

# C. Louis Leipoldt and the Role of the “Cape Malay” in South African Cookery

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## Summary

The famous Afrikaans poet C. Louis Leipoldt (1880-1947) has long been misread as a nationalist writer. During the first half of the 20th century Leipoldt's poetry seemed to be in sympathy with Afrikaner nationalism, and since his death he has mostly been remembered for this element of his work. Recent scholarship reveals a different Leipoldt, one fiercely anti-nationalist in his unpublished English fiction and more openly aggressive in his non-fiction prose. Leipoldt regularly wrote about food and culinary traditions in South Africa and used his knowledge of local cuisine to argue against notions of “authentic Afrikaner dishes”, instead insisting that the earliest authorities behind original South African dishes came from the “Cape Malay” population of the Western Cape. This article aims to explore Leipoldt's cosmopolitan argument against political, sectional possessiveness in the cultural development of South Africa between the mid-19th and early-20th centuries, with a sustained focus on the importance of food as a cultural marker.

## Opsomming

Die bekende Afrikaanse skrywer C. Louis Leipoldt (1880-1947) is vir 'n lang tyd verkeerdelik bestempel as 'n nasionalistiese skrywer. Gedurende die eerste helfte van die 20ste eeu is sy poësie beskou as simpatiek teenoor Afrikanernasionalisme, en sedert sy dood word hy grootliks hiervoor onthou. Onlangse studies beweer egter dat Leipoldt inderdaad anti-nasionalisties was in sy ongepubliseerde Engelse fiksie en selfs openlik aggressief in sy niefiksie. Leipoldt het ook heelwat geskryf oor kos en die kookkunstradisie in Suid-Afrika en het sy kennis van die plaaslike kookkuns gebruik om te argumenteer dat daar nie iets soos “outentieke Afrikanerdisse” bestaan nie, maar dat die vroegste bewyse vir Suid-Afrikaanse resepte eerder gevind kan word in die kookkuns van die “Kaaps-Maleise” bevolking in die Wes-Kaap. Hierdie artikel ondersoek Leipoldt se kosmopolitiese argument teen die politieke, seksionele besitname van die kulturele ontwikkeling in Suid-Afrika tussen die mid-19de en vroeg-20ste eeu, met die fokus op kos as 'n kulturele merker.

My friend asked me to serve him something truly indigenous. I replied that there was no such thing as an authentically Afrikaans dish

...

(Leipoldt 2004: 208)



C. Louis Leipoldt was born on 28 December 1880 to a missionary family in the Cape Colony and, under private tutelage, became an accomplished reader and writer, able to speak, read or write in eight languages. He held numerous vocations, working firstly as a journalist for wartime publications during the Anglo Boer War of 1899-1902, then qualifying as a physician abroad, establishing a practice in South Africa in 1914. He also became a health inspector of schools and secretary of the first *South African Medical Journal* in 1929, as well as a part-time lecturer in paediatrics at the University of Cape Town. He also resumed journalism, writing for numerous Afrikaans publications throughout the 1920s.

As a writer, his palette was broad: in Afrikaans, he published collections of poetry; short and long fictional writing; plays; historical works; cookbooks; and wine guides. In English, he published personal memoirs; a retrospective on the cultural history of food and wine in the Western Cape; a collection of poetry; and an entry on South African cultural development for the *Cambridge History of the British Empire* series. He also tried, unsuccessfully, to publish a trilogy of novels he had written in English. His legacy after his death on 12 April 1947 was initially seen to be his Afrikaans poetry and his medical work. Established perception saw him as an Afrikaner nationalist, an opinion largely based on the tone and sentiments of many of his poems. However, recent studies and the belated publication of his trilogy of English novels in 2001 to a large extent contradict this reputation, and in recent scholarship there is the emergence of a “different” Leipoldt, who can now be seen as an English-speaking anti-nationalist and cosmopolitan figure with visionary ideas about future democratic cultural developments in and for South Africa. This article intends to explore Leipoldt’s anti-nationalist stance through his writing about food.

Leipoldt’s early life was spent in the Western Cape, South Africa, then under British Colonial rule. Born in Worcester, inland from Cape Town, he was raised in the Hantam region, in the valley town of Clanwilliam. His father was a German-speaking Moravian missionary who had previously been stationed in Sumatra, Indonesia, with his South African wife, Christina, born Ana Meta Christina Esselin (Leipoldt’s mother). This association with the East fascinated Leipoldt, as is evident both in his literary output and his culinary pursuits.

As a teenager he had an interest in botany, and the distinguished Cape botanist Sir Harry Bolus took the young Leipoldt in as a ward and a friend, becoming a significant figure in Leipoldt’s life. The natural scenery of the Hantam region left lasting impressions on this author, as did his interactions with the Valley communities. These communities included Afrikaner farming families, English and European settlers and “non-white”, or coloured, worker families. From an early age he had ideas of eliminating racial boundaries between white and non-white South Africans, and in 1896, aged 16, he wrote a letter (using a pseudonym) about “The Coloured Question” to



the *Cape Argus*, calling for the recognition of non-whites as equals. There were heated responses from the newspaper's readership. Upon leaving Clanwilliam to seek employment in Cape Town in 1898, Leipoldt for a time stayed with a Cape Muslim family.

