2016)

Several of Parveen’s informants were able to bring with them the actual tools used by their families back in Pakistan to make these recipes:

“Many first-generation women carried grinding stones with them [on their journey to the UK] and passed them on to the next generation” (ibid).

The 5.5 million west Africans who were transported to Brazil between 1540 and the 1860s (Brazil LAB, nd) were not of course able to physically bring their 'grinding stones' with them. The brutal reality of the Atlantic slave trade meant that people were brought from West Africa to Brazil as mere objects: bodies, torn from everything they were surrounded with in their own communities - their families, work, history, language, poetry, art, culture, and food. Archaeologist and anthropologist Dan Hicks in his excellent study of the Benin Bronzes, 'The Brutish Museums', cites author, poet and former President of the Regional Council of Martinique, Aimé Césaire, who puts it eloquently: "I am talking about millions of men torn away from their gods, their land, their traditions, their life: torn from life, from dance, from knowledge." (Césaire, 1955 cited in Hicks, 2020 p.7).

But these millions of men (actually, millions of PEOPLE – many were women and children) torn from their roots, were still able to bring with them their memories, their culture and their learning. As American anthropologist Sidney W Mintz wrote: "The millions of Africans who were dragged to the New World were not blank slates upon which European civilizations would write at will. They were people with complex social, political and religious systems of their own. By forced transportation and incessant violence slavery was able to interdict the transfer of those systems as systems, none could be carried intact across the sea. But it could not crush the intellects, habits of mind, and spirits of its victims. They survived in spite of everything, their children survived and in them survived Africa." (Mintz 1990, cited in Carney 2021 p1)

And their survival included reproducing their former agricultural and culinary practices, as far as they could, in their new setting. Talking here about North America, geographer Judith A Carney cites the ideas of Sidney Mintz and Richard Price who argue that "Slaves survived the brutal and dehumanising experience of bondage by developing hybrid cultures within a setting where plantation owners exercised an absolute monopoly of power." (Carney, ibid, p3).

We know that in Brazil from at least the 1600s enslaved people were allowed to grow food for themselves on 'provision gardens' . As Carney notes: A description of Brazil under Dutch administration in 1647-48 recorded that may of the plantation slaves had 'little pieces of land on which, during the limited time they have for rest (after a twelve-hour day) they sow peas, beans, millets and maize".(Carney, ibid, p174).

It is not clear where the enslaved people obtained the seeds to grow the foods from home. Carney suggests that requests could have been made of sailors or plantation owners to ask for specific seeds. There are also stories of captured women bringing seeds over to the Americas in their hair (eg Carney 2004).

Carney expands on the idea of gardens as being 'survival' work, and suggests that, according with Cohen's theories, these gardens were reconstituting African foods as cultural memory:

"Survival depended critically on the extra exertions slaves made to diversify and augment basic needs. But just as importantly, these extra exertions reconstituted and renewed some customary African foodways. Perhaps in no small part it is the cultural memory of slavery

and hunger that sometimes makes food, especially food of African origin, a metaphor for migration and loss among diasporic cultures." (Carney 2011).

As writer and literature scholar Pola Schiavone points out, "It is necessary to bear in mind that to speak about food means to talk about many areas like economy, anthropology, sociology or religion, to name just a few." In the case of Acarajé, a food which may seem at first glance like a simple black bean fritter, we also need to talk about agriculture, history, memory and longing, politics, forced migration and enslavement, language, memory, clothing, culture, resistance, and technology. We have looked at agriculture, memory and forced migration. And we will move on to language.

The word Acarajé comes from the Yoruba Acara (variously translated as 'ball of fire' and 'bean cake) and 'je' (eat!) (Wilson Centre, 2014 and Ogunsunlade, 2023). Nigerian writer Imisioluwa Ogunsunlade expands on this:

"There have been debates as to the source of the name Acarajé. But we can easily agree that it is a combination of Àkàrà (bean cake) and "je" or "jìje" both meaning "to eat" in Yoruba language. By the word formation process of blending which we call "ìpàròje" or "ìsúnkì" in Yoruba where two separate words are brought together albeit by removing a syllable, "Àkàrà Jìje" (to eat bean cake) becomes Acarajé. (Ogunsunlade ibid).

