

Gathering at the Table

A Worship Service for African Heritage Month

This worship service was prepared by members of [The Journeys of Black Peoples in The United Church of Canada](#), Toronto cluster. We have been coming together on a monthly basis since our last national gathering in the spring of 2007 in Montreal. At each monthly meeting, we gather at the table and break bread together (share in a meal). In September 2008, we talked of the important need to share our stories of faith, culture, and food with others, especially with our children.

Psalm 78:1-7 is a testament to this fact: the children of Israel took pride in sharing their faith journey with their children and with their children's children. We realized that our children do not know our stories of faith and culture. Many of us learned these stories of our culture over or around foods, and we wondered, if we don't, who will pass these stories to the next generations?

This worship service was written in response to this question. The prayers are by Alydia Smith; the stories are credited individually. We believe that by passing our cultural stories of faith, food, and fellowship to the next generations, and by sharing them with the rest of our church, we like the children of Israel may be able to celebrate God's wondrous deeds!



CASSAVA

(Leslyn Henry)

This simple root, cassava, journeys with African Canadian peoples throughout our lives. Cassava is a starchy root food—a ground provision—that has a thick outer brown skin and is firm white on the inside.

Cassava is over 5,000 years old and grows mainly in South America. It was used to feed Christopher Columbus and his crew when they travelled to the West Indies over 500 years ago. In the 17th century, 200 years later, cassava was exported to Africa by the Portuguese as payment for the purchase of slaves. Because it was very cheap, cassava became the slaves' main meal on their long journey across the Atlantic to their new home.

Cassava is now an international dish that can be used in many different ways, such as cassava bread or bammy (a bread or cracker that is made by grating cassava and spreading it thinly in the sun to dry); porridge (the cassava is peeled, sliced very thinly and placed in the sun to dry, then pound into a very fine powder to make porridge for babies as a formula); baby food (boiled cassava, crushed with egg/butter); pone (something like pumpkin pie); cassava balls; cassava casreep (one of the main ingredients along with meat in the favourite Guyanese dish—pepperpot). Cassava is a must-have in soups and in another favourite dish—metagee.

Cassava can also be used to help in ironing clothes. The cassava is grated, then placed in a cloth. The extracted juice from the cassava is boiled to make starch, which is placed on the clothes before ironing.

I choose to talk about cassava, to share its endurance in our lives from the beginning to the end.

Call to Worship

We will marvel and celebrate today
in what we have heard and learned from our ancestors

We will tell new generations of the wonders God has done

We will marvel in the sustaining power
of the simple roots and foods that God has provided for us

We will tell new generations of the wonders God has done

We will marvel in the creativity that God gave our ancestors
to turn leftovers into our daily manna

We will tell new generations of the wonders God has done

We will tell of how our ancestors put their trust in you,
just as we continue to put our trust in you

We will tell new generations of the wonders God has done

Through our worship here today, we will together tell new generations
about the wonders of our God!

MAIZE MEAL (CORN)

(By Vuso Moyana)

Corn and cornmeal (called maize) constitute the staple diet of most countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Cornmeal is used to prepare bota, a breakfast porridge made by mixing the cornmeal with water into a thick paste. This paste is usually flavored with peanut butter, milk, or butter.

Cornmeal is also used to make the sadza (also referred to as nshima, ugali, and mealie), which is the cornerstone of the traditional Zimbabwe and southern African meal. Sadza is usually eaten for lunch and dinner. In Zimbabwe, the Shona-language name for the cooked meal that is a thickened porridge is sadza. The process of making sadza is the same as bota (porridge). However, after the paste has been cooking for several minutes, more cornmeal is added to thicken the paste until it is really hard.

This meal is usually served with red or white meat, vegetables (spinach, collard greens, grapes, etc.), and sugar beans. Sadza can also be eaten with curdled milk, commonly known as lacto (mikaka wakakora). The sadza is usually served in a communal bowl or even separate plates and is taken with the right hand, rolled into balls, and dipped into sauce, gravy, or stewed vegetables.

Maize is also harvested from the fields and consumed in the unripe state, when the kernels are fully grown but still soft. Unripe corn is cooked to become palatable. This is done by simply boiling or roasting the whole ears and eating the kernels right off the cob. This corn on the cob is common not only in Africa but in other continents where maize is grown.

An abundance of cornmeal in one's granary is a symbol of wealth and abundance. An unhealthy-looking person is often referred to as one who "needs sadza" or "lacks sadza." In the same vein, poverty is referred to as "hatina sadza" ("We don't have sadza!").

A good harvest and full granaries symbolize blessings.

Opening Prayer

We come to you, God,
grateful for your life-giving nourishment and in need of more.
Just as our maize feeds us from *bota* to *sadza*,
morning, noon, and night we come to you, and you continue to provide.
We come looking to be fed this morning.
Fill us according to our need:
our *bota* for this morning;
our maize for this day;
our *sadza* for the journey!
Amen.

