Chapter 13

Kitchens, Archives and Cookbooks

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This is a conversation about cookbooks, and more specifically, the three cookbooks produced for the 2023 'Kitchen Histories' module in the Department of Historical Studies at the University of the Western Cape (UWC): 'Cooking Curiously' *by Shireen Abrahams;* 'Ous Beauty's Kitchen' and the 'Kitchen of the Trade Unionist and "Pseudo" Vegan' *by Limpho Makapela; and* 'Poggenpoel Cookbook' *by Amber Poggenpoel. The cookbooks emerged out of the module's History Maker Lab, a methodology for thinking history through making history that understands the kitchen as a complex site of memory and archive, and the cookbook as an opportunity to engage and curate out of this archive. Over an intensely creative period of four months, the cookbooks emerge out of a series of seminars on creolisation, migration and diaspora, accompanied by meals lovingly prepared and openly shared with anyone who wants to sit at our table; sometimes conflicted and oftentimes contradictory conversations with family, friends and strangers; and the rigour, insights and enabling feedback of expert cookbook makers.*

RB: Let's start with what your cookbooks are about. Each of you has stayed quite close to home in configuring cookbooks that differently speak to three generations—grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles, siblings and cousins—of memory, making, preference and ritual. They include recipes that are carefully recorded and passed down from one generation to the next, recipes that exist only as distant or painful memories, recipes that are absent because of family feuds or because they are family secrets and new recipes that are re-making old identities. These recipes exist in rich conversations with a trove of family photographs, anecdotes about when something was first tried or how it's adapted to particular tastes and wider family histories written with and against apartheid. They feel like they belong together as a compendium, but it's their differences that we should explore first.

Shireen: My cookbook is a Cape Malay cookbook, but it's also an Islamic cookbook. And it's my family cookbook. It depends on who I'm talking about. When I talk about my grandparents, I need to say that my grandmother was not ethnically Cape Malay. She was Indian, and she became a Cape Malay wife by marrying my grandfather.

RB: So, you're working with a fluid sense of Cape Malay in your cookbook, right? The Cape Malay identity that was shaped before and after World War II by figures such as I.D. du Plessis is controversial. One of the earliest extensions of this essentialist view was Hilda Gerber's '*Traditional Cookery of the Cape Malays'* (Gerber 1954). It took nearly 40 years for the, the real complexities of Cape Malay cuisine to be expressed in published cookbooks, starting with Faldela Williams' '*The Cape Malay Cookbook'* and Cass Abrahams' '*The Culture & Cuisine of the Cape Malays'*, and then really growing in a range of cookbooks from 2008 onwards (Abrahams 1995; Williams 1993). Your cookbook takes the notion of "Cape Malay" even further.

Shireen: When I talk about the Cape Malay in Cape Town, I'm acknowledging many differences and contradictions. For example, the difference between growing up Cape Malay in the north of Cape Town and the south of Cape Town. In my research for my cookbook, I found that families who moved from the south to the north lost the older traditions of the south and became detached from that identity. Not in the sense that they are not Cape Malay, but rather in the sense that they are finding new and different ways to be Cape Malay in the suburbs.

RB: How do you understand "north" and "south" in the way you're using it?

Shireen: It's what's on either side of the "*Boerewors* (South African beef sausage) Curtain" (*laughs*)! Anything just above the city is north, and everything below the city is south. Kensington is technically north, but people still call it south because of forced removals. Kensington used to be a largely Black, but also mixed area. People were moved out of Kensington to Langa and Nyanga, and a lot of the, especially Muslim community, were moved from District Six to Kensington. So, for me, the north doesn't include Kensington, and the "curtain" actually starts next door at Canal Walk. The part of my family who moved to Kensington are very traditionally Cape Malay. They follow those traditions that are practiced in the south of Cape Town. My own family moved to the north of Cape Town and have a very different way of being Cape Malay.

RB: This is further complicated by who does and doesn't grow up Cape Malay, and who over time, becomes Cape Malay, which is part of how you're arguing for a more complex understanding of Cape Malay.

Shireen: My dad and his sister didn't grow up with Cape Malay parents. Only their father was Cape Malay. And my dad and his sister then also married people who weren't Cape Malay. So, we see

Cape Malay a little differently. Producing the cookbook helped me think through where I belong in this community that we call "Cape Malay", and also challenge popular notions of the "curtain" that divides north and south.