So every time a Baiana uses the word Acarajé, not only the manufacture of this food but also the language takes her back to her ancestral homeland and her ancestral language.

As well as being part of connection to loss and identity, enslaved women were able to sell Acarajé on the streets in Brazil to buy their way to freedom.

Environmentalist Mari Kundson writes "The Baiana de Acarajé figure emerged out of a form of female resistance to slavery through the practice of selling street food to earn money for manumission. In the urban centers of Salvador and Rio de Janeiro, it was common for enslaved women to sell crafts and food on the streets, giving their masters most of the profits but retaining a portion for themselves " (Knudson 2022)

From the beginning, these foods were associated with West African religion and ritual as well as leading to economic freedom. Carney explains how African foodways became linked to Candomble in Brazil:

"Out of the exigencies of food, diasporic peoples vested many African staples with important symbolic meanings. The annual seú festival of Curaçao, for instance, began as a celebration of the sorghum harvest ... ; . Other African foods are prominently featured in the liturgical offerings of Afrosyncretic religious practitioners throughout the Americas. The black-eyed pea dishes abará and acarajé, for example, are both among the consecrated specialties of candomblé cooking".(Carney,2011).

Sociologist Gilberto Freyre, in his seminal publication 'Casa-grande e senzala', writing in the 1930s, observed "Certain Afro-Brazilian dishes still keep something of a religious or liturgical character as regards the manner of their preparation. In order to prepare them as they should be preapred, in all their fine points, the negroes for a long time brought over from

Africa, in addition to the oil of the dende palm, a number of exquisite condiments, bejerecum, iere, uru, atare," (Freyre 1945 p.465)

Although Freyre writing in the 1930s said that 'one still sees, now and again, these black women with sweetmeat tray or chafing dish in Bahia, in Rio, or Recife, but they are becoming rare' (ibid p.463), by the mid-1960s the profession of 'Baiana de Acarajé' became more widespread – until nowadays there are over 3500 Baianas de Acaraje in Savador, the capital of Bahia, alone. The techniques, rituals and rites around the making and serving of Acaraje by the Baianas de Acaraje are recognized by UNESCO and IPHAN (the Brazilian institute of cultural heritage) as 'intangible cultural heritage'. (Tomon, 2018).

The Associação das Baianas de Acarajé, Mingau, Receptivo e Similares (ABAM) was founded in 1992 to represent the 'Baianas de Acaraje' nationally in Brazil. , and is a textbook 'diaspora organisation'. According to Bela and Mierina (2025), "diaspora organisations can contribute to nearly all [the] traits [of diaspora listed by Safran, Cohen and others] by reinforcing diasporic identity, preserving and transmitting history and memory and nurturing transnational relationships among dispersed compatriots and with the country of origin ."

ABAM can be seen to fulfil all these roles; providing training in food hygiene, food preparation and the history of the Baiana de Acarajé themselves (Castañeda & Pereira de Jesus, 2021) as well as maintaining the integrity and original recipe and presentation of Acarajé in the face of challenges. These challenges included FIFA, who banned Acarajé from being sold within the world cup arenas until a campaign led by ABAM overturned the decision (Araujo 2020); evangelists who wanted to change the name of the product to 'Jesus Fritters' (Tomon, 2018), and, most recently, suppliers who wanted to sell strawberry flavoured 'barbie Acarajé'. In response to this latest initiative, Rita Santos, president of ABAM, said "We are ancestral entrepreneurs focused on the tradition left by our ancestors, without aimlessly surfing contemporary influences." (My translation).(IBAM 2025)

According to the 1992 municipal decree of the city of Salvador, the 2005 national decree and the 2012 state decree, only 'Baianas de Acaraje' dressed in traditional clothing can sell Acaraje in the streets of Brazil. As Rita Santos said, in response to a question about whether the Baianas felt pressurised into dressing in this way: "The Bahian women who are part of the African-based religion and other Catholic religions dress this way because it is part of the traditional attire of a Baiana de Acarajé. ... this clothing ... dates back to our ancestors and preserves our culture that has existed for over 300 years". (Santos 2025)

Even searching for recipes for Acaraje brings up history and culture. Of three searches on my phone in English, one recipe included an animated video telling the story of how Acaraje's connection with the Yoruba gods Iansã and Xangô. ('Hungry Nati 2021). And of three searches in Portuguese, the third (Andrade nd) included a link to a podcast "Acaraje não e McDonalds" which included an interview with Rita Santos, who very strongly agreed with the sentiment of the title of the podcast.

