The Body Remembers What the Recipe Cannot: Embodied Knowledge and Cooking as Performance

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"පොල් ටිකක්... ගම්මිරිස් ඇට කීපයක්... සුදු ලූණු බිකක්... හොඳට ගලේ අඹරන්න..."
("A little coconut… a few peppercorns… a clove of garlic… grind it well on the stone grinder.")

An instruction: not measured, not fixed, but felt. *Handi Kawum* (හැඳි කැවුම්) is a traditional festive sweet prepared during the Sinhala and Tamil New Year in Sri Lanka, where culinary knowledge is often transmitted through spoken instruction, gesture, and sensory judgement rather than standardized recipes. This paper traces my attempt to recreate my grandmother's *Handi Kawum* without a conventional recipe, guided instead by her approximations: a "little," a "few," a consistency that the hand recognises before the eye confirms. What happens when knowledge refuses to be written down? When does instruction become sensation? Situated within a practice-led autoethnographic inquiry, this study positions the repeated preparation of *Handi Kawum* as the primary site of research, where cooking becomes both practice and method. Having been trained within educational and professional systems that privilege precision, standardized measurement, and written instruction, I initially encountered my grandmother's mode of knowledge transmission as uncertainty rather than clarity. Yet, through repeated acts of heating, grinding, waiting, tasting, smelling, touching, and adjusting, memory intertwined with sensory perception, transforming the body itself into a mode of inquiry. Rather than reproducing a fixed recipe, the practice continually negotiated flavour, texture, timing, and bodily intuition, revealing that knowledge emerged through embodied engagement with ingredients, tools, and remembered gestures. Drawing on Susan Leigh Foster's articulation of embodied knowledge as produced through movement (Foster, 1995), the paper frames cooking as choreographic practice, where knowing resides in action. The recipe becomes adaptive, contingent, and incomplete. In dialogue with Diana Taylor's concept of repertoire (Taylor, 2003), it argues that culinary knowledge is carried, repeated, and transformed through embodied practice rather than preserved as fixed textual instruction. The repeated making of *Handi Kawum* demonstrates that embodied knowledge does not simply preserve the past; it negotiates it. It drifts, substitutes, forgets, and remembers differently. Rather than treating these transformations as failures of transmission, this paper proposes them as the very conditions through which embodied knowledge continues to live, evolve, and perform itself.

Keywords: embodied knowledge, practice-led autoethnography, performance, culinary memory, *Handi Kawum*