RB: Producing a cookbook is complex, especially when they are bound up in the political histories of racism and forced removals that intersect with the personal histories of generational and intergenerational memory and archive.

Shireen: This cookbook has been a very emotional journey, especially for my dad. He's had to face things he'd been pushing away since his mother passed away. The other day, when I was sitting with my scarf in a turban and wearing an apron because I had just made *Akhni*, he said I reminded him of his mother. It's a big step for him even to be eating the food that I make and at the same time reminisce about his mother.

Limpho: Shireen's cookbook has a deep sense of identity—her grandmother's identity, her family's identity, her Muslim identity—and not only how these affect her ways of being in the kitchen, but also how she cooks food today for her family. Her cooking must be powerful, because it resonates so strongly with her father, and reminds him of his mother, your grandmother. You have your grandmother's spirit hands when you are cooking.

Shireen: I've said it already, but my grandmother was not Cape Malay. She became a Cape Malay wife. My stepmother, who is white and grew up in Durban as an Anglican, was also not Cape Malay, but she has become a Cape Malay wife. A sense of shared community is so much more important than ethnicity. My stepmother became Muslim in Cape Town, started participating in traditions and cultures that exist within these communities and took on the identity of being Cape Malay. This is why Cape Malay is more about being Muslim and being in a community than it is about having a particular ethnic background. If it's only about ethnicity, then it's going to be complicated, because the ethnicities that constitute Cape Malay are so many.

Amber: Shireen's cookbook is about trying to navigate and understand her religious identity through food. I'm not religious, but I'm close to religion. The most religious part of my cookbook is the Easter weekend. It's the only time we're super strict. We only eat fish on Good Friday. And if you don't eat fish, you eat hot cross buns and cheese!

RB: So, if it's not about religion, what is your cookbook about?

Amber: My cookbook turned out to be nothing that I thought it would be. It turned into an ode to my grandparents. For the longest time, my grandparents would not talk about forced removals. My grandfather only spoke to me about forced removals towards the end of his life. My cookbook is about piecing together this knowledge about my family.

RB: You don't address this directly in the cookbook. But, it's everywhere in how your family holds onto a sense of connection and sharing despite a trauma that sent different parts of the family in different directions. It's one of a number of subtle political layers in your cookbook.

Amber: There are politics on many different levels in my cookbook. My great-grandfather was a coloured man living in Lansdowne, which was declared a white area. When he died in 1972, the family wasn't allowed to inherit the three homes he owned. Everyone moved to a different area—Grassy Park, Pinati Estate, Southfield and Kensington. Forced removals broke up the family. And then there are the family dynamics that are the result of anti-apartheid politics. My dad was part of MK, but the family still doesn't talk about that. They will acknowledge it, but nothing more.

Shireen: The common theme between Amber's and my cookbook is the family politics—the trauma, the disagreements, the arguments. There is family we don't speak to anymore, and family we've both decided to leave out of the cookbook for different reasons, but which all stem from a place of trauma. Amber's cookbook is more of an archival journey. None of her siblings or cousins want to learn how to cook, and the family recipes are going to disappear if they are not recorded. But in being this archive and trying to curate a cookbook out of this archive, her project is full of the politics she spoke about—not only the politics of her dad's involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle, but also the politics of being coloured in Cape Town, and their own immediate family politics.

Limpho: Amber's cookbook is a tribute to her family and the ways in which they have continued to be together. So even though her cookbook is about many days in the year, her Christmas lunch is the centre of the cookbook. There is a sense of the detail and preparation that goes into Christmas, starting with the first family meeting in September! Each person makes the same dish in very particular ways, making the selection of recipes complicated, especially when the recipes themselves are so

much a part of family histories and politics. It wasn't so complicated with my cookbook, which is about the recipes that come from the kitchens that are close to me. It's a reflection on the dishes that have been prepared in my grandmother's kitchen, and then thinking about how different my mom's kitchen is from my grandmother's kitchen. Where my grandmother's kitchen was centred around hospitality, my mom's was about survival. In my own kitchen, I'm trying to hold these two kitchens, but also find a home for the vegan food that comes out of my kitchen. But as much as it's about my own veganism, it's also about me grappling with my own memory of the kitchen as a gendered and contested space.

