

My name's Annette and I was born in East Germany in 1960.

When I was young, plastic was still something new and very modern. We used it sparingly – like everything else, really, as East Germany was not a wealthy country. If something broke, we repaired it. Our village had a repair shop for broken household appliances like shavers, vacuum cleaners, TVs, and even sheer tights. It didn't cost much and was always worth it.

Packaging was usually made of cardboard, paper, or glass. When we went shopping, we used fabric or string bags. Meat, fish, cheese, and even sauerkraut were bought fresh from the counter and wrapped in paper. Fruit and vegetables were packed in brown paper bags.

One time, a classmate of mine came back from Sweden and told us they collected their trash there in plastic bags before throwing them into the waste container. We could hardly believe it. Waste appetizingly presented for the trash?! At our house, waste went straight into the garbage can. After we emptied it, we rinsed it out and lined it with newspaper. Organic waste landed on the garden compost heap. There were special drums in the town where they used to collect feed for the pigs. We took metal, glass, and waste paper to the scrap dealer. This was something children did – with our handcarts and bicycles, we regularly went door to door, rang the bell, and asked for empty bottles, glasses, and old newspapers and magazines. We lugged it all to the collection point as a way of topping up our allowance.

Plastic packaging was always reused or repurposed. It was practical and fairly rare, so it would have been a shame to simply throw it away. We would rinse out the one-liter plastic milk bags and use them to carry our school lunches. My parents used empty margarine tubs as flowerpots.

On an outing, we'd take food from home or buy a sausage on a small paper plate. At events, we had drinks in bottles or returnable glasses. If the adults wanted a coffee, they'd go to a café – takeaway cups were unknown. As a young woman, I was invited to an event at the French Cultural Center in Berlin, where they served water from transparent plastic bottles in see-through plastic cups. My jaw dropped when I saw that they just threw them in the waste basket, so I sneaked one of these lovely bottles and a number of cups into my bag and took them home with me. My family was amazed and used them for a long time.

Today my parents still rinse out almost all their plastic containers and use them for things like storing food in the freezer. They also reuse all their plastic bags. I used to think it was embarrassing, but now this pair of almost ninety-years-olds have shown themselves to be fully in tune with the times. I try to follow their example, but I simply have more empty plastic containers than I could ever need.

My name is Kofo and I was born in London in 1959.

When I was ten, we returned to my parents' homeland, Nigeria. There was not so much plastic in England at that time either, but much less in African countries. In the 1970s there were some supermarkets, but most people in Nigeria bought their food in markets and carried it home in baskets. In the market, foodstuffs such as rice, cassava, and grains were packed in bags made of jute, a natural fiber, and food sold was often wrapped in newspaper or large leaves. Similar leaves were used to cook food in. When the sacks or baskets were worn out, they could simply be thrown away, because they were made of plant fibers that rotted quickly in a natural organic way. In the old days water was carried in containers found in nature, such as hollowed-out bottle gourds and calabashes. The calabash trees where bottle gourds grow are not as common today. I have one planted in my garden, and when I have guests, they are surprised and happy to see it. I encourage them to take the gourds and use them as water containers, but it is a lot of work to hollow them out.

Some household items are still made from natural materials, such as brooms made from the fibers of palm leaves. In the old days clothing was woven from cotton, and sometimes made from tree bark. Toys were made usually made from wood, and sometimes from recycled tin cans. People had more time to make things and cook their food.

When I was young Coca Cola was always in glass bottles. We used to collect empty bottles at home and save them for people who would come by the house, and we would also give them bundles of old newspapers. The newspapers were reused at the market to wrap fish, meat or other food. Collecting was fun for us kids because we always received a few pennies for it.

Since the 1980s, life in Nigeria has become faster. Many young people are moving to the city, wanting to earn money and live a modern life. They eat fast food and buy water in plastic bottles or in plastic sachets, which are small, square bags. In the countryside, where food and plants to make utensils were once grown, houses are now built or products are grown for export abroad and to make money. As a result, the cultivation of traditional plants is declining. Items made from natural products such as baskets and brooms are becoming more expensive, rare, or are forgotten altogether. We have copied the western lifestyle. Now it is time for us to remember our traditions, because we know how life can work well with less plastic.