Leipoldt, in his capacity as a popular writer who appealed to an Afrikaner readership, wrote a regular column for *Die Huisgenoot*, which was among the most pre-eminent Afrikaner publications from the 1920s to the 1990s. Originally contributing under his own name (he was a qualified paediatrician) articles concerned with health and medicinal practices and acting as a familiar, as well as a literary "house doctor", Leipoldt, under the pseudonym KAR Bonade, also delighted in providing discourses on culinary matters to *Die Huisgenoot*'s readers. Between 1942 and 1947 (the year of his death), Leipoldt wrote more than fifty pieces devoted to cooking.

His recipes were never metrically precise, as his most notable biographer, J.C. Kannemeyer (1999: 566), finds, but instead they were discourses, in fine Afrikaans prose, on the art of cooking, which Kannemeyer (p. 567) describes as pieces for the connoisseur rather than the layman cook. While studying medicine abroad, Leipoldt came into contact with the famed French master chef Auguste Escoffier, who took a liking to Leipoldt and partially introduced him to fine culinary practices. The sense of sophistication inspired by Escoffier, as well as Leipoldt's own cosmopolitan background, can be found, among other things, in his discourses on food.

At a time in the 1920s to 1940s when Afrikaner lobbying by the National Party was at its zenith, so much so that claim was staked to what constituted authentic Afrikaner dishes, Leipoldt emerged as an antidote, a known writer with a great knowledge of the history of national culinary practices, who could (and did) dispute this sense of aggressive possessiveness and instead argued, as he did in his literary output, for cultural inclusivity. In short, if he disseminated the notion of a South African culture in harmony in his fictional works and critical pieces, he did the same when he talked about food. Leipoldt's famed hospitality, the regular get-togethers and dinner parties at his Kenilworth home in the 1920s to 1940s, often centred around meals and the dinner table, immaculately prepared with optimistically exotic, at times bizarre, dishes and a gentrified seating arrangement. In this way, this particular element of his life story reads as a narrative of old-fashioned patrician values being played out in a quasi-modernist context: it was at the dinner parties he hosted that Leipoldt would tender his take on South Africa's racial concerns and cultural development before guests that sometimes included the foremost literary or political figures of his day (Kannemeyer 1999: 493).

The National Party, through citing its own history as one associated with mobility and struggle (The Great Trek and the Anglo Boer War) could appeal to imaginations of their followers: like the Trekkers almost a century before them, they could convince themselves as forever following a Biblical narrative of being "Chosen People". With the support of the Dutch Reform-



ed Church and the ability to manipulate the story of the Anglo Boer War as a battle for independence that had to be continued, the National Party could speak of a self-righteous identity out to right the wrongs of the past and assert itself as independent and proud:

The Afrikaner's source of power was allegiance to South Africa as their only fatherland. Hertzog called the Afrikaners "pioneers" of South Africa. With ancestry in Dutch, French and German, the Afrikaner was never heard to proclaim his faith in either.

(Giliomee 2003: 350)

In his trilogy of English novels, Leipoldt contests the idea that the Afrikaner has no cultural debt to Europe, and this debate is a running motif throughout the trilogy. Leipoldt's regular criticism of Afrikaner sentiment appeared in almost all facets of his writing, and this tone can be detected in his writing about food.

If the Afrikaner nationalist project in the 1920s to 1940s had as an aim the establishment of an authentic white African identity, its cultural influence could be researched in many facets of daily Afrikaner life at the time: magazines like *Die Huisgenoot* were sounding boards for maxims of good house-keeping, good reading, good patriotic practices and good health, mostly along the lines of what was good for the Afrikaner family. Afrikaner extremists were vigorous in their moves toward an English-free republic in which non-whites were to play subordinate roles only. The Federation of Afrikaner Cultural Associations (FAK) was established to legislate Afrikaans literature, language practice, drama, financial corporations and businesses as far as possible.

Like many other famous writers at the time, Leipoldt was employed by top Afrikaner publications to write weekly columns with the aim of strengthening Afrikaner identity: while common readers would be drawn by accessible and familiar topics that served the greater purposes of cultural development, the Afrikaans language itself was also gaining more exposure this way, which was a key edict of the nationalists. Leipoldt often strayed from his "patriotic duties" to Afrikaner readers by using his journalistic output and astonishing world knowledge as a didactic platform on which he could place his views of a liberal, racially inclusive South Africa. Even when it came to discussing food, he saw a means to educate and promote harmony but, sometimes, to dispel notions of authentic Afrikaans cuisine:

Our Afrikaans culinary art is about as feeble as our volkspele [folk dances], and these too are imitations of what we have inherited from Europe.

(Leipoldt 2004: 227)

The quote is in keeping with Leipoldt's general attitude towards the National Party in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In various newspaper articles in



the 1920s, he attacked nationalists for their insistence in promulgating Afrikaner culture that, to Leipoldt, was largely based on anti-English sentiment. Impoverished white Afrikaners were, to Leipoldt, becoming “masters of the North” in that in the Transvaal mining and railway industry poor whites were being uplifted, at the expense of black workers, to play a greater part in the mechanisation and modernisation of the country (Merrington 2003: 35). Running alongside this evolution into the modern is a moral devolution Leipoldt was concerned with in the form of moral exhaustion, physical decay and the problem of “poor whites” as a sign of social degeneracy ...” (Merrington 2003: 41). This degeneracy, in Leipoldt’s scheme, was destined to be incorporated, rather than tended to and improved, by the 1920s Afrikaner nationalists as part of their popular lobbying, both for a divided white South Africa and a larger count of white Afrikaans-speakers to the vote.