Shireen: There are strong women in Limpho's cookbook, which makes me think about the many ways in which kitchens are woman-only and woman-run spaces. In Limpho's memory, her grandmother's kitchen was a lot stricter than her mother's kitchen. You followed instructions. You sat at the table. You cut the vegetables. But in her mother's house, you sat in front of the TV instead of at the kitchen table. And then Limpho's kitchen has exploded all of this by trying to figure out a new vegan kitchen for herself, but still also going back to these kitchens of her past. She's holding onto tradition, even though she is exploring new ideas.

Amber: Limpho's kitchen is about experimenting, about taking what she remembers from these other kitchens and shaping these memories into her vegan kitchen. Because these prior kitchens were so contested, Limpho's cookbook is also about trying to reconnect with food.

RB: If we think about all the kitchens that make up the cookbooks, there are the kitchens of grandmothers, mothers, stepmothers, fathers, aunts and uncles. They are the kitchens of homemakers, traditionalists, trade unionists, freedom fighters and eccentrics. To hold all these kitchens, you've chosen to organise your cookbooks in different ways—by days, by people, by culture. Can you talk about how and why you've chosen to organise the cookbooks in these ways?

Amber: I chose different days because my cookbook is about the rhythm of how we affirm each other as a family. There are five kinds of days that are family-centric and affirm who we are as a family—ordinary Sunday lunches, Easter lunches, Christmas day, birthdays and *braai* (BBQ) days.

RB: And for each of these days, it's also about the people who make the food on those days, which in turn, also says something about their own histories. This was really evident in your section on *braai* days.

Amber: *Braai* days are about three things—meat, fish and *potjie* (food cooked in a cast iron pot over an open fire). My dad flame grills meat like he's at a *shisa nyama* (burnt meat) because that's how the MK operatives cooked meat in Langa, and even though my mother thinks he burns the meat. My great-grandfather and his father before him were fishermen, so cooking fish on the fire is part of our history. In my family, there is always fish available and my two uncles do the fish *braai*. Everyone in the family has their favourite fish. I don't like *snoek* (pike) because it can easily go *pap* (soft). But a *snoek* head is my favourite kind of fish head only in a *lang sous* (long sauce). And then *braai* days are also about *potjie*, which my other uncle does, from when he started going on camping trips to racially segregated campsites like *Soetwater* outside *Kommetjie* (campsite in Cape Town).

Limpho: For my structure, I chose three homes, the three kitchens within those homes and the three people who prepared food in those kitchens. I was raised in two of these homes, both of which were in Kimberley. I was raised in both these kitchens and many of my culinary skills, which I resisted at the time, are rooted in those two kitchens.

RB: If your cookbook is structured around people, does this suggest that you associate particular foods with particular people?

Limpho: Some dishes, yes, but also other memories, like cutting vegetables in my grandmother's kitchen. I concentrated less on what she was making and more on what she was saying. Which is also why I remember so much about my grandmother, even more than my mom remembers about her own mother.

RB: In some ways you left those kitchens behind because you didn't absorb the recipes, but now that you're an adult you're wanting to go back to those kitchens, but as a vegan.

Limpho: I'm going back because those dishes were good and many of them are still my favourite dishes. I know I'm not going to find vegan pilchards anywhere, but I can still get something of that flavour in the simplicity of tomato, onion, chilli, salt and pepper. So, it's a going back, entering the space and thinking about my mom, thinking about my grandmother, remembering dishes and replicating a vegan version of these memories.

Shireen: I started with Cape Malay culture, because I needed to establish who I am in relation to this identity. From there I moved to religion because it influences everything Cape Malay culture. All our traditions celebrate some aspect of Islam. And then the cookbook moves to geography, because this allowed me the freedom to move out of Cape Town and consider other foods that I have introduced into my kitchen—especially cuisines that are similarly creole or are marked by colonialism, like Mexican food, and then the Arab food that my grandmother brought back to her kitchen through travel. There are also some foods that I eat that are not part of my kitchen and not in my cookbook. I eat biryani, but it's not my biryani, it's not in my cookbook. Not because it's Indian rather than a Cape Malay dish, but because there are two people in my family who makes the best biryani. And I leave it to them.

RB: How do you understand the differences between Indian and Cape Malay food?

Shireen: Indian curries are stronger, spicier curries, while Cape Malay curries are softer and sweeter. Cape Malay food in general is sweeter. *Bobotie* (spiced minced meat baked with a custard topping), which I also didn't include in my cookbook, is a good example of this sweeter style.

