

Food, Migration, and Identity

Halal food and Muslim immigrants in Italy

BY

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Abstract

Recent events have solidified an Islamic identity for North African immigrants in Italy. Parts of the Italian population have transformed their general prejudice against immigrants into an anti-Islamic sentiment. This sentiment is caused by a clash of created identities that do not necessarily correspond to ethnic groups. Food is an important aspect of personal identity, and in the case of Muslim immigrants, religious dietary guidelines make certain foods legal (halal) and other ones illegal (haram). Does halal food unite Muslim immigrants or are other aspects of personal identity that are more important? Halal butcher shops have become the symbol of this cultural identity, where both religion and national origin mix. I argue that immigrants recreate a personal and ethnic Muslim identity through food.

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Introduction:

Food, Immigration and Identity

According to some estimates, 185 million immigrants have moved since the eighties. The number of illegal immigrants is not part of this estimate. According to Castles and Miller (2003), “much contemporary international migration is simply unrecorded and not reflected in official statistics.” (p. 5) Immigrants often find themselves in hostile environments that identify them as the other. Muslim immigrants in Italy find themselves in a very difficult situation. While recreating their personal identities, they have to try to dissociate themselves both from the Western stereotype of fundamentalist Muslims and the International Muslim Organizations that promote their own versions of Islamic identity. Halal and traditional food represent an important key to understanding immigrants’ identity from their own perspective.

Halal food shapes certain aspects of Muslim immigrant identity in Italy. Immigrants used to have difficulties finding halal food and abiding by the Muslim dietary rules in a place where nobody else followed these rules. The food industry in the last years has seen Muslims in Italy as possible customers in need of items not easily available in a non-Muslim country. The Italian public often associates ritual religious slaughtering of animals with barbaric and violent traditions that reflect the characteristics of what they see as a blood-thirsty religion. At the same time, halal butcher shops are seen by outsiders as a place where Muslims of all different nationalities can meet and form community. Halal meat too, has a symbolic meaning that is different to the Muslim and non-Muslim populations.

Immigration, identity and food interact with each other at different levels and from different perspectives. Food imports, for example, can trigger migration; in a foreign country, religion can become an anchor to which immigrants can attach their identities; and identity can become a way to stigmatize immigrants. Language, family and religion, for example, define

people's identities. These elements have the power to define people because they shape people's behavior. A language that has words to describe social classes, words for ethnic groups inside these classes, and words for families inside these groups, as well as, words for roles inside these families, shapes the way the speakers of the language think about themselves. Words are only a means to convey meanings, and they don't create meanings. However, words shape the way we think about these meanings, in the same way that specialists in a political debate don't make decisions, but they do shape the way politicians and the public think about the issues, and ultimately, politicians and the public make decisions using the information technicians have given to them.

Food, I argue, is just as important as language and religion in shaping people's identity. Just like religion and language, food is a connection to people's origin. People eat what they used to eat as children and what they ate as children becomes their standard of measurement to decide what is good or not good. This connection between food and identity is true for different cultures. Pollan (2006) argued, sadly, that certain tastes have become part of American identity: the food Americans eat at McDonald's. He argues that McDonald's has become part of the American tradition because it is a place where Americans eat as children and as a family. This ritual of eating together as a family or as a group, eating the same kind of foods since childhood, is what gives food symbolic meaning. This symbolic meaning, I argue, is another ingredient in the making of human identity.

Halal meat gives yet another twist to the connection between food and identity. Food and religion are connected in Muslim countries. While halal butcher shops and halal sections in super-markets have started popping up like mushrooms in many large cities in Europe, such places have never existed in Muslim countries. All butcher shops, all meat at the super-market sold in Muslim countries is halal (even when, as we will see, it is not). What does it mean, then, for immigrants to only eat halal meat when they are living in Italy? Some interviewees in this

research, for example, responded that they would only eat halal meat bought from a butcher shop owned by an immigrant coming from their same country, while others argued that all meat sold in Italy is halal. Eating is not just another everyday activity, but an action that shapes the way immigrants think about themselves.