Acting as something of a cultural historian in many of his articles on food, Leipoldt also wrote *Cape Cookery* (posthumously published in 1976), a book that partially assimilated his recipes with his social commentary. In the book he dismisses the first published Afrikaans cookbook, a compilation of recipes by E.J. Dijkman. His grounds for disappointment include the political connotations to “ordinary fruit cakes” named after famous Boer leaders in the Anglo Boer War, the mere repetition and translation of recipes already to be found in Dutch cookbooks, as well as its author’s lack of insight on fish dishes and her “frugal employment of wines and spices” (Leipoldt 2004: 27), which is undesirable. In his criticism, he appears to rebuke repetitive and overzealous appeals to culture: perhaps both out of his respect for certain Boer War leaders (like Louis Botha) and his disdain for others, Leipoldt lambastes that ordinary fruit cakes are merely made to sound important through these connections. In other words, a revolutionary event was being “used” to help nurture Afrikaner cultural growth (even to the extent of naming cakes), and Leipoldt, a first-hand witness to certain events in the Anglo Boer War, was scathing of such appeals to sentiment. He would launch similar attacks on Afrikaans literature in the 1920s when he sensed that saccharine novels glorifying the Anglo Boer War for Afrikaners were popular. The nationalists were gaining power through appeals to sentiment, usually by holding the Anglo Boer War as the trump card that inspired emotion when it was appealed to as the event that forever changed Afrikaner history. Whether the politicians were urging their followers to never forget the War or whether it became the subject matter of many books, the danger of establishing culture on sentiment, to Leipoldt’s mind, was a great hindrance:

Instead of writing ... purely literary books, you are producing propaganda literature, and you are using your schools, your universities, and your cultural centres for the dissemination of propaganda, not culture.

(Leipoldt 2001: 557-559)



Leipoldt also opposed the removal of South Africa's Dutch cultural ties (in particular the language and literature) in favour of Afrikaans, and repeatedly pointed out that Afrikaans culture still owed a great debt to the Dutch, a debt that he felt nationalist Afrikaners were quick to forget. To Leipoldt, the Dutch influence was still visible and, as in Dijkman's book, it often appeared in the form of Afrikaans repetition, or was copied over into Afrikaans. Giliomee mentions that Leipoldt considered the replacing of Dutch by Afrikaans as a "monstrosity" (2003: 391).

However, similar to Leipoldt's English trilogy of novels and its anti-sectarian stance, Leipoldt's food writing also revealed that, in his view, if any culture were to be seen as having some authoritative stamp on South African cuisine, it would not be from any of the white sections but from the "Cape Malay" population.

The term "Cape Malay" refers to Cape-based Muslim people that make up the "largest group of practising Muslims in South Africa" (Mandivenga 2000: 1), with the arrival of Islam to South Africa researched as originating in the 1660s when Malay Muslims, mainly from the Indonesian Archipelago were brought to the country, either in bondage, servitude or exile (2000: 1). The term "Cape Malay" is sometimes synonymous with the term Cape Coloured, almost a direct reference to coloured people in the Cape devoted to Islam, but also problematic in that "Cape Coloured" could as easily be a reference to most Christian coloured people based in the Cape. The very racial classification of "coloured" is one that has historically been contentious:

The category "Coloured" has no doubt been the most nettlesome .... This "group" was constituted historically out of descendants of various unions between African persons and European persons. It also included persons brought from the East Indies centuries ago, who came to be known as Cape Malays. The "Coloureds" were mostly persons who in other parts of the world would have been called "mulattos" ....

(Wallerstein 1987: 374)

In his biographical writings, Leipoldt fixates on his father's missionary experience in Sumatra, as well as his reverence for "Cape Malay" cooking. His idea of the Cape Malay can roughly be attributed to an amalgamation of the Cape Coloured and/or Muslim population he encountered both at Clanwilliam and in Cape Town. Leipoldt often mentions the "Ayah" (an affectionate if somewhat inapt term for a coloured domestic servant in a white South African household at the time) he grew up with, a domestic servant in his family home from whom he gleaned many of his first impressions of cooking. This woman, Ayah Hannah, may also have been the likely inspiration for the character "Ayah Minah" in his contentious novel, *The Mask* (2001, completed 1932), based on his own Afrikaans play *Afgode* (1929).



Gabea Baderoon's article, "A Never-Ending Series of Pictures: Representations of Muslim Food in Cape Town" (2004) deals, among other things, with the historical depiction of the "Cape Malay" figure, as well as the propinquity between the "Cape Malay" and food in national (and perhaps international) discourse. The article also differentiates between the terms "Islamic" and "Muslim" in addressing common misperceptions of both, which Baderoon argues "leads to an erasure of difference between and within Muslim communities" (2004: 18). The history of slavery in the Cape Colony plays a large, if at times subliminal, part in early writing about food in the Cape, and Baderoon refers to local cook Cass Abrahams's thoughts in a 2002 interview when saying that the "contents, methods and rituals of 'Cape Malay' food demonstrate its development under slavery ... 'Cape Malay' food was among the earliest 'fusion' food in South Africa". In the interview, Abrahams tells Baderoon:

"[T]he spices and fusions of Khoi-san and Dutch food gave rise to what is known as Cape Malay cuisine today. So you can think of the meat loaf coming from Holland and the spices added to that to make a bobotie. So there you have a fusion, it's a very good example, and is incidentally the national dish of South Africa as well ...."

