

## A HOLIDAY CELEBRATION

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“Weather is calling for a minimum of 2 feet of snow with gusty wind. The storm is supposed to last for the next 24 hours. It’s advised that people stay indoors. Bus service to NYC is interrupted and won’t resume for at least 24 hours until the storm fizzles.” It was 6 AM in Ithaca, NY, at the sprawling campus of Cornell University on a Friday, one week before Christmas. The news carried particular importance to students staying at Ujamaa, the dorm so coined as it grouped minorities inclined to live among kindred spirits.

This was in the early seventies, a turning point in the nation’s initiatives to solidify the gains achieved in the previous decade through social protests. It was a time when social activism was prevalent, and the cultural paradigm was shifting. Affirmative Action was in its heyday, and *Black is Beautiful* was a novel and hip idea of the time. Admission to institutions of higher learning for minority students so long denied such opportunity was on the rise.

Hip then carried the same connotation that woke nowadays hold, never mind its vilification by hidebound denizens. The pendulum was swinging toward the implementation of socially progressive policies to advance the cause of equality and fairness to attain a level of equanimity in society. It was also a period of unbridled fashion expression: bell-bottoms, platform shoes, and large Afro hairdo (‘fro). The idea of the contribution of Blacks to the quilt of this nation had taken root, and colleges and universities began to open Black Studies departments.

Joey, student leader, was the epitome of the activist. He was majoring in Black Studies and was residing at Ujamaa, a dorm with a Swahili name, a symbol of kinship. As such, he would be the first to give guidance in such delicate situations. He was a whale of a man who wore his feelings on his sleeves, literally. He dressed the part, sporting a dashiki and a large ‘fro. Any conversation with Joey was an open-ended trip into knowledge lane. He would spend hours on end convincing students of the necessity to register and vote, and he would go into a passionate debate about Pan-Africanism and the urgency for members of the diaspora to band together. God forbid one inquired about black achievements! He would go on an exegesis about great black inventors. A pet peeve of his was the notion that Thomas Edison created electricity. He would go into a rage and educate the novice about Lewis Latimer, who basically gave us the light bulb, and before him, Granville Woods, a trailblazer. “Thomas Edison built on others’ work and got the patent because he was white. Latimer did the work, and Edison got the credit. They will never teach you that in school. They would have you believe we are stupid. Latimer was self-taught. Imagine if he went to MIT!”

He demanded and received respect. He was good at cajoling; his own special version of it mixed fiat with persuasion. Yet, due to his jumbo size, no one would choose to get into his crosshairs. It was not long after the newscast that he crisscrossed the floors, and he used his powerful voice as a natural bullhorn.

“Brothers and sisters, in the spirit of Ujamaa, let’s organize a multicultural celebration instead of feeling sorry for ourselves. Let’s bring a dish from one’s own cuisine. It could be a drink, a cake, a meal, or what have you. Let’s have fun and let’s begin the party at 6 PM sharp. Not CP time.”

Joey was alluding to the hardship for students living in NYC, the residence of the bulk of the minority students. They were stuck on campus and would have to wait to travel to join their relatives. Commiseration about a snowstorm versus a cultural gathering centered around culinary delicacies was a no-brainer for the students. Indeed, food, drink, party were always magic words that pulsed people’s endorphins for times immemorial. The motley crew of students responded

very favorably. Born in America, the West Indies, and Africa, all members of a diaspora of varying hues but of kindred spirit, they saw this as a providential fruition of the idea of solidarity. That concept had become a rallying cry, an idea they espoused and discussed incessantly in newly created classes of Black History. The story within the story was the existence of corners of jingoism; some students were still narrow-minded in limiting their horizons to their own culture and customs. For example, some of them only consumed their native meals and listened only to their country's music for the most part. So, this was an opportunity for those with a cosmopolitan outlook to mingle with others not necessarily of the same ilk but enticed by the circumstances to go outside of their comfort zone and be adventurous.

However, in all fairness, those who held such tribal views were a minority since the students were frequently commingling at the cafeteria, the hallways and were forever playing dominos, and cards when not at the gyms and or doing the thing that people all over do: gossip about who is doing what with whom or trying to do you-know-what with whom. Time was of the essence for organizing the celebration.

Students had about an eleven-hour window to transform the cafeteria into a catering marvel. They would burnish its menu from mass-produced but utilitarian offerings into homemade victuals cooked to impress taste buds. In the offing lurked accolades and bragging rights, yes, since we are dealing with human beings always looking for a friendly edge. A sound system to blare music and establish the right mood to invite folks to step needed to be part of the setup. Getting out of their apartments to go to the cafeteria itself would be a challenge.

