

THAT PIECE OF CHICKEN

Amwene Etiang (Uganda)



He looked down at his audacious granddaughter, waiting to hear her plan.

Two days before.

“Adai, turn up the volume!” you politely ask your little sister after she insists on hogging the TV remote.

“Oh, so Blessing is now in this woman’s house to confront her about her sister?” you say with the certainty of a student who’s just solved a Maths problem. You are engrossed in a Nollywood movie you have been watching for three minutes and don’t know the name of when a thunderstorm starts. The picture freezes, the sound crackles and then the screen goes blank. If you weren’t so invested in the movie, you may have taken time to laugh at God’s humour. Load shedding plus bad weather never makes for good entertainment on a rainy day at home in Kampala.

“*Banange*¹ this weather! It’s January and it’s already raining!” Mama exclaims, “Ha, that means jam on the way. By the way, did you people buy the brown bread for *Papa*² and *Kuku*³?”

1 *Oh my goodness* in Luganda.

2 Grandfather in Ateso.

3 Grandmother in Lugisu.

Today is the day you're meant to go to Tororo. You stare at her blank-faced with a cheeky smile, remembering the detour you and *Yaya*⁴ took to the bakery section to buy *kabalagala*⁵, forgetting the bread. When the rain stops, you and *Yaya* stroll out of the house, laughing at the Nollywood movie, in search of the bread.

As you step out of the house, the air is thick with humidity but the ground is cool. It's a weird atmosphere, between hot and cold but not warm. Your bodies adjust as you walk towards the gate. Strolling along the road the small rev of a *bodaboda*⁶ sounds from behind you and it soon slows past you as the rider nods his head. So you nod your head back. Then he stops.

"*Jhebale ko ssebo*⁷. *Ku Capital Shoppers meka*⁸?" you say with the confidence of a zealous student on a school trip to France using the French phrases they learnt in class ordering something from a Parisian crepe vendor.

"*Nkumitano*⁹."

He senses your unfamiliarity with Luganda and, at first, charges you the *mzungu*¹⁰ rate. He'd take any chance to make an extra two thousand shillings after the lockdown. But *Yaya* sweeps to the rescue and bargains to a fairer price. It is funny – in a sad kind of way – how it's assumed that you are rich because your Luganda is poor. Despite the concoction of dust and diesel fumes floating in the air, as you ride to the supermarket, you feel like you're in a music

4 Aunt in the Ateso language.

5 A Ugandan deep-fried pancake made with cassava flour and bananas.

6 A motorbike. It's a common form of transport in Uganda.

7 Greeting to a man in Luganda.

8 *How much* in Luganda.

9 5,000 Ugandan shillings.

10 Means a white person. Reference is made to tourist prices.

video. The sun is high in the sky, afro beats blare from the speakers in the *dukas*¹¹ and the sound of Bobi Wine and Radio and Weasel from the campaign trucks, the breeze whips through your hair, but your hair isn't sailing in the wind – it can't. Especially today. It sits still on your head, curled in a million little coils because you were not bothered enough to comb it this morning.

Then. Toot toot.
Taxis¹².

One rattles past, almost knocking you both off the bike. Then, without indicating, it swerves and stops on the side of the road so you almost ram into it. It chugs a bit, lets out plumes of smoke and the conductor sticks half of his body out of the window and yells: '*lukumi lukumi*¹³ *mu town*' trying to get customers. The *bodaboda* weaves through the cars. Stopping, starting, stopping. It takes skill and practice to sit and stay on a *bodaboda* in Kampala. It seems *Yaya* has mastered this skill. She can sit like a 19th century Elizabethan high-class woman on her pony, even for long distances. You don't have that kind of strength, so instead, you sit astride. When you reach the supermarket, *Yaya* is smiling in a reminiscent sort of way.

"*Naye*¹⁴ you people," you say, pushing her shoulder, "you had my whole childhood to teach me Luganda yet you laugh at me for trying to speak Luganda and complain that I don't know the language."

11 Small shops on the side of the road that normally sell household items, snacks and airtime.

12 Not to be confused with small cabs. In Uganda, taxis are 14-seater vans that are used as public service vehicles.

13 *One thousand* in Luganda.

14 *But* in Luganda.

“*Gwe*¹⁵,” *Yaya* responds, laughing, “don’t you remember how we tried, but you refused. You always said you were too exhausted from a long day at school, in Year 4!”

“*Eyiii* how can you expect a 9-year-old child, whose parents signed her up to multiple afterschool activities to finish all her energy before 8 pm, to voluntarily learn another language?” I ask.