(Abrahams in Baderoon 2004: 16)

One of Baderoon's stated interests in her article "is how representations of Muslim food ... can also encode other, resistant meanings" (2004: 28), referring to how slaves and servants working in Cape kitchens during the 19th century were sometimes able to "use the objects of consumption in ways that exceed and escape the desires of the dominant classes" (2004: 15). She goes on to explore the idea of resistant meaning through recent debates regarding calls for rereadings of South African slave history that eschew various tropes. The most consistent example Baderoon cites (and disagrees with, partially) is Sarah Nuttal and Cheryl-Anne Michaels's *Senses of Culture* (2000), which argues against reading South African slavery through exceptionalism and invocations of segregation. Nuttal and Michaels also call for recognition of intimacies (of culture) between slaves and slave owners, moments of cultural continuity. Critics of this approach counter-argue that such a study is limited, as it does not take into account a pre-apartheid history of segregation even as it calls for separating these "intimate" transactions from the spectre of apartheid. While she focuses for a while on the debate between *Senses of Culture*'s writers and their critics, what is more interesting about Baderoon's idea of resistant meaning is her observations on the cultural exchanges between slaves and slave owners in the Cape – not so much for the "unequal intimacies" she mentions (and traces in books like Rayda Jacobs's *The Slave Book*) but for cosmopolitan findings, the "fusions" that Abrahams mentioned to her in their interview. On the topic of cosmopolitanism, I hope to find a space for Leipoldt's voice.



Leipoldt's writings on the "Cape Malay" cooks make no aspiration towards offering his thoughts on 19th-century slavery so that they could give a focused and sustained take on the "Cape Malay" cooks who were bought as slaves. Neither does he say much about Muslim people in the Cape, although he does perpetually return to his fascination with the inhabitants, many of whom came to the Cape as slaves, from foreign territories that are Islamic, as well as Eastern mysticism. While he does include this history in his writing on Cape food, he has other aims when he does so, which I will discuss later. Leipoldt's thoughts on slavery include a broader trajectory of looking at coloured people in the Cape Colony, called half-castes and natives in the 19th century. He explores the role of Cape coloured people in the cultural development of South Africa largely in his fiction: in his Afrikaans writings they make small but significant appearances but in his trilogy of English novels they form a greater part of his anti-nationalist argument, so much so that the key character in the trilogy's concluding novel is a coloured domestic servant who is a cipher of the unequal relations evident in the domestic environment. While Leipoldt's writing on Cape food does not pursue any grand ambition to give voice to coloured slaves and servants, he does humanise them and reveres their culinary skill; when he calls them artists he does not abstract them but emphasises his own take on the complex blend of personal and social factors he considers inherent in all artistry and in part of his major works in fiction, poetry and journalism.

Baderoon cites Jacobs's *The Slave Book* and the more recent work of conceptual artist Berni Searle as crucial to understanding the forged links between women slaves and the sexual gaze of the slave owner, and how especially Searle's work explores "returning the gaze". Leipoldt's writings on Cape food acknowledge the familiar idiom linking "Cape Malay" women to the kitchen, although he does not offer any more than the acknowledgement when he includes quotes from 19th-century advertisements:

The Malay community at the Cape always had a reputation for its good cookery and even now the best women cooks are to be found among the Coloured people who have been trained to appreciate all that is best in both eastern and western culinary fashions. In the old days a Malay cook was regarded as indispensable for the household that wished to entertain; slaves who had knowledge of this kind of cookery commanded a far higher price than other domestic chattels. Thus a local advertisement stated that "Malani, a good cook, exceptionally skilled and not wasteful in the kitchen," was one of five slaves to be sold on behalf of the estate of a deceased owner; while an account of a slave auction related that "there was spirited competition for Emerentia, who is an acknowledged artist of the pot". At the hospitable house where the young officer, later on to be Lord Wellington, the conqueror of Napoleon, but at that time rustivating on his way to India, was frequently entertained by the richest man in Cape Town, the cook was a Coloured woman, skilled in the preparation of oriental dishes ....

(Leipoldt 2004: 22)



What is perhaps most striking about this quote is the lack of commentary Leipoldt offers about slavery, given his strong humanitarian stance in especially *The Valley* trilogy. The emphasis is instead on the slave Emerentia who is regarded as an “artist” of the pot, as well as the cook who served dishes of a high enough quality to impress Lord Wellington. It is challenging to decide whether Leipoldt mentally connected the artistry of coloured women cooks to their bondage, or whether he merely neglected it altogether in his writing. In the opening novel to the *The Valley* trilogy, *Gallows Gecko*, the question persists. Time and again the novel goes on to address the history of slavery in the Colony, but this usually happens in a disinterested manner or as a minor contextual point in conversations. These brief asides do enough to ensure that there is not the abject denial of the role of slavery but do not venture any further, apart from emphasising the link between former slave women cooks and artistry.

For instance, in the novel the servant Regina, a former slave, is mentioned as “a wrinkled and podgy woman skilled at kitchen work and a mistress in the art of baking bread and griddle cakes” (Leipoldt 2001: 18). Regina and her husband Sylvester are described as former slaves that “had that respect for authority and that conception of loyalty which were innate in those who had been brought up under a system of paternal slavery” (p. 18). When we look closely at the novel, few traces of slave or servant resistance can be found; Leipoldt merely gives routine descriptions of servants that used to be slaves.