The hissing and howling wind, the cumulus of the fluffy white flakes layering into varying shapes but blocking roads, alleyways, and doors, illustrated a real downer. That sight, that day, interfering with careful plans and long-held hopes, beckoned a strong remedy. Joey, the leader, provided the right formula, as usual. The appeal of the celebration became a self-fulfilling prophecy, as it were. The scene dispelled the notion of the seductive or vaunted wintry wonderland but rather evinced convincingly the tapestry of desolation à la mother-Nature-running-amok at the most irksome time. No better optic could encapsulate this drama than the chagrined posture of the weeping willow's branches bending under the weight of the snowflakes. Against such a drab landscape, this remedy had all the look and feel of an antidote.

The antidote, however, mandated man and woman power. Basking in the role of the practical tactician, Joey divided the duties by categories of different squadrons. The *housekeeping crew* would clean the place and rearrange the tables, carving a large empty center as a dancing area. Another squadron, the *designer set*, would wow with the decoration. To avoid overburdening anyone, a member of one crew would not be required to cross over into another. His pet pastime was to be in full display as he would install the stereo equipment and would be the DJ. Due to the short notice, his low-hanging fruit option pointed to cobbling a jerry-rigged stereo system. As an audiophile, he wouldn't trust anybody else for this task. He had acquired the reputation of having the most powerful system in the dorm, and he was not above playing his music full blast when feeling the compelling groove. Writ large as a tonic on a down day like the present one, he would play Coltrane's *Giant Steps*, Sonny Rollins's *The Everywhere Calypso*, or *St. Thomas*, or Miles's *So What* in any order, ranging from one to all four. If, after a great date the night before, he awoke with a flutter in the chest, making him spoony, he would play *Moody's Mood for Love* by King Pleasure, Hartman's *My One and Only Love*, or *The Midnight Sun Will Never Set* sung by Sarah Vaughn or the instrumental version by either Benny Carter or Quincy Jones. Hence, handling the production of the music heaved to a serious level to him.

Joey made the round to find extra speakers and to label each with the name of its owner. He also requested albums from students and favorite songs to create a handwritten playlist. Joey had to match the song and number on the vinyl. No worse scenario for a DJ than picking the wrong song; the ensuing catcalls, a nuisance to his ears, would aim an arrow at his proud ego and credentials. The styles of music unearthed unknown nuggets for the uninitiated. From Trinidad: *Parang* and *Soca* as well as a mixture of *Parang/Soca*. From Jamaica: *Reggae*. From Haiti: *Konpa*. From PR: *Salsa*. From USA: *R&B*, *Soul*. To make sure the catering chores ran smoothly, he called on his girlfriend, Njeri. Following the spirit of the time, she had switched from her given name of Josephine to a Swahili pet name. She and Joey were a pair of extremes that complemented each other. While he carried a large frame, she was petite; his baritone voice contrasted with her whisper-like soprano tone. He would give the outlines of a plan, and she would make it happen. His Gargantuan appetite ran circles around her bird-like eating. Everybody was looking forward to stepping onto the dance floor, as it was a joy to behold.

She was a born caterer and knew how to divvy up the work and more importantly, how to properly supervise the operation to make it a seamless undertaking. In no time, she compiled a list of cooks and penned the menu. The list uncorked the lid into cultural anthropology. From Haiti: rice with black mushrooms, aka *diri ak djondjon*. From Puerto Rico: *piononos*. From Jamaica: jerk pork and jerk chicken. From Trinidad: roti. From USA: trotters, mac and cheese, hog maws, egg nog, dumplings. From Nigeria: fufu. Desserts were just as tempting: rum cake, sweet potato pie, fruit cake, carrot cake. *Kremas* from Haiti, *coquito* from PR and *sorrel* from Trinidad were some interesting ethnic beverages added to the mix. Meal preparation became a logistical task.

As the day went by, the cafeteria's kitchen, in crescendo fashion, started to exude the flavors of the different condiments and spices. The musk of ginger, thyme, nutmeg, curry, cinnamon, onion, hot pepper, clove, black pepper, and numerous others wafted the air. This eclectic olfactory mix elicited the Pavlovian reflex, aggravated one's hunger, heightened even a dormant appetite, and raised the ante for the upcoming shindig.

