

Scott: *Recently, I started a new custom where I make tourtière on Christmas Eve.*

Tourtiere is a French word for meat pie. It's a family tradition that was lost when my Grandma, who was French Canadian, married my Anglo grandpa.

People who have been listening to our podcast for some time may know that my mom died this past February. Last Christmas, I started reconnecting with traditions from that side of my family. I think at some level I knew she wasn't going to be around much longer to be that connection.

While it's a very new tradition, I intend to keep it going.

Today on the show, we're talking about food and the important role it plays during the holiday. Food connects us to our ancestors. And the smells of these foods can transport us back to some of our earliest memories, to our loved ones no longer with us.

For this month's special holiday episode, we reached out to some members of the MCC global community to hear about how they fill their bellies and nourish their spirits during this season. We hope these stories delight you and invite you to reflect on your own family traditions this time of year.

I'm Scott Campbell and you're listening to "Relief, development and podcast," a production of Mennonite Central Committee.

MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN.

Scott: *Do you remember being a kid and saving up all your coins, so you could buy something special? We have a Christmas story about just that from Connex Kalinde, who works with an MCC partner in Malawi. MCC staff 'Segun Olude will take it from here.*

'Segun: *In the rural villages in Malawi, many people start to run out of food around September. They harvested their crops in March or April and there isn't enough food to last the whole year. But even so, the community makes sure that no one goes hungry at Christmas.*

Connex: *You can never lack on Christmas, that's the beautiful thing. Because we're communal, everyone wants to see everyone eating, and people will share the whatever little they were able to raise. They will share and eat together and enjoy together.*

The special food during Christmas celebrations in Malawi is rice, rice and chicken, sometimes beef, sometimes goat meat. So, what makes it special is the way they prepare the food. So, they prepare it the way mama prepared it when she was still alive. You have cut up chicken and then you have onions, you have tomatoes. If some parents have children coming from the cities, they buy cooking oil.

'Segun: *On Christmas Eve, people from neighboring villages will gather for traditional dances and Christmas carols and at the end of everything, sit down and feast. But the climax of the celebration is on Christmas day. The food people have been saving for all year is brought out and shared, including chicken that has been raised for six months, especially for this holiday.*

Connex: *It doesn't end on Christmas Day. It extends to 26th of December the Boxing Day. So, people will continue with the dances. And during lunch they will also come together again and eat again to finish whatever remained on on Christmas Day.*

'Segun: *Connex remembers what it was like when his family couldn't afford to buy food or clothes on Christmas. So a memory of one time when he did have the money, for a celebratory treat, is particularly special.*

Connex: *I remember when I was a little boy, I think I must have been around 12. I was old enough to work in another person's field to save a little money so I could buy a bottle of soft drink. My brother also helped me with a little more cash. And I had to keep it for over a month. Together with my young brother, we had new clothes—these were bought for us by Father. So, we prepared for the day, early in the morning, we went to church and but with our bottles in our hands, right into a church. After the church then there were dances in neighboring villages. So we will move around with a bottle of soft drinks and candies, we will be enjoying candies, but then we'll hold on to our bottle of soft drinks because we wanted everyone to know and see that we had what was regarded as special food on Christmas Day.*

'Segun: *Holding a soft drink all day made him feel proud. He carried it everywhere he went, clutching it in his warm little hands.*

Connex: *I don't know if you know Coca Cola. Coca Cola, if you drink it hot, then you have a problem. So, we moved with a bottle of Coca Cola the whole day. And then by 3pm, you have it, it's warm it's almost hot. It's it's quite hot in Malawi in my village. And this is not what you are used to drinking every day. So you know you take it while everyone else is there admiring you those kids that didn't have admiring you. But then you don't know how to drink Coca Cola, which is warm, you drink it with your mouth and nose closed. And then tears begin to come out (HE LAUGHS).*

'Segun: *Even though that hot coke tasted gross, it remains a fond memory.*

Connex: *When you have your own, it makes you feel proud. But even when you don't have—your neighbours your relations are right there to to give a hand.*

Scott: *That was Connex Kalinde with the story about a warm coke, specially cooked chicken and a community that won't let anyone go without during Christmas.*

Next, we'll hear a story about how people at a local migrant center in Mexico City, supported by MCC, are putting their own spin on the Mexican holiday tradition of Posada. Here is Gabriella Hernández, who works at the shelter.

Gabriella (in Spanish): *El hecho de celebrar la posada*

Crisol for Gabriella: *At the shelter, when we celebrate the posada, we combine the Mexican tradition with the need to have the surrounding community feel the sorrow of people that have been asking for refuge, which is what Mary and Joseph did in their time.*

Ken: *The word Posada means "lodging" or "inn" and is traditionally a religious celebration honoring the birth of baby Jesus. The people participating travel to different houses each night for nine nights. This journey represents the pilgrimage of Mary and Joseph leading up to Jesus' birth.*

Crisol for Gabriella: *The posadas begin on a special date, December 16. And the last one is December 24th, which is when the Baby Jesus is born. The posada begins more or less at 7:00 PM.*

Ken: *It's common to prepare a Nativity scene with Mary and Joseph figures and those will go on the walk singing the litany. Sometimes actors play Joseph and Mary.*

Crisol for Gabriella: *We also pass out little candles. We go walking in the dark and the candles light the way, just as they lit the path for Joseph and Mary. The Nativity has to be carried by a small donkey because the Virgin Mary rode on a small donkey.*

They also pass out little candles, hymns, the litany, so that everyone can sing.