SHONA CUSTOM OF ZUNDE RAMAMBO: THE CHIEF'S GRANARY

(by *Vuso Moyana*)

Traditional Shona custom required the chief in any given locality to allocate land for growing food crops as protection against food shortages in the community. This communal land is referred to as the *Zunde* land. Everyone in the community provided their labour on a voluntary basis, even though not everyone would benefit directly from the harvest. Members of the community would take turns to participate in the farming process from preparing the land and sowing to weeding and harvesting. The harvest would be stored in granaries at the chief's homestead as a food reserve. These reserves would be distributed to the chief's subjects only in the event of food shortages or on special occasions.

Although all members of the community would obtain food from the food reserves in times of need, priority was given to older people, widows, orphans, and people with disabilities. Traditionally, the food reserves from *Zunde raMambo*, the chief's granary, were also used to feed the chief's army, due to their role as the protectors of the community. The community was therefore motivated to provide free labour for *Zunde raMambo* because they benefited from the security and protection provided by the soldiers.

This voluntary participation helped to sharpen the community's sense of belonging and identity. It also reinforced collaborative relationships in the community. In this way, apart from its food security function, *Zunde raMambo* also had important social and political functions. During the colonial times, *Zunde raMambo* schemes disappeared following the establishment of new power structures by the colonial regime. The new power structures curtailed the powers and responsibilities of chiefs over land and their people. The state assumed the role played by *Zunde raMambo*, although in reality the state abdicated its responsibilities on racial grounds.

Prayer of Confession

We are a community—
our efforts affect the community;
our rewards are shared with the community.
Forgive us, God, when we do not do our part:
when we enjoy the foods of the harvest before those who need it most;
when we rely on others to toil and farm the land that we will reap gladly from.
Forgive us, God, and assure us that you are a God of *Zunde raMambo*.
Assure us that our forgiveness is secured by your grace.
Amen.

Suggested Scripture Readings

Psalm 78

Matthew 15:21–28

STEW PEAS

(by Eleanor Scarlett)

My grandmother was a wonderful storyteller who used stories to pass on family and cultural traditions to us. As a child, stew peas was one of my favourite dishes and still is to this day. It is made of red kidney beans (peas), which were planted in our gardens, pig's tail, and bits of salt beef along with a variety of spices.

Grandmother taught us that the history of stew peas was closely tied to life on the plantations during the enslavement of Africans. Enslaved Africans had commune gardens, in which they planted peas, beans, green vegetables, yams, cassava, and numerous spices. They were usually given the crumbs from the master's table, in other words, the bits of animals that the masters did not want to eat, such as the tails, the intestine, the skin, the head, and small leftover bits. These crumbs would become our family's main staples. Grandmother told us that the enslaved were very resourceful; they turned what was once useless into hearty meals.

Stew peas was passed on from one generation to the next and continues to be a favourite among many (especially Jamaicans). At family gatherings, if stew peas is on the menu it is usually the first to go. Stew peas is said to bring people together; stories like the ones my grandmother told me are always shared around the stew peas. I can still remember, when I first came to Canada, driving for miles just to get some home-cooked stew peas from a family member or friend. Stew peas is a comfort food!

Prayers of the People

Restorative God,
 we thank you for foods of comfort,
 foods that tell the story of who we are and where we have come from;
 food that we share with our ancestors and kin.
 May these foods and stories nourish us
 when we are starving for justice...
 when we are starving for a sense of belonging and community...
 when the journey seems too far and too long and we starve for respite and relief...
 Be like fried dumplin', stew peas, and sadza to us.
 Restore our souls.

Refrain ("Ameni," *More Voices* 219)

Resourceful God,
 we thank you for the gift of abundance;
 and for the ability to see something in what others see as nothing.
 Just as our ancestors turned table crumbs into main dishes,
 help us to turn our fears into moments of great courage...
 our weakness into signs of your strength...
 and our despair into places for your hope.
 We trust in your promise of abundance.
 Give us the imagination of our ancestors
 to transform and challenge those
 who would count us as last and least.

Refrain

Satisfying God,
 our bellies are full with your love, grace, and abundance.
 Yet we are still hungry for justice.
 Restore us. Satisfy us. Feed us. Sustain us.
 As you have in our past, as you are in our present, as you will in our future.
 Amen.

Suggested Hymns

"There Is a Time" *More Voices* 165
 "Your Will Be Done" *More Voices* 151
 "Deep in Our Hearts" *More Voices* 154
 "Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying" *Voices United* 400
 "We Shall Go Out with Hope of Resurrection" *Voices United* 400
 "There Is a Balm in Gilead" *Voices United* 612