In a departure from accepted custom, everything was set to go live at 5 PM, as Njeri would have it no other way. In a fashion parade, young folks dressed to impress. Young men and women exchanged statements by the size and luster of their 'fros. The fuller and the shinier the 'fro, the more attraction the look bestowed. Clad in polyester clothing with large bottoms sweeping the floor despite high platform shoes, everybody wanted to be seen as hip and not square, never mind the shoes' discomfort. In fact, the thickness of the sole held such an allure that it mirrored the taste of a large hairdo. The showy adornments, the trendy coifs, and the stylish footwear sent the clearest signals that boogie time had arrived, as the saying went.

Christmas memorabilia and Kwanzaa signs enlivened the atmosphere of the spruced-up cafeteria. The *designer crew* had meticulously organized the offerings on the tables as if reminding us of the Chinese proverb that "food that looks and smells good tastes good." Sight, smell, and sound all pivoted in alignment inside for positive vibes. Sight and sound outside veered from spiteful killjoy into collateral incentive for those trapped inside as a silver lining. Some would even go so far as to call it poetic justice for Mother Nature's misdeed.

Students started milling around 5:30 PM. Their taste buds, as well as growling tummies, had taken over. The music system that Joey had assembled, warts and all, was working fine, bellowing pulsatile beats revving up the pent-up energy of dancers. At 6 PM, everybody scurried to get a plate and made a run at the food. Somehow, word had leaked and had spread fast that the dish with the funny name, *diri* something, was to be had, a true gastronomic delight.

In keeping with that, people were voting with their feet and mouths, and it was the first dish to disappear. Gone from sight and was now a transient resident transiting into others' entrails, having fulfilled its duty of satisfying demanding taste buds. The competition for the best-tasting dish was keen for sure. Few offerings remained untouched, and far fewer remained unfinished. A lot of the students were discovering dishes for the first time in their existence. A carb-laden dish like fufu, so common in West Africa, was virtually unheard of in America. The same could be said about *diri ak djondjon*.

*Sometimes*, the naming of a dish and its recipe followed separate universes. Trotters refer to a pig's feet. *Piononos* describe minced meat encircled by a thin layer of fried sweet plantains. *Kremas*, *coquito* essentially described the same beverage with local nuances. The mix of spices established the difference. *Sorrel*, in turn, a drink made from the hibiscus leaf, became another discovery. These cultural tidbits sharpened the fellowship among the students and dominated conversations. Same pattern would occur for musical styles.

Exploration of musical genres segued. Very few students were aware of the existence of *Parang*, a style of music imported into Trinidad by migrants from Venezuela traditionally only performed during the Christmas season. It originally started as a minstrel-type of folksy performance, and the genre has evolved over the years to encompass a stylistic hybrid format when mixed with *Soca*.

Joey was in his element while holding court. He, just like a lot of the other students, was learning about others' culture and he was enjoying it too. Njeri made sure she fixed him a plate that included each dish, as his appetite was as renowned as his love for music. The celebration stress-tested the notion of multiculturalism. Students accustomed to only listening and dancing to R&B were learning the cadence of different rhythms and vice versa for others who only dealt with their own genre. That experiment opened a lot of eyes and broadened a lot more horizons. Food and music as a duet mimicked a piano's keyboard, where ebony and ivory morph to create artistic wizardry.

Similarly, a fish that only swam in water called homogeneity dared to go into another body of water called otherness and discovered that a body of water by another name still behaved like the one he was used to. That celebration on a snowy day brought together different cultures that often, even when juxtaposed, were sliding past each other. Some of the highlights of the celebration centered around the demonstration of the fleetness of Joey's feet on the dance floor despite his portly size. He and Njeri lived up to the billing. Some others ranged from silly to plain comical. All the bodies generated enough heat to compete with the warmth emitted by the radiators. This caused some of the polyester pants to shrivel and curl up. The heat and humidity caused the grease in the hair of some students to gum up the beading sweat. That, in turn, parlayed into a bit of discomfort, and that stained the garments. These glitches released either a faint grimace at this minor inconvenience or a rapt tickle but wouldn't halt the fun, far from it.

All of this happened when the world was younger than today, and the youngsters took their energy for granted and eternal in a carefree, unbidden pursuit of adventures and of the beckoning taste of a joyful life worth living.

The harder the snow was falling, the harder the students were partying, and they couldn't get enough of a good time. Joey couldn't have written a better script, had he wanted to.