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Onunu and Seafood Stew: *The Influence of the River on Kalabari Cuisine*

By Kosisochukwu Nzeribe

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Food plays a powerful role in shaping cultural identity, and for the Kalabari people of the Niger Delta, cuisine reflects a deep relationship with the watery landscape that surrounds their communities. From the quiet creeks of Bakana to the bustling waterfronts of Buguma and Abonnema, Kalabari culinary traditions have been shaped by centuries of interaction with the river, mangroves, and the Atlantic coast. Among the many dishes rooted in this environment, Onunu, a rich blend of pounded yam and ripe plantains served with spicy seafood stew stands out as one of the most iconic.

01

Historical Background: Rivers, Waterways, and Food Culture

The Kalabari are historically a riverine people whose settlements evolved along creeks and islands in the eastern Niger Delta. Their proximity to abundant aquatic life shaped their economy, rituals, and, most importantly, their food systems. As Alagoa notes, Niger Delta communities developed “a culture of water,” meaning that their daily life and sustenance depended on fishing, canoe transport, and river-based trade.

Fish, crustaceans, and mollusks became dietary staples, complemented by agricultural produce imported through trade networks. The river therefore served not only as a food source but also as a trade highway, allowing the Kalabari to exchange smoked fish for yam, plantain, and palm produce from inland communities. Over time, dishes like Onunu emerged as hybrid root-crop based but inseparable from seafood accompaniment.

Onunu is traditionally prepared by boiling ripe plantains with yam, then pounding them together with palm oil until smooth, soft, and slightly elastic. Among Kalabari elders, Onunu is described as “food

for occasions,” particularly during naming ceremonies, chieftaincy celebrations, and visits by esteemed guests. The texture and bright golden color symbolize hospitality, prosperity, and festivity.

Historically, Onunu was a prestige meal served to chiefs, titled men, or important visitors. It formed part of the culinary practices surrounding iya (marriage rites) and other ceremonial gatherings. According to Briggs, Kalabari ceremonial cuisine often emphasized softness, richness, and the presence of palm oil, symbols of abundance and communal warmth. Onunu fits this pattern perfectly, representing a blend of local ingenuity and environmental influence.

02

Seafood Stew: A Riverine Masterpiece

Onunu is almost always served with a thick, spicy seafood stew. This stew reflects the biodiversity of Kalabari waterways. Ingredients often include:

Offor or atama leaves (depending on the household)

Palm oil, pepper, crayfish, and local spices.

The stew embodies the essence of riverine living. It is flavorful, aromatic, and rich in protein. The use of periwinkles called isam is particularly symbolic, representing delicacy, patience, and meticulous preparation. In many Kalabari homes, the seafood stew served with Onunu is described as “the spirit of the meal,” because it completes the dish and links it to the river that has sustained the people for generations.

Environmental Influence: The River as Provider

The dominance of seafood in Kalabari cuisine is not simply a matter of preference; it is geographical inevitability. The Niger Delta's mangrove ecosystems support some of the richest aquatic life in West Africa. The patterns of tidal flooding, seasonal fish migration, and nutrient-rich estuaries have shaped both the diet and the daily routines of Kalabari families.

Kalabari fisherfolk employ various traditional methods:

Canoe-based deep-water fishing for larger species

Mangrove gleaning for oysters and periwinkles.

These methods influence the freshness and availability of ingredients for seafood stew. The daily rhythm of fishing, morning paddling, afternoon sorting, and evening trading ensures that Kalabari meals are closely tied to the day's catch.

Environmental patterns also shape cuisine. During the rainy season, crabs and shrimps are more abundant, making seafood stew richer. In the dry season, smoked fish dominates, producing a different but equally distinctive flavor. Thus, Onunu reflects both the environment and the natural rhythms of Kalabari life.

04

Symbolism and Social Functions of the Dish

A Dish of Unity and Warmth: Onunu is often served in shared bowls, reinforcing Kalabari values of hospitality, community, and collective enjoyment. Some elders explain that the soft texture of Onunu symbolizes “the softness of heart required to live in harmony.”

Food and Identity: For many Kalabari people living in urban centers like Port Harcourt or Lagos, preparing Onunu is a way to preserve cultural memory. It becomes a marker of identity, a culinary bridge between home and diaspora. As Ayeomoni observes, food is central to the maintenance of ethnic identity among Nigerian groups in urban spaces.

Ceremonial Relevance: Onunu appears prominently in rites such as, Naming ceremonies (igiriga), Marriage rites (iya), Funeral gatherings, Celebrations of chieftaincy titles.

Its presence signifies honor and respect for guests and ancestors.

05

Modern Transformations: Urbanization, Oil, and Changing Food Habits

In contemporary Kalabari society, food practices show a mixture of continuity and change.

Influence of the Oil Economy: The rise of the oil industry has

introduced processed foods, fast meals, and hybrid recipes. Yet Onunu remains a culinary anchor prepared during weekends, festivals, and special events, even by younger generations.

Restaurant Culture and Culinary Revival: Kalabari-themed restaurants in Port Harcourt and Abuja now serve Onunu as a signature dish, increasing its visibility beyond the Niger Delta. Social media platforms have also popularized the dish, leading to creative variations while maintaining its cultural essence.

Migration and Diaspora Communities: Kalabari people abroad prepare Onunu using substitute ingredients like frozen seafood, but the symbolic significance remains intact: it is a taste of home.

Onunu and its accompanying seafood stew represent more than culinary traditions; they embody the environmental, spiritual, and social history of the Kalabari people. Rooted in the relationship between humans and the river, the dish tells the story of a people shaped by water, community, and creativity. In a globalized age where fast food and modern diets threaten cultural specificity, Onunu stands as a vibrant reminder that food is heritage. As long as the rivers flow through Kalabari land, and as long as families gather around bowls of golden Onunu, the deep connection between the Kalabari people and their aquatic world will continue to thrive.

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