Ken: *When the actors arrive at a house, the resident responds by singing a song, asking Mary and Joseph to enter and explain who they are.*

Crisol for Gabriella: *Here in Tochán the song we sing has special lyrics explaining the migrants' need, that someone give them refuge. For us, as a shelter, it's more important to celebrate that here, to remember it, because it's the same sort of pilgrimage that migrants make.*

After being rejected a few times, Mary and Joseph go into the house that's going to welcome them and begin to sing carols of gratitude for having been received ...

Ken: *Then, the party begins.*

Crisol for Gabriella: *Guests enter the house saying, "I don't want gold, I don't want silver. What I want is to break the piñata."*

The piñata is the culmination of everything bad, so that everything good can come. After breaking the piñata, little baskets of sweets are passed out, or a very Mexican treat, such as tostadas or maybe tacos dorados, which are deep-fried tacos.

And of course our hot drink made with lots of fruit—a traditional punch only served during posada.

The fragrant punch is made with apple, cinnamon, orange, guava and piloncillo which are solid blocks of sugar.

Some add tamarind, but what is never missing are the cinnamon, the guava and the piloncillo. And, depending on the economic resources, many more fruits are added.

Everything begins to smell nice as soon as you start preparing the punch. It's the most aromatic thing at the posada. Traditionally, whoever hosts the posada is in charge of making the punch and the piñata.

In the shelter, obviously, as it is a Mexican tradition, it is the Mexican volunteers who make the punch. The volunteers, three or four days before, begin to bring materials to make the piñata with the migrants.

Ken: *For Gabriela and the people who live in the shelter, posada provides a unique opportunity to thank their neighbors.*

Crisol for Gabriella: *Families organize and take turns hosting the posada. It's a tradition that we share the posada with the neighbors. It opens doors with the neighbors so that they also see that the migrants are beneficial.*

It's like a gesture that, you help provide a good neighborhood for our migrants. And as a thank you, the migrants share with you the posada that Tochán hosts.

We have the opportunity to be more united. It's an act of union between neighbors among the community.

For us as a shelter, it's represented something strong that gave us a base to present ourselves as a shelter and say, here we are. We also need you to take us in.

The posada is something traditional that helps us preserve the union of community and obviously, family.

Gabriella (in Spanish): a conservar la unión de las comunidades y obviamente de la familia.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)

***Scott:** That was Gabriella Hernández, who works at a shelter in Mexico City, with translation voiced by Crisol Gonzalez.*

Food is so much more than just something that fills our stomachs. It can connect us with our neighbors, help us feel special, and sometimes, it even represents freedom.

***Rony Janvier:** You can cook soup joumou anytime you want. But in January 1, it's something else.*

***Scott:** That's Rony Janvier, an MCC staff person from Port au Prince, Haiti, talking about soup joumou, which is a pumpkin soup that includes other vegetables, Haitian spices and sometimes meat.*

***Rony Janvier:** In Haiti, when the new year comes, before saying Happy New Year to anyone, we say Happy Independence Day because it's first our Independence Day.*

That day is first considered not only as the new day of the year for the Haitian people, but a day of freedom and a day of sharing. It was on that day, we started to share soup joumou. When it's time to celebrate the Independence Day, we are proud, we are very proud to celebrate our freedom and also to share with others what, what we have.

On January 1, of 1804, at this time, we became the first black Republic in the world. And that was a very amazing and that made us as Haitians very proud. Haiti was a French colony. And before the independence of the country, the soup was served only to French plantation masters. And it represented an idea inaccessible to slaves, even though they were the only ones to sow and cultivate the fruit of what you need to prepare the soup joumou. So the slaves were the ones to to, to farm them, okay, but they did not have access. Once they were free, they started to consume the soup joumou.

And especially on the new day, the new day, like the Haitian family likes to like to prepare and share the symbol of victory against oppressions. And but also, the union necessary for this independence. And you know, someone says, the soup joumou, it is the soup of independence when you share it.

When we have soup joumou on January 1, on that day, in Haiti, the soup joumou is served throughout the day so from early in the morning, until the evening.

I have great memories about soup joumou. When I was a kid, my mom used to cook soup joumou in quantity. We could, we could eat and also we had in quantity to share with our neighbors. And also we used to receive from our neighbors, and that tradition continue. Now in my proper family, we keep having this this tradition on on January 1. My wife, she cooks soup joumou. As well we explain to our kids, what is the symbol for us as Haitian. When we have soup joumou, it's time to discuss with our kids and to explain them the Independence Day what was happened before that. And what was that land we occupy now? What was it before the independence? It's because of the soup joumou we have kind of conversation and so they can continue to transfer, to live that tradition as well.