In conclusion, we can see that in all its manifestations, the simple acaraje is a tangible symbol of Afro-Brazilian diaspora. Today's lunch, snack, or evening meal, is not only yesterday's way of buying yourself out of slavery, but is also a representation of candomble religion, linking those who make it – and thus, also, those who buy and eat it – to the Yoruba Orixas and, inevitably, like Ozoz Sokoh whose poem introduced this piece of writing, to the atlantic slave trade. Even searching for recipes online provide links to history and culture, thus ensuring that the knowledge of the history of this food is passed on to others when they cook it, helping new generations to realise its story and its significance.

Perhaps uniquely in world foods, acaraje occupies its protected position as a National Heritage item. It is impossible to buy acaraje in Salvador without engaging with the Baianas, their ornate costumes and the ritual surrounding the preparation. I hope that in this short piece of writing I have done ABAM, and the humble acaraje, justice, showing that acaraje is, indeed, 'more than just a fritter'.

Acknowledgments.

With thanks to Vanessa Castañeda, Rita Santos, and my fellow students on the Connecting cultures: migration and immigration Kings College London MA Module.

Bibliography

ABAM (2025): *Acarajé com polemica*. Facebook post. https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=1178903044275699&set=a.498890095610334&locale=en_GB accessed 25 August 2025.

Andrade, Manuella (nd). . Acaraje . Recipes from Globo.com https://receitas.globo.com/tipos-de-prato/paes-e-salgados/acaraje-4e35da3c0f63084dae0031ac.ghtml

Araujo, Larissa da Silva. Baianas de Acarajé against FIFA: Coloniality Nowadays. *Alternautas* 7(1)–JULY 2020 https://journals.warwick.ac.uk/index.php/alternautas/article/view/1105/787 Accessed 25 August 2025.

Bela, B., & Mieriņa, I. 2025. Diaspora as a Community of Practice: Civil Society Engagement in Latvian Diaspora Organisations. *Diaspora Studies* **https://doi.org/10.1163/09763457-bja10166** Accessed 2 August 2025

Boaz, Danielle, 2022. Acaraje, Religious Attire and Conflict in Brazil. *Canopy Forum; on the interactions of Law and Religion.* https://canopyforum.org/2022/12/12/acaraje-religious-attire-and-conflict-in-brazil/ accessed 25 August 2025

Brazil LAB, nd. Racialized Frontiers: Slaves and Settlers in Modernizing Brazil. https://brazillab.princeton.edu/research/racialized_frontiers accessed 1 August 2025

Carney, J. A. 2004. 'With grains in her hair': rice in colonial Brazil. *Slavery & Abolition*, *25*(1), 1–27.

Carney, J.A., 2011 Memory Dishes of the African diaspora. In**:** In the Shadow of Slavery, Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World. By Judith A Carney. Oakland, University of California Press.

Carney, Judith A. 2021.. *Black Rice : The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Castañeda, Vanessa, 2021.Mucamas or Baianas?: Black Female Empowerment and Cultural Representation in Bahia.*The Latin Americanist* The University of North Carolina Press Volume 65, Number 1, March. pp. 9-34

Castañeda, Vanessa and Pereira de Jesus, Tania, 2021. We Honor Our Religion With Our Acarajé . Brazil Cultural Connections (Podcast). Episode 6. https://www.brazilcultureconnections.com/home/episodesepis%C3%B3dios/season-01temporada-01/ep-6-english accessed 2 August 2025

Césaire, Aimé 1955. *Discours sur le colonialisme*. Paris, Presence Africaine.