Methodology:

This research is composed of different stages: first, a theoretical reflection on connections among immigration, globalization, culture, and identity (without even trying to exhaust the complexity of how these dimensions interact with each other). I will look at the historical background that has formed the different identities, confronting anti-Islamic sentiment and Italian culture. After this desk work this research focuses on field work that includes 14 qualitative interviews with Muslim immigrants on halal food in the Italian context. Then, I will connect these findings with the previous desk work, trying to understand food, migration and identity from different points of view.

The interviewees were selected through the “snow-ball” method. The interviewers were initially found through an Internet database “Islamic finder” (<http://www.islamicfinder.org/>). This database lists Islamic centers, mosques and Islamic businesses (that is businesses that serve customers of Islamic religion) all over the world. All business owners contacted for the interviews were immigrants and were Muslims. Moreover, most business owners had lived in Italy for more than a decade. Since I wanted to diversify the sample, I called not only businesses, but also mosques and Islamic centers. The idea behind reaching into Islamic centers and mosques (there are actually only three official mosques in Italy, however many improvised places of worship define themselves as mosques) was that immigrants that had only been in Italy for a short period could be found in this way, while business owners would probably already have been in Italy for a long time. I was not able to diversify my sample in gender, as most

people contacted were males.

All the interviews were conducted on the telephone. Except for one interview, all interviewees were not contacted beforehand. The use of this media of communication presented both advantages and disadvantages. It was at times difficult, for example, to call a possible respondent at a convenient time. However, with a bit of planning (taking in to consideration the time change between the U.S.A. and Italy, prayer-times, times when business owners could be busy with customers, days when Islamic businesses would be closed, and Islamic centers would be crowded) it was possible to find willing interviewees. In general, all respondents were glad to answer questions and participate in this research project. I even had two interviewees that, when not able to be reached, called me back in spite of the cost of an international call.

All the interviews were qualitative with an open question format. I took notes to record the data. I had prepared a table with different topics of discussion on which to write the notes. I also used a questionnaire that allowed me to write down answers faster and allowed me to collect specific data (country of origin, time of permanence in Italy), however, if a particular question allowed the respondent to talk freely about the topic, I let them talk and explain themselves at length. After the first two (failed) interviews, I realized that certain questions made the interviewees uncomfortable, specifically, one about how they were able to find loans to open a business (this question was only intended for the business owners) and another about their possible membership in any Muslim association. I thus dropped these questions, and tried only to ask about them indirectly (for example: what were the difficulties in opening a business in a foreign country or how/if they met other Muslims outside the mosque).

The goal of this research is to understand the connection between food and identity from more than one perspective. Just as immigration itself cannot be explained as the direct result of one cause, the same holds for identity. While food is an important aspect of personal identity,

just like language or national origin, it changes in importance and significance depending on the observer and on the situation. Halal food has a meaning for Italian citizens that is very different from the meaning that the Muslim immigrants or the food industry that tries to target Muslim immigrants in Italy assigns it. The change of perspective is more important than the meaning or the identity connected with eating, for example, halal meat. This change, I argue, can be understood as part of a global game of interests and powers where often individual decisions and identities are irrelevant.

Economic Background:

Europe comprises a large portion of manufacturing, services, and agricultural production as well as imports and exports worldwide. European states are some of the major players in the global economy. The European Union limits the power of European governments, causes unemployment, and influences the economy of many developing countries, many of which are in Northern Africa and in the Middle East. Employers, for example, attract immigrant unskilled workers to keep wages low or open manufacturing operations in developing countries where wages are low. Developing countries are forced into a system of dependency because of the overwhelming influence of Western countries, under the form, for example, of Foreign Direct Investment. Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino, and Taylor (1998) argued that “Global capitalism acted to ‘develop underdevelopment’ within the Third World” (p. 34). Massey et al. (1998) argued that: “this global capitalism penetration into non-capitalistic or pre-capitalistic societies creates a mobile population that is prone to migrate” (p. 36). Globalization and global capitalism influences internal economies of different nations in different ways. Many developing countries have greatly benefitted from the transformation that this economic model has brought forward, while some have been negatively affected by the greater economic connections this economy has created.