It was the way our ancestors celebrated the Independence Day. And now, because of them, we are free now. Okay, we are no longer slaves and we have to keep that tradition. We have to keep on celebrating our Independence Day. Now we can have access to soup joumou. It's because we are free. We are no longer slaves.

We know that we are spiritually free because of Jesus Christ, okay? But as Haitian people, okay, we are free because of our ancestors.

So, it's, I'm very proud to, um, to tell our story and to, to tell about our soup joumou. And so I invite everyone to taste soup joumou. Because it's really good. It's really good.

Scott: *That was Rony Janvier, an MCC staff person from Port au Prince, Haiti, with the story of freedom soup!*

We have a recipe for [this soup on the MCC website](#) that we'll link to in the show notes.

Our last story today is about an Arabic tradition around Christmas that is bringing Christians and Muslims together.

Here is Iklhas Siriani, an MCC staffer and Palestinian Christian from Jerusalem.

Iklhas: *A favorite holiday will be the time when family meets. And when we speak about family gatherings here, they're huge. It would be around 35 people or 40 people. So, the gatherings that matter, matters not the feast. But we always make sure that good food is on the table. For all Christians in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine they we all share this feast. It's called the St Barbara feast. All Arab Christians in December every year they celebrate this feast.*

There are different stories and I don't know which one is the right one. But Barbara was a girl in Syria. I know she struggled to keep her Christian faith because her father was not Christian and he would like lock her I think in a storage room due to her beliefs. And she only had access to the wheat berries to eat. And some others would say that she was cooking the, the wheat and giving it to the poor. It's not only a religious story, it's something about to remind us that we celebrate and embrace all our differences together.

In our language, we call it burbara. Burbara is boiled porridge made of shelled wheat, includes several ingredients, we will add pomegranate seeds, figs, dried figs, apricots, raisins, anise, fennel, cinnamon, to it. Decorated in a very nice way and we share it with everybody around us. So, I remember as a kid, my mother used to do this big pot of burbara, very huge one. And it will keep boiling and the smell, the you know, smell would be all over the house.

And we then she will decorate around 20 or 25, 30 dishes. And we would go around and share it with our neighbors. My mother was a nurse. She would work all day, sometimes at night. But she insists to do that. And it was a lot of work. And we would see her tired. And we'd said, Mom, why are you doing that? We will get Barbata from the neighbors like, Why would you worry? No, you have to give them and she was like no, etc. addition, we have to do it. And then she would start decorating these. And we will see on the table like 30 or 25 dishes decorated. And now then she would ask us, me and my siblings to go around all the neighborhood to distribute all the dishes. And it was a lot of work! But it was also fun.

So, this is part of the fun part, like I like about it. It brings us together all the time. And my Muslim neighbor keeps reminding me, "don't forget burbara this year." And my neighbors, they're all Muslims, near, in the village where I live in Jerusalem. They're used to having us around so they know the traditions. And they like joining us, I always notice they like joining us. Sometimes we gather in one place and we eat it together and sometimes we just send it all over to the neighbors around us. It's a very nice tradition and I really wait for it. Every year, we do it only once a year. So I really wait for that.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)

Scott: *That was Ikhlas Siriani, from Jerusalem, sharing about a holiday tradition that unites neighbors through food.*

And that's it for this episode, our last episode of the year! We have so enjoyed bringing you these stories and we look forward to bringing you more in the new year. We have some interesting things planned, so stay tuned...

If you like this podcast, it would be great if you could subscribe and rate it and tell your friends to give us a listen.

This episode of Relief, Development and Podcast was recorded on the unceded territory of the Kwantlen, Katzie, Matsqui and Semiahmoo First Nations.

And produced on Treaty 1 territory, the original land of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, and Dakota peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation. And also produced on the traditional land of the Anacostia and the Piscataway.

This episode was produced by Meghan Mast and Christy Kauffman. The head producer is Emily Loewen.

Thank you to Ikhlas Siriani, Rony Janvier, Connex Kalinde and Gabriella Hernández for sharing their stories and for Crisol Gonzalez for lending her voice to the translation of Gabriella's story. Thanks as well to 'Segun Olude and Ken Ogasawara for narrating.

A lot is happening in the world right now. This is a difficult time for many. May you experience God's provision and protection as we work together to share God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ.

Thanks, take good care, and MERRY CHRISTMAS!

(A COMPILATION OF GUESTS SAYING MERRY CHRISTMAS IN THEIR LANGUAGE)

Crisol Gonzalez (in Spanish): Feliz Navidad

Connex (In Chichewa): Ndikufunirani khristimasi yopambana.

Ikhlas Siriani (in Arabic): !ميلاد مجيد! وكل عام وانتم بألف خير. ينعاد عليكم بالصحة والسعادة وراحة البال

'Segun (in Yoruba): "Ah! É kú ọdun Kérésì!"