

Remembering Kendejah: Theophilus Uso III's Kendejah Restaurant



-Priscilla Ankrah

One hundred years ago, Godwin Uso moved from Nigeria to Liberia. There, he met his wife, who begot Theophilus Uso II, who met Phebe, and together, begot Theophilus Douglas Uso III, who begot Kendejah Restaurant.

According to Uso III, Kendejah was in the days of old, the cultural cornerstone of Liberia, where art, cuisine, and “Liberianness,” flourished.

Inspired by what Kendejah meant in the cultural memory of Liberians, Uso III conjured Kendejah Restaurant here in San Leandro. Uso III is of America as much as he is of Africa; in his long locks and sunglasses, he reflects his father’s estate on Tubman road in Monrovia, Liberia, and the blend of hip-hop and roots music that shaped him. At fifteen, he left Monrovia to join his family in the Bay Area. A Cal Bear, and MBA graduate, Uso III invested his time and talent to build Kendejah Restaurant, an ode to the former cultural center.

Kendejah Restaurant boasts palaver sauce, cassava leaves stew, palm butter, and beans Torborgee, satisfying American and local Liberian palates. In so doing, it weaves the story of two countries struggling to define their nationhood.

Phebe, Uso III’s grandmother, was born from enslaved African peoples in America in the 1860’s. She was the product of the geopolitical forces that created Liberia, or the “The Land of Freedom,” in Africa. This mythology of Liberia as “Africa’s First Free Republic,” and its glaring contradictions, mirrors that of its patriarch, “America, the Land of the Free.”

In the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution from 1791 onwards, the ever increasing tensions that divided slave-holding and “free” states, haunted the fragile American union. Several forces converged to bolster the question of abolition: The rising population of free Africans in America from 1790 to 1820 (roughly 288 percent)ⁱ; The Slave Trade Act of 1819;ⁱⁱ and The abolition of the slave trade in England in 1808. With these forces, the very question of America’s survival depended on what the nascent nation would do with its freed and enslaved Africans.

The American Colonization Society, offered its answer: in the same vein of Britain repatriating black soldiers of the the 1775 Revolutionary Wars to Sierra Leoneⁱⁱⁱ; America would do the same with freed Africans in Liberia^{iv}.

But what of the indigenous Africans already living, loving, and being, with their own civilizations in the land they had always known? What did freedom mean in their eyes? Who were the new black settlers to them, coming to colonize and civilize them, all in the name of an undefined freedom?

In Teah Wulah's *The Forgotten Liberian*, and the works of Abayomi Karnga^v, the lives, the language, and the histories of the Kru, the Gola, the Kpan, the Kpelle, the Loma, and the Mande are uplifted, to complicate, question, and re-member the narrative of Liberia itself, as Africa's "first free republic."

In grappling with the ghosts of our histories, what we choose to remember and forget can free us or keep us captive. In choosing to remember Kendejah, through palaver sauce, palm butter, and fufu - the cuisine of a country coming to terms with its nationhood - Uso III honors a Liberia yet to be. Within this, he chooses the freedom of the possible.

ⁱ See Claude A. Clegg III, *The Price of Liberty: African Americans and The Making of Liberia*, (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 19.

ⁱⁱ Under the slave trade act the U.S. congress appropriated 100,000 dollars for the support of blacks recaptured from enslaved trading ships. Santana, Genesys. "A case of double consciousness Americo-liberians and indigenous Liberian relations 1840-1930." (2012).

ⁱⁱⁱ Norton, Mary Beth 'The Fate of Some Black Loyalists of the American Revolution', *Journal of Negro History*, 58 (4), 1973, 402-26

^{iv} <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1830-1860/liberia>.

^v See Karna, Abayomi Wilfrid. *The Negro republic on West Africa*, (Monrovia, Liberia : College of West Africa Press), 1909.