Howard-Hassmann (2005) argued for example that describing globalization as a positive or negative process is an irrelevant discussion. Globalization is an historical process happening regardless of what individuals think of it. Furthermore, Howard-Hassmann hypothesized that globalization could favor social change and human rights worldwide. Countries like South Korea, for example, were transformed from a rural to an urban society and from a dictatorship to a democracy in fifty years. Globalization, the author argues, could cause such changes in a shorter amount of time. China, for example, is changing from a rural to an urban society in a much shorter amount of time. This author certainly does not predict that globalization will spread universal human rights, but he certainly predicts the acceleration of social changes that in authoritarian regimes could have positive results. However, short term effects of global economic policies can be negative.

Dumping, also known as ‘import surges,’ is a clear example of how the European economy negatively affects North African countries. Thanks to the innovations in agricultural practices and direct and indirect government subsidies to European farmers, the European agricultural sector is able to produce more than it can consume. European chicken farmers produce genetically engineered chickens with unnaturally large breasts. Most European consumers prefer to buy breast meat, and thus the chicken industry is left with legs and shoulder cuts that have no market in Europe. Since the pet food industry cannot pay as much as developing countries for those cuts, European farmers “dump” their overproduced goods in North African countries.¹ Hermelin (2004) found “EU frozen cut pieces of chicken was sold ...in African harbours (Dakar², Cotonou, Douala, and Abidjan) under the EU market price for the whole chicken” (p. 2).

¹ These cuts, thus, do not come from halal slaughtered chickens.

² 95% of Senegalese population is Muslim.

In Senegal, poultry production has traditionally been in the hands of women in the rural areas, and a few processing plants were present around the larger cities to supply the local demand. This was a growing business for the few small plants and a source of extra income for women in the rural areas. However, when Dakar and other major cities started to receive imported chicken pieces from Europe, the local market collapsed. Sharma, Nyange, Duteurte and Morgan (2005) found that:

Senegalese imports of poultry have grown dramatically over the past decade, rising from 506 tonnes in 1996 to 16,600 tonnes in 2002. This growth, in conjunction with declines in domestic production, has increased the share of imports in domestic consumption from only 1 percent in 2000 to an estimated 19 percent in 2002. The composition of these imports is predominantly frozen cuts (86 percent), supplemented by frozen carcasses (13 percent) and fresh meat (1 percent). About 62 percent of these imports came from the Netherlands and Belgium (p. 2).

This study showed that the cost of production in 2002 in Senegal was two euros per kilo, while the imported chicken cost a little over .80 Euro cents. Rural production and small processing plants have thus disappeared in Senegal. This has created a chain effect, lowering demand for locally produced feed-grains, lowering demand for locally grown beef, and, has ultimately, produced more unemployment and migration. This example is particularly important since it highlights the connections between the global economy and migration (Shama et al. 2005).

Senegal's chicken imports and production are examples of how the global economy affects the economies of developing countries. European farmers receive subsidies from their governments to keep production costs low. Farmers are thus able to flood the market with goods sold at prices lower than production cost. Watkins and von Braun (2003) have found that:

Each year rich countries spend an excess of US \$ 300 billion in support of

agriculture--some six times the amount they allocate to foreign development assistance. Most of the subsidies end up supporting production and generating large surpluses, which then are dumped on the world market at prices that bear no relation to production costs.
(p. 3)

European agricultural subsidies show a direct connection between economic downfall for North African countries and globalization. As a result of this downfall, many inhabitants of developing countries decide to migrate. Also, interestingly enough, while this example shows the export to Muslim countries of non-halal meat, the halal food industry targets Muslim immigrants when they are in Europe.