Yet, in *The Mask*, the final novel in the trilogy, Leipoldt’s most intriguing character is Ayah Mina, a domestic servant to a villainous mayoral figure, who had secretly fathered a child with her from an apparently savage encounter, a secret that they both keep from his fragile wife – although Ayah Mina’s reason for keeping the secret is to shelter the wife, Maria, from her husband’s treachery, whereas his reason is merely selfish. When Ayah Mina and Maria interact, it is usually in the kitchen and the dramatic tension is effective when, in spite of the Ayah’s history with the husband, there are hints of a rivalry for the running of the household (put into perspective at the novel’s twist ending) between the quiet, saintly wife and the domestic servant. So, while Leipoldt could merely acknowledge the tendency to associate “Cape Malay” women with the kitchen in his writing about food, he did pursue writing a sustained fictional project that included as a theme the sexual gaze of the white master figure, and the miscegenation that occurs between the white master and the “Cape Malay” domestic servant as a result of avarice and moral corruption on the former’s part.

In his Afrikaans cooking contributions, Leipoldt also has this to say about “Cape Malay” women cooks:

The old Ayah who gave me my first cooking lessons, in my early youth – and I must admit that, in all honesty, the old soul taught me more than Maitre Escoffier, for whom I had the honour of washing dishes and filling a



sucking lamb with chestnuts – always said: “My Basie, raisin rice and pie-nangvleis – now that is something that Basie will never learn to make as it should be made. Only we Blacks can make it properly, not Dutchmen!” ... In those days – I have said it was in my tender youth – I still had the cheek to suggest to the old soul that a woman could never really be a first-class cook .... Now that I am older I feel I must apologize to Ayah Hannah. I know that I cannot make curried meat as it should be made. The “yellow raisin rice” – that is no miracle .... But curried meat – the real, unadulterated, traditional, unequalled thing – that requires far too much patience for my liking. I therefore appreciate it all the more when I happen to get some to eat. Even when made by a woman! I know a few who can prepare it excellently, even though not in Ayah Hannah’s more or less ritual way.

(Leipoldt 2004: 241)

Familiar interests of Leipoldt’s can be spotted here: his fixation with the past, which is a generational yearning for Old World sensibilities (he inserts this yearning to greater effect in his English trilogy of novels), his appreciation of tradition and his description of food as works of art, categorised and classified. His familiarity with Ayah Hannah even eclipses his esteem for Escoffier, a testament to Leipoldt’s pride in his upbringing. Ayah Hannah (and later, Ayah Toontjies) is routinely mentioned in Leipoldt’s food articles, and few of his recipes count for much unless some mention of her is made. The inclusion of “even when made by a woman” may either be Leipoldt’s attempt at humility or a reflection on his youthful prejudices: the “woman” is as significant to Leipoldt as Escoffier, a male master of the kitchen domain – in other words, in the local context, Ayah Hannah is a kind of authority similar to Escoffier, lacking his credentials and reputation but living strongly (and equally alongside Escoffier) in Leipoldt’s memory and his appropriation of oral tradition.

Furthermore, Leipoldt’s obsession with the term “art” occurs regularly in most of his general writing: in articles in the 1920s he uses titles like “The Art of Reading and The Ghost Story: The Art of Fear in Literature”, and in the middle novel of his *Valley* trilogy, *Stormwrack*, the protagonist, whose primary activity in life is tending to his magnificent garden, is introduced with the description, “without knowing it, [he was] an artist” (Leipoldt 2001: 222). Often didactic, the “teacher” in Leipoldt was evident in his ambition to share his great worldly knowledge with his readers, and his obviously patrician but also deep-felt appropriation of the term “art” when he was discussing anything from winemaking to medical matters. In his writing about food, he seems to hold a special association between women cooks and artistry: “I have once eaten, at the old White House in Strand Street [then the recognised Mecca of all who wished to taste good Malay cookery] where the coloured cook – my most proficient instructress in the art of making pancakes – used fish and eel flesh for the dish ...” (2004: 81) [Leipoldt mentions this in a chapter devoted to fish and seafood, and he regularly emphasises the Eastern influence on Cape seafood dishes: “One of



the best-known fish dishes at the Cape is also one of the oldest and is undoubtedly of Eastern origin. It is known as *ingelegde vis*, which is commonly „Englished’ into „curried fish’, although it should properly be called a pickled fish curry” (2004: 68). (As far as I could find, having grown up in a Western Cape coloured family, *ingelegde vis* is traditionally prepared by women – although, despite its Eastern origin, it is in this context served as a traditional Christian meal at Easter.)

In an early chapter in his *Cape Cookery*, Leipoldt sets out his hypothesis:

Properly speaking, the art of cookery is the art of preparing food for eating by cooking it, that is to say, by rendering it more palatable through the application of heat. In practice, however, the art of cookery includes much more than that, for it embraces all methods of preparing food for the table, even those in which no attempt is made to vary the character of the crude ingredients except by the addition of flavouring or the subtraction of what interferes with the palatability.

(Leipoldt 2004: 31)

Recollecting asking Ayah Hannah a question, as a child, about the preparation of mortar to include in a curried meat dish, Leipoldt (still writing as KAR Bonade) remembers:

Politely and humbly, as it behoved a descendant of slaves to address the child of a Bonade, she said: “My Basie, it is to get the soul out of it and into the meat.”