But still, I tried. Whenever stories were being dished out after dinner, I’d always ask, “What are you saying?”

But the response was always, “*Akoku*¹⁶, this conversation is for big people.”

To you, Luganda is a language that is familiarly foreign; one often spoken but rarely understood. You wonder for how much longer you can excuse your lack of knowledge on *Yaya* and your parents.

With no further lines of argument, you both smile and go in to buy bread.

On the way back home you tune up the Ugandan part of your accent and the *bodaboda*, thanks to your much improved Luganda, doesn’t charge you *mzungu* prices.

Just as you are approaching the house, the clouds swirl and change, like millet porridge on the stove, from smooth and light to volatile and dark in seconds. You are swept away from standing in the weird spot between hot and cold to one that is almost icy, reminding you of the Kenyan highlands. For a second you wonder whether you’re still in Kampala.

15 *You* in Luganda.

16 Female child in Ateso.

“*Banange* this weather! Now I have to do my hair again!” exclaims *Yaya*, running towards the house with the effort of an unfit child made to run laps.

You grin while running in the rain, knowing that you won’t have to do your hair again, because you never did it. Soon, brown streams with plastic bottles, *matooke* peels and the odd shoe flow out of the roadside gutters. This city is not built to be rained on.

Soon you are off to Tororo. Bustling through trading centres with *bodabodas* carrying logs, doors and everything in between, breezing past an old man dressed in an old pale ‘Harvard University’ shirt, knee-deep in a rice paddy and blazing across the grand, ivory Jinja bridge. The one some people say makes you ‘forget you’re in Uganda.’ You always cringe at that statement, as if Ugandan engineers can’t design and build such structures. But then you remember the morning’s headline: *Mulago imports 100 hospital beds* and the other cover story, *Government plans to expand the Buy Uganda, Build Uganda campaign for development.*

Entering the gate to your grandparents’ home, Adai flies out of the car and yells, “*Papaaaa*” while running towards the glass door with white netting behind it. The kind of fabric that seems like an immutable trend in modern African interior design, particularly in homes of older people in towns and villages. It goes on chairs, armrests, tables, food and even the occasional *gomesi*¹⁷. She runs into his arms. Well actually his legs, she isn’t yet that tall.

“Praise God,” he says with a smile.

“Praise God,” you smile back.

17 Traditional dress of Baganda women.

In your heart, hoping for Him to show up in that moment as He did to Moses in a burning bush. Knowing full well that's not how He talks, at least to you.

That's how *Papa* always greets you and you marvel at his faith and steadfastness. You almost hug him but then remember, COVID. After the 'school is good', 'home is fine' and 'ah this government' conversation, *Papa* catches you up on the latest developments on his farm and starts getting ready to take you all on a trip there. You listen attentively, wondering why you weren't taught this way about plants back in secondary school, maybe you would have done more than barely pass Biology and Geography. Adai, *Kuku* and *Papa* sit in the front of the pickup while you, Mama and *Yaya* get comfortable on the iron sheets at the back.

Again you and *Yaya* feel the wind in your hair but there is no background music this time, just the sound of the wind and the scene of rolling hills with maize and millet gardens. Reaching the farm, *Papa* gets out of the car barefoot. Without fear of stepping on manure or stones, he says with absolute confidence, "I know my farm." Walking around the farm, dodging stones, sticks and cow dung, again, you marvel at his faith.

At dinner, the table is covered with steaming pots of *atapa*¹⁸, *eboo*¹⁹ and meat. *Kuku* picks up her fork and starts serving, beginning with *Papa*. After serving him meat she puts some on your plate.

"No, thank you *Kuku*. I don't eat meat," you mutter.

18 A starchy dough-like food made with cassava and millet flour. It's a staple of the traditional Ateso diet.

19 A type of leafy greens in Ateso.

From the looks on their faces, you sense an avalanche of questions. “You don’t eat meat? Why?” *Kuku* asks.

They all wait for you to respond. Mama and *Yaya* have slight smiles on their faces, knowing what you are going to say. “It’s not good for the environment,” you say.

Kuku looks shocked and intrigued. *Papa* looks like he is re-reading a complex argument in one of his philosophy books and *Yaya* and Mama are straight-faced. They are used to your speeches about saving the environment and being vegetarian.

“What does meat have to do with the environment?” he asks you. “Well, I was reading somewhere that in America, the production of red meat contributes more to global warming than all forms of transport combined. Also, cows produce methane which is a greenhouse gas. Besides, it’s inefficient. If I can reduce my demand for it and other people can as well, then we can reduce the supply and slow down the impact of climate change. If we don’t act now on climate change then we’ll all be doomed, basically,” you recite. This is your explanation for when you’re asked why you don’t eat meat during family dinners, half-kringing at yourself and half listening with pride.