Chok, Vera 2016. 'Yellow'. In *The Good Immigrant*, ed Nikesh Shukla. London, Unbound.

Cohen, R. 2008. *Global Diasporas. An Introduction.* London: Routledge

Cohen, R. 2021. **The Changing Idea of Homeland and Home in Diaspora Studies**. Seminar, *HOMInG, the Home Migration Nexus*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7VkNujPFGY accessed 1 August 2025

Duarte, Pedro, and Zahir, Paloma. Acaraje nao e McDonalds. *Podcast Episode 10, Raspar o Tacho*. https://omny.fm/shows/de-raspar-o-tacho/acaraj-n-o-mcdonald-s-epis-dio-10 accessed 24 August 2025

Freyre, Gilberto (1945). *The master and the slave, a study in the development of Brazilian Civilisation*. First published in Portuguese in 1933 as Casa-grande e senzala. Berkeley, University of California Press.

Hicks, Dan (2020). *The Brutish Museums: the Benin bronzes, colonial violence and cultural restitution.* London, Pluto Press.

Hungry Nati. 2021 How to Make Acarajé - Amazing Complete Recipe - Brazilian Food - Bean Fritter. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ZoY5FF2-PI accessed 25 August 2025

Knudson, Mari, 2022. Baianas de Acarajé as Agents of Resistance: Selling Acarajé as a Source of Female Resistance, Empowerment, and Sovereignty . University of Chicago: *Revista Vaeranda.* https://voices.uchicago.edu/vaeranda/2022/03/15/baianas-de-acaraje-as-agents-of-resistance/ Accessed August 2025.

Mintz, Sidney and Price, Richard 1976. The Birth of African American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective. Boston, Beacon Press.

Mintz, Sidney W, 1990. Introduction: The Myth of the Negro Past by Melville Herskovits. New York, London: Harper & Brothers.

Ogunsunlade, Imisioluwa, 2023. Àkàrà-Acarajé: Unravelling Nigerian-Brazilian Culinary Ties: Drawing the Nexus. *Oriire: African stories, myth and history.* https://www.oriire.com/article/akara-Acarajé-unravelling-nigerian-brazilian-culinary-ties Accessed 2 August 2025.

Parveen, Razia, 2016. Food to remember: culinary practice and diasporic identity. *Oral History*, Spring, Vol. 44, No. 1 , pp. 47-56 https://www.jstor.org/stable/24892958 accessed 1 August 2025

Phillips, Tom, 2025. Missing in the Amazon. Six part podcast. *The Guardian* https://podcasts.apple.com/ie/podcast/missing-in-the-amazon/id1731314182

Proglio, Gabrele (2024). To the taste of Ghurba: Diasporic food and oral memories of Tunisian Europe. *Dublin Gastronomy Symposium* 2024 – Food and Memory: Traces, Trauma and Tradition.

Safran William 1991 'Diasporas in modern societies: Myths of homeland and return' *Diaspora* vol. 1 no. 1 pp. 83–99.

Santos, Rita. Personal communication 2025.

Schiavone, Pola, 2024. Food and memory in literature: A Folkloric Approach. *Dublin Gastronomy Symposium 2024 - Food and Memory : Traces, Trauma and Tradition*.

Sokoh, Ozoz, 2010. Akara-Acarajé: The Brazilian-Nigerian connection. *Kitchen Butterfly* (blog). https://www.kitchenbutterfly.com/2010/akara-Acarajé-the-brazilian-nigerian-connection/ Accessed 2 August 2025

Sokoh, Ozoz (2021) Memories of Akara and Acarajé. *The Recipes Project*. https://recipes.hypotheses.org/17749 Accessed 2 August 2025.

Tomon, Rafael, 2018. Staying faithful to Acarajé. Anthony Bourdain, Parts Unknown (Blog). https://explorepartsunknown.com/brazil/bahia-salvador-Acarajé/ accesed 24 august 2025.

Wilson Centre, 2014. Acarajé is a central element of Afro-Brazilian culture (translated by *Erica Kliment, author not credited*. https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/Acarajé-is-a-central-element-of-afro-brazilian-culture Accessed 2 August 2025