Many European countries are affected by migration, and the number of migrants is rising. As the number grows, so does the differentiation amongst migrants. They are not coming from one single country or even region of the world. Turkey, Jordan and Morocco are the greatest sources of migrant labor in Europe. Once in the country of immigration, migrants are politicized and grouped in a single category. In Europe, a large number of migrants have moved from Islamic countries, and, thus, "Muslim" is the category or identity in which most migrants are grouped. However, Islamic identity is often an imposed identity. The dominant groups in Europe, European citizens, identify the other as different and external. In Italy, when the first waves of immigrants arrived in the eighties, they were defined as *extracomunitari* (non-European-community citizens) as a way to group all foreign workers that arrived in Italy to work. Now, Islam is the defining characteristic used to categorize immigrants.

Historic Background:

In 1945, there were 1 million people of the Islamic faith in Europe, while there are 15 million now. A number of Muslims are European citizens. However, in the last 20 years we have

witnessed an increase from 6 million to 15 million, and most of them are migrant workers coming from Muslim countries, while a great number of illegal immigrants are not accounted for.

Historically, specifically in Italy, northern industries needed cheap labor that southern Italians provided; northern communities, however, were not willing to accept the different culture brought by southern Italians, and called them disparagingly ‘*terroni*.’³ In the years that followed, the economic boom slowed down, and *terroni* stopped immigrating. In recent years, new immigrants took the place of the *terroni*, and the history of prejudice seemed to be repeating itself, at least initially. Many immigrants coming from North Africa arrive by sea in the South of the Italian peninsula and slowly move to the Northern part, just as Italian Southerners did a few decades before.

Migration from North Africa to Europe started at the end of WWII. Generally, most North Africans immigrated to France since Algeria was part of its territory, and Morocco and Tunisia were protectorates. However, with the oil crises of the seventies and new restrictive migratory laws adopted by central and northern European countries, migratory movement redirected itself toward Italy.

The economic crises of the seventies (the oil shock of 1973-1974) stopped the emigration of Italians. A decade later, a new wave of “extracomunitari” started coming from developing countries to Italy. Two decades later, 800,000 immigrants were living in Italy, and currently there are about two million foreign-born residents living in the country. Italy was transformed from a country of emigration to a country of immigration. Italians “welcomed” the new comers with an old prejudice towards foreigners. Italian citizens and the media started defining these

³ *terroni*: from terra (dirt), people of the dirt, i.e. farmer, ignorant.

new-comers not based on their ethnicity, but on the low status of their labor activities.

Although the eighties and the nineties cannot be described as years of economic boom, Italy was one of the major industrialized countries. The Italian population was better-off and, while unemployment was still present, Italians were not willing to do the most menial jobs. The jobs at the bottom of the hierarchy -dirty, dangerous, and demanding- were always in need of willing unskilled workers. Up to this point, other demographic groups, such as women and teenagers, had performed these low-ranking jobs. However, according to the Italian official census bureau (ISTAT), the Italian birth rate has been decreasing. Demographically, Italy reached its highest point in 1963, while it reached its lowest point in 1993, with negative growth since the early eighties. This demographic trend created a labor deficit. Immigrant workers solved this problem by doing those dirty, dangerous and demanding jobs.

Immigrant laborers constitute this new labor force in the country. Immigrant laborers perform low-ranking jobs without being effected by the stigma attached to such jobs. At least initially, the immigrants' identity is not affected by the way people outside of their identities see them. Italian employers needed, as Massey et al. (1998) has found, "workers who view bottom-level jobs simply as means to the end of earning money, and for whom employment is reduced solely to income, with no implication for status or prestige...immigrants satisfy this need" (p. 29).