(Leipoldt 2004: 242)

When discussing *bredies* (stews), sauces and stewed fruit, Leipoldt claims:

A bredie tests the cook’s skill not only in blending, but also regarding that subtle aptitude that experience alone can make perfect – to decide when the margin between perfection and over-cooking has been reached.

(p. 96)

The Malay cooks were adept at making the exceedingly pungent, sharp, well-spiced sauces that are so much favoured in the East .... A well-made atjar is an enthralling relish, for you never know, when you are fishing in a jar, what you may come across ....

(pp. 113-114)

In preparing fruit for the table, the old Malay cooks drew on their experience with tropical fruit. They hardly ever boiled fruit in water; they recognised that most fruits contain enough water to allow gentle steaming if one wanted to cook them ....

(p. 166)

Readers familiar with Leipoldt’s critical writings and fiction will know that the didactic tone evident here was always reserved for subjects he felt passionate about, things he had to share, and an awareness of artistic com-



plexities he had to pass on. He casts the “Cape Malays” in a certain light when he writes about food: they are present as the artists who shaped Cape cooking in history, through the tribulations of slavery and emerging Afrikaner nationalist rhetoric, yet he also makes little mention of the idea that slavery may have had a strong influence on this “kitchen art”. Rather than attempt to define any fixed idea of what an Afrikaans dish could be, Leipoldt’s aim seems to show the historical importance of “Cape Malay” cooking as among the earliest examples of recognised national cuisine, much as he tries, in his English-language trilogy of novels, to show that Cape Afrikaners through the mid-19th and early-20th centuries were of greater importance than the Afrikaners who trekked out of the Colony, established their republics in the Transvaal and Orange Free State and created the modern Afrikaner. Leipoldt’s contestation of history is both determined and flawed: his tracing of the history of the “Cape Malay” influence is meticulous and could hardly be challenged, but he bases his entire cosmopolitan argument on the Cape alone. Even Leipoldt’s writing on Afrikaans cooking (for *Die Huisgenoot*, 7 August 1942) is imbued with a yearning for the old Cape and its ties with Europe:

In the good old days, when Cape Town still showed signs of being a real mother city, nurturing western civilization, it was possible – in an old-fashioned way – to learn something of real Afrikaans cookery .... The question remains whether we have a culinary art that can validly be described as genuinely and indigenously Afrikaans ... there is hardly any so-called “Afrikaans dish” the preparation and contents of which were not known to our forefathers in Europe .... What we call traditional Afrikaans cooking can be compared to that found in the area south of the Ardour River in France .... Our contemporary schools for domestic science have thus far not managed to produce excellent cooks. If we were to take our cooking more seriously, we would utilize our indigenous treasures .... But without experimentation, there will be no progress.

(Leipoldt 2004: 227)

Discussing Leipoldt’s trilogy of English-language novels, Peter Merrington highlights a general tendency in his fiction and documentary prose:

By contrasting “northern” meanness of political spirit with Cape generosity, [Leipoldt] locates his authorial position within an outdated Cape patrician set of discourses .... His protagonists lament the loss of inherited tradition, brought about by the South African War, and by the new sectarian interventionist social policies of the Afrikaner nationalist party, which is regarded with suspicion as composed of people “without tradition” ... and their narrow race-based interests. What becomes evident in the trajectory of Leipoldt’s three novels is a nostalgia for a rooted or “organic” past, combined with an argument that this rooted past owned a greater sense of humane values than does his contemporary modernizing world.

(2003: 43-44)



Leipoldt's Cape patrician discourse creates a problem for itself when he discusses the figure of the "Cape Malay": he means to include this figure as an artist, a historical gatekeeper of food culture, but in lamenting the loss of the Cape Colony and its English-centred cultural development, Leipoldt is also yearning for the reinstatement of the more privileged citizens of the old Colony and their class-based interests – in other words, he yearns for the return of a world where "Cape Malays" feature as slaves, or servants. While Leipoldt, in one of his English novels, does emphasise the influence of the English settlers in the abolishment of slavery in the 1820s and 1830s in the Cape, his argument for many of the slaves choosing to stay with their masters is a thin veneer for a possibly naïve outlook that under exclusive English rule, things were simply better for everyone than under 20th-century Afrikaner rule. What he neglects to discuss (even though he does acknowledge it) is that the "artistry" of the coloured cooks he studies developed both under and possibly as a response to slavery and servitude in a world where Cape Afrikaners and English settlers were the masters. The cosmopolitanism is surely located there, and so too its influence in Cape dishes, but the social consequences to and of this cosmopolitanism are unequal to the non-white participants.

Baderoon, discussing Leipoldt's mention of the "free, almost heroic" use of spices by "Cape Malay" cooks, makes the point that, among other things, his use of the term "heroic" lends itself to the notion that the cooks, as either slaves or servants, were the masters of the kitchen; they used their skill at "combining flavours as a significant claim of control – mastery and freedom over a domain which fell beneath the surveillance of slave-owners" (2004: 15). She goes on to cite Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), in which he theorises on subversions that play on "the notions of invisibility" (2004: 15), stating that in unequal power relations, there can exist an "ambiguous" space in which objects can be destabilised by the "powerless" to disguise their resistance to the dominant figures in a society (2004: 15). This kind of resistance is not transparent, it is

devious, it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by dominant economic order.