The following day you take another trip to the farm and meet a stranger. He is dressed in an oversized brown suit, black gumboots and is slightly greying. *Papa* greets him like an old friend and he introduces himself to you all as Papa Junior. He greets you in Ateso, you stumble your way through to *jokuna*²⁰ and he smiles,

20 Greeting in Ateso.

disappointed, noticing you don't speak Ateso. You're disappointed in yourself too.

Soon he invites you to his home and you walk out of the farm and follow him along a muddy path to his homestead. His home also has that in vogue white netted fabric everywhere. As you sit down, he offers you tea as his wife prepares lunch. When lunch is served at the table you are offered meat but politely decline and recite your reasoning again, sparking tufts of laughter on the table. Adai insists on serving herself and so she reaches for the ladle, dips it into the chicken stew and scoops out a gizzard.

You all freeze. But you're proud of her audacity.

"Young girl, that piece isn't for you," says Papa Junior.

"But I want it," she replies, defiantly pouring some more sauce on the piece of chicken, and the plastic-covered table mat with a picture of fruit on it in the process.

"Young girls are not supposed to eat the gizzard. It is a piece for big men," he says.

"Why? What is the gizzard anyway?" Adai asks, confused about the big deal surrounding this piece of chicken.

"It's like the stomach of the chicken. Chickens have special stomachs that can grind food, pu-ro-pa-lé²¹!" answers your cousin.

"Why is it important?" she asks again.

"Well, traditionally the head of the house or important guests are given the gizzard since it is the best part of the chicken," *Yaya* answers. She looks at *Yaya* confused and offended. Adai looks at *Mama* to save her chicken piece. *Mama* sighs and is beginning to reassure her that girls can eat gizzards too when *Tata*²² Junior (you assumed

21 Properly.

22 Grandmother in Ateso.

since she is Papa Junior's wife) picks it off her plate. She stops mid-sentence and looks at them unamused.

After lunch is finished, Papa Junior takes you around his home. Reaching his small, packed wooden cattle kraal, he stops and beams at it with pride. They all look well-fed and beneath the mud and purple insecticide, you can see their brown, black and white colours.

"That one is called Peace, the other Ejakait, the other Apese. They sustain my family and I. There is no way I can live without them, even if you people complain about the environment," he says.

"But according to statistics ..." you smile like a lawyer about to rebut in court and start on your environmental campaign again. Not registering that this man depends on cows for a living, not just to enjoy his meal.

"Here in our village, we rely on these animals to survive. I don't know about you people in Kampala but how can we think about the end of the world when we need to put food on the table?" he responds calmly.

Your insensitivity and hypocrisy slap you in the face.

"But Papa this is a serious issue," you say, more timidly than before. "If we don't try and hinder global warming then the heavy rains or the hot sun of this week will happen more frequently and then what will be left of your cows? Won't all their feed be destroyed? Won't the blazing sun dehydrate them?"

"Okay. But today, I have to feed my family," he says with a slightly resigned smile.

A thick cloud of awkward silence looms over you.

"Now what can we do about it?" asks Adai innocently.

"Well, we use solar energy at home, grow our food and take good care of our cows," says *Papa*.

That eases her worries and when you get back to *Papa's* home, she is bent on becoming an eco-warrior. But you aren't comforted. Even if your country reduces its greenhouse gases, it still only contributes a minute fraction of emissions in the world. You think that the real decision-makers are in the boardrooms of global corporations, state houses and halls of parliament regardless of what you do.

Lord knows how much you want to stand in the middle of town, poster in hand and demand that your government does something. But you'd rather not taste teargas as well as dust and diesel fumes while moving around Kampala.

Kuku sets the table and you smell the steaming rice, reminding you of the farmer you saw on the way. You want to help him, but don't know how if you can't even speak to him in his language, what's meant to be your language too.

"The headlines. The new Kiira Motors bus which runs on electricity took its first trip around Kampala today. This is the first of a thousand that the government has commissioned to be produced in the next five years," the TV screen crackles on, interrupting your train of thought as you sit down to eat dinner.

A glimmer of hope, a glimmer only, but hope nonetheless.

"When we get back home, we have to figure out how to make our house eco-friendlier. Oh, and we can also get our neighbours to do the same. Papa, what else do you think we can do to fight climate change?"

As *Papa* thinks about an answer to Adai's question, he reaches into the pot of chicken stew and scoops out a gizzard, puts one on your plate and another on hers.