RB: Everybody makes a version of *bobotie*. Is it one of South Africa's national dishes?

Amber: Nobody else in the world makes *bobotie*. But Cape Malay people will say you must make it this way, and Coloured people will say you must make it that way. And Afrikaners will say another way. It's a debate between these different ways of making *bobotie*, which is also what makes it even more South African. But *bobotie* is very bland. The mince is barely spiced.

Shireen: *Akhni* would be a better option. It's also only made here, but there are so many different versions of it.

Amber: A full-house steak masala Gatsby would be a better option!

Shireen: A Gatsby cannot be a South African national dish because the Gatsby is a Cape Town thing.

RB: Food is slippery, like Cheryl-Ann Michael suggests (Michael 2006), and it can become a emotional conversation very quickly, and we have to find more imaginative ways of thinking about food and telling stories that can still hold and navigate emotions.

Limpho: I didn't give myself the room to mourn my grandmother's death, at the time when she died and also afterwards. With the cookbook, I've had to remember a lot of things, but it has been difficult because family politics means I don't have access to my grandmother's house anymore. A part of me wanted to reach out to this part of the family, but I sit with not forgiving a lot of them for what they did before and after my grandmother's death. I can feel her presence, but I still wonder whether I'm remembering correctly, or whether I'm doing her justice. I returned to these childhood memories of my grandmother, knowing that it's a good space, but also crying about it while I'm making my cookbook. So, there were heavy emotions that I've had to navigate in this cookbook. But more importantly, it's given me the space to mourn.

Amber: It was difficult for me to confront the emotions directly. So even though my family is still around and I live with them in the same house, it's difficult to ask my parents directly about the past. I sent them questions by WhatsApp, even when they were upstairs and I was downstairs, just so that I didn't have to confront the emotions directly.

Shireen: I was very *voorbarig* (forward)! I made sure to stand right in front of them and say I needed to know this or that. I really wanted to hold space for my grandmother, who is someone I don't know, but whom I'm told I resemble. Oftentimes it can be frustrating, especially as a young woman, when you're told you resemble this person so much that you feel like you don't belong to yourself. And you're trying to live up to this person you have no knowledge of whatsoever. So, as much as I held a space for my grandmother in the cookbook, I was also able to clearly position myself. As much as I was forward about my questions, there were times when I also needed to step back, reflect and tell myself not to push too much because I'm dealing with something that is very traumatic. It was difficult for my dad to relive a trauma that happened thirty years ago. So, as much as I was direct, I did it in a very gentle way with my dad. When I was a teenager, we didn't have a great relationship, but we would still always get along very well in the kitchen. That is how we would re-connect and bond, through being in the kitchen and through food.

RB: There is emotion in the stories that form the basis of the cookbook. And there is emotion in the re-telling of these stories in the cookbooks themselves. But there are also secrets that are left out of the cookbook. And secrets in the not sharing of recipes themselves. How did you engage and reflect these secrets in your cookbooks?

Shireen: The milk tart that my stepmom makes is a secret that I didn't share in my cookbook. But I did write about why she preferred to keep it a secret. The recipe is from her grandmother, who raised her and with whom she was really close. It's also a family favourite, and she wanted to protect that shared memory and emotion by keeping it secret. My stepmother had a difficult childhood, and it was these secret things that helped keep them together. It's also her way of protecting her family now, and also preserving the memory of the grandmother who protected her.

Amber: My sister's spice mix is secret. She says it's her secret. When we bought fish and chips, she only ate the chips with what was called "Fisherman's Spice". We never knew what was in that spice, but Storm decided she wanted to make it herself. Whenever my dad went away, he'd bring back spices for my sister to try and mix with other spices, until eventually Storm came up with a mix that was exactly like the spice on the chips. And now we put it on everything—hot chips, fried fish, fried chicken and even eggs. So, the mix is her secret, and she doesn't want anyone to know.

Limpho: In terms of recipes, I don't have family secrets. Because food is based on what's available in the house. But if I had to think about there being a secret in my cookbook, then perhaps my grief is the secret, because I don't go into much detail in the cookbook about my grief about my grandmother's death. The way I present the recipes masks the grief, mostly because I'm still learning to navigate the emotion of that grief. My mom was shocked that I still have my grandmother's skirt and coat. She said I should learn to let them go. But I have my own process.

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