(de Certeau in Baderoon 2004: 16)

Inasmuch as Leipoldt's "Cape Malays" are given voice through the quotes of Ayah Hannah and other servants Leipoldt was familiar with in his youth, they are still "chained" to the kitchen in his depictions of them, with Ayah Minah in *The Mask* as the only crucial exception. This somewhat deflates his arguments for racial and cultural inclusivity in the national sense even as it does supplement his research into the country's food history. In his reveries for "Cape Malay" cooks, Leipoldt does not make a case for them as



being agents of resistance, and of course it must be considered that Leipoldt himself, because of his position, may actually never have witnessed any signs, concealed or otherwise, of such resistance. Yet, considering his argument for Ayah Minah in *The Mask* (set in the “Afrikaner” 20th century), it begs the question why Leipoldt never broke with the image of the docile, familial servant in his critical writing, why he never considered that in the moral universe of his idyllic 19th-century Cape, not yet tainted by the return of Republican Afrikaners (who had left the Colony as Voortrekkers), there could have been earlier models for Ayah Minah. It may appear that in his writing, the “free, heroic” use of spices could only carry deeper connotations of resistance when squared against the 20th-century Afrikaner ethic.

Stephen Gray (1984: 1) notes that Leipoldt is an urbane storyteller, highly respectful of oral tradition, and Kannemeyer applies the term “causerie” (in Leipoldt 1990) to Leipoldt’s critical writings, referring to his ability to be conversational with his imagined readers and thereby giving an accessible, familiar spin to otherwise complex topics. His “causerie” writings in the 1920s often attempted to bring “folk” anecdotes and tales to inform the newspaper columns he was writing – columns that, as stated above, were often established for political gain by Leipoldt’s employers. In Leipoldt’s recipes, he often eschewed providing too much knowledge, instead trying to inspire “feeling” in his readers. What Kannemeyer points to as Leipoldt’s artistic sensibility in the kitchen refers to his refusal to be too precise and detailed when sharing recipes, his writing on food was meant to inform his readers more on the history of South African food, and his recipes were intended for those who already appreciated the finer points of preparing food. In this, he showed a respectful (if not overt) affinity to the Cape Malay cooks he often wrote about: these cooks had secrets outsiders could not easily learn from, and their recipes were often passed through oral tradition (Baderoon 2004: 25). Leipoldt draws on this when he writes about Cape Malay cooks, and seems to try and emulate them. Gray considers that, in Leipoldt’s work,

oral transmission is the best material for making history, thus making tradition the valuable possession instead of recorded history ... Leipoldt then commenced on the Valley project acting as a scribe to Clanwilliam and its oral tradition, but as an artist and not a historian. Yet, hearsay or oral tradition does make it historical ... Leipoldt was not interested in using history to illustrate how we come to be at one particular moment, with the implication that the moment is a summation and climax of all pre-existing events; he was far more interested in showing that history itself was, and is, in dynamic flux, a continuing process of transformations ....

(Gray1984: 2-9)

Although Gray is describing Leipoldt’s *Valley* trilogy, his assessment may be shifted to general patterns in his writing. If we reapply the focus to



Leipoldt's thoughts on food, his resistance to the idea of a national, Afrikaner cuisine has roots in his disagreement with the idea that a national history follows a certain structure that only emphasises the importance of a group of peoples, and that this history has written documentation for its various cultural tenets. It is, in fact, the practice of oral tradition that is more important to nation-building in Leipoldt's scheme. As characters in the *Valley* trilogy would have it, "national feeling presupposes a nation, and what [you] take for it is sectional feeling" (Leipoldt 2001: 147) coupled with "you cannot create tradition by act of parliament" (p. 576) are indicators of Leipoldt's scepticism regarding Afrikaner cultural supremacy.

Introducing *Cape Cookery*, Leipoldt immediately shares childhood memories of watching his family's Ayah preparing meals in the kitchen, in the late 19th century:

I assisted, in a very minor and suppressed capacity, at the culinary operations of a very expert Coloured woman cook who bore the reputation of being one of the best in the Cape Colony .... She presided over a kitchen whose cleanliness could have served as a model for an operating theatre of a modern hospital, largely because she insisted that punctilious, painstaking ablution was an indispensable preliminary in the preparation of food ....

The Ayah's art was the result of many years of instruction and experience in the traditional methods of Malay cookery, whose outstanding characteristics are the free, almost heroic, use of spices and aromatic flavourings, the prolonged steady, but slow, application of moist heat to all meat dishes, and the skilful blending of many diverse constituents into a combination that still holds the essential goodness of each. Her dishes, that were eaten by Governors, Prime Ministers and Very Important Persons, were made from old recipes that were firmly enshrined in her memory, for she never referred to written or printed directives ....

(Leipoldt 2004: 5)

We may note a worthy distinction here: Leipoldt emphasises the Ayah's ability to cook from memory without the support of written instruction. In contrast, Leipoldt was often critical of so-called Afrikaner recipes, questioning their authenticity and often quietly lambasted his readers who were in need of written recipes. An authentic national cookery, he seems to suggest, should be based on personal feeling and memory, not a handbook of instructions. Even with his mention of the "free, heroic use of spices" we may observe that, in his Afrikaans recipes for *Die Huisgenoot's* column, he subtly mentions the Afrikaner's lack of freedom when cooking, as if lambasting his readers for needing his column. A deeper point here is that Leipoldt's emphasis on memory is, of course, an observation he makes of the slaves and domestic servants he writes about, the authority figures (to his mind) behind Cape food. They are superior in the kitchen, he seems to say, because they memorise their recipes, meaning that the transference of these recipes occurs through word of mouth. An authentic food culture in



South Africa, then, owes more to the oral tradition of the Cape Malay cooks than it does to written recipes.

Much of Leipoldt's discourse in the early chapters of *Cape Cookery* seems intent on giving due recognition to the role of the Malay influence on Cape food, as well as showing how the literature on Cape cooking available at the time owed much to this. Discussing the earliest known cookbooks (or writing) on the Cape, Leipoldt emphasises the debt: Undoubtedly the most potent influence on Cape cookery has been the methods, tastes and culinary customs of the Malay cooks brought directly from Java in the early part of the eighteenth century. Sir Spenser St John, in his entertaining book *Life in the Forests of the Far East*, published in the latter part of the last century, has paid a well-deserved compliment to his Malay cook:

Malay cookery is sometimes very tasty; I remember spending a fortnight in the Sultan's palace, and we were fed daily from his kitchen; sometimes the stewed fowls were admirable and there was a particular kind of rice-cake, sent in very hot, which was delicious. But the triumph of Malay cookery is to send in the sambals in perfection, particularly the one called blachang .... I have mentioned the admirable curry which the Ahtan put before me .... it appears a very different thing from what I have tasted in England under the name of curry. A fowl is cut up into small pieces, and four dried and two green onions, five chillies, half a turmeric, one teaspoonful of coriander seed, one of white cumin, and one of sweet cumin, are provided. You must well pound the seeds, turmeric and chillies, and slice the onions fine; then take the saucepan and, after buttering it, slightly brown the onions, then add the pounded ingredients with just sufficient water to reduce them to a paste, and throw in the fowl and well mix them up, till the meat has a yellow tint, and lastly, add the cocoa-nut milk, and boil till the curry be thoroughly cooked .... The cocoa-nut milk is made by scraping the meat of half an old nut very fine, then soaking it in warm water, and after squeezing out the milk, throw the fibre away.

(Leipoldt 2003: 21-22)

These directions are identical with those of some of our earliest manuscript recipes, and show how closely East Indian methods were followed at the Cape, even though the blachang referred to is obviously a mistake for the much more pungent trassi condiment that never became naturalized anywhere outside the Malay archipelago .... It was customary for Cape housewives to commission captains of ships going to Batavia to buy and bring back modest quantities of ... spices and delicacies .... Oriental influence was predominant in Cape cookery, and its importance can easily be judged by the value attached to eastern spices and condiments in the old-fashioned recipes.

(Leipoldt 2004: 21-22)

As Leipoldt, in his English-language fiction, contested the Afrikaner nationalist project, there are traces of this trajectory when he discusses the



history of the Malay influence in Cape cooking. If he at times challenged notions of authentic Afrikaner cookery, he seemed to do so by pointing to traditional South African meals that include the “non-white” influence and significantly, the earliest published cookbooks relevant to South Africa that are not in Afrikaans or Dutch but in English. When he discusses A.G. Hewitt’s *Cape Cookery*, published in 1889, and states that it is the “first accurate account of local recipes” (Leipoldt 2004: 23), the book’s chapters on fish, especially, point to Cape Malay cooking: “smoored kreef” (smothered or stewed crayfish), “ingelegde vis” (curried pickled fish) and “smoored snoek” (smothered or stewed fish) while later chapters in Hewitt’s book describe the recipes for bobotie, Cape curry and Cape chutney – even the absence of recipes that could include wine, which Leipoldt criticises the book for, emphasise a local, Eastern tendency. [Another book, A.R. Barnes’s *Colonial Household Guide*, published shortly after Hewitt’s book, Leipoldt criticises for a lack of imagination and only counts its recipes for “cabbage bredie”, sosaties and barbel fish as among the few that could be said to have local origin – again, these recipes (with the exception of “bredies”) are more decidedly Cape Malay.] The book is also, to Leipoldt, not entirely satisfactory, as it “could not claim that it was an exhaustive collection of Cape recipes, nor that it gave the reader the best to be found in the old family manuscript cookbooks” (Leipoldt 2004: 23). The manuscripts he mentions are recipes that were written down and passed on in families, a historical marker of the development of food writing in South Africa following from informal oral transference of culinary knowledge.

Leipoldt’s anti-nationalism was complex. On the one hand, he was consistent in his calls for a South Africa free of sectionalism, yet his mostly focusing his debates from an anti-Afrikaner stance did not begin to address more pertinent questions of how he imagined a nationalism equal to all races. Similarly, his food writing indicates that he was as passionate about ridding the available local literature on South African food of Afrikaner stamps of authority, yet he seemed disinterested in pursuing any great representation of the non-Afrikaners he acknowledges as the artists behind authentic South African food. What he left behind were arresting visions of cosmopolitanism and cultural linkages through food, with highly respectful nods to the secrets transferred through oral tradition that have kept certain recipes intact. Both Leipoldt’s respectful distance from these “secrets”, as well as his arguably well-intentioned ways of drawing attention to the keepers of these secrets (as being the guardians of food culture in South Africa), possibly emerges as his contribution to the recognition of the “Cape Malay” culinary influence in South Africa.



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