Although great numbers of migrants started working as farm hands, their work and their presence was invisible to most Italians. A number of them sold cheap merchandise on the touristy streets of many large Italian cities. Immigrants were identified as "*vu cumprà?*" this is broken Italian for *vuole comprare?* (Would you like to buy?). Religion, or even national identity, was never important in the way Italians identified black or darker skinned migrants at the beginning of this migratory movement. Immigrants were marginalized as different and as

inferior since they did not speak proper Italian. Their personal identity, their political ideas, and their faith were irrelevant. The switch from racism to anti-Islamism came to life around the year 2000 and it solidified itself after September 11, 2001.

Two identities have formed as a reaction to each other. On the one hand we have the Islamic identity that migrant workers bring from their countries of origin and that is only one of the many aspects that create their identity. On the other hand, we have the Islamic identity that the Western world, especially through the media, has forced on them: a monolithic identity that overshadows all other identities migrant workers may have. In this same perspective, Western culture is to be defined as a negation of the Islamic religion.

Political Background:

As is becoming evident with peoples' uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and other North African countries, European nations have strong political ties with these countries. These ties, however, are not between the Italian people and the Libyan people, for example, but between the Italian power elite, both in politics and in economy, and the power elite in the North African countries. Spain has important political ties with Morocco; France has political ties with Algeria and Tunis; Italy has political ties with Libya. European countries have used their political power to keep friendly dictators in power so as to ensure an economic relation that, on one side, enriched their own countries and, on the other, kept powerful dictators in power.

Italy's Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, for example, has been very slow to condemn Colonel Gaddafi's use of military force against its own citizens in the first months of 2011. The reason Berlusconi is reluctant to break political ties with the Libyan government is because of all the economic ties between Libya and Italy. There is a direct pipeline from Libya to Sicily that brings oil to the Italian island and then to the rest of Italy. ENI (the Italian Energy Company, one of the biggest energy companies in the world) has large interests in Libya as well as many other

African countries. The Italian government has a strong interest in maintaining friendly relations with Colonel Muammar Gaddafi so as to insure a continuous supply of raw materials for industry. There is little concern, however, about the social and economic oppression these dictators cause. Italy, moreover, does not want to pay the consequences of its political alliances. Poverty and migration, both internal and international, that dictators and their corrupted governments cause, is the reason why many North Africans leave their own countries to find fortune in the North.

The European unity is based on economic interests that leave little space for the safeguard of human rights outside the countries of the European Union. The ties between Italy and Libya have become stronger since 1998 with the Joint Declaration, whereby Libya allowed Italian investors to start development projects in Libya, while Italy would pay back damages for its failed attempt to colonize Libya more than half a century before. The fact that Libya is a dictatorship that does not allow freedom of expression or association (such as the fact that expressing criticism against Col. Gaddafi is punishable with the death penalty) was not relevant in the decision to form strong political ties with Gaddafi's regime. A regime that caused migration by taking away resources and spreading corruption helped the Italian economy and its need for a cheap labor force.

There are agreements between the Libyan government and the Italian one to keep possible illegal immigrants who are directed to Italy in Libya. Many immigrants try to reach the Italian coasts from the relatively close Libyan coast (only about 60 miles). Detention centers in Libya jail many North Africans that have tried to illegally cross the Mediterranean. Sometimes these are Libyan citizens and sometimes immigrants that had almost made it to the Italian territory from other parts of Africa, but were discovered by the police and escorted back to Libya.

On May 7, 2009 two hundred and twenty seven illegal immigrants, after sending SOS distress signals to the near coast of Lampedusa, a small Italian island, were “rescued” by the Italian coast guard. In fact, they were escorted to Tripoli. The Italian foreign minister, Maroni, explained that Italy and Libya conduct joint patrol of the coast. Maroni, however, did not comment on the fact that Libya is not a democratic country that had not ratified the Geneva Convention.

European political and economic influences certainly are only some of the many causes of economic hardship in developing countries. This economic hardship, however, is a cause of migration. European countries, as other world powers, benefit from the presence of dictators in some Muslim countries that allow a steady supply of raw materials. For example, Gadhafi has supplied the Italian economy with oil. Gadhafi, however, caused social, economic and political hardship, and as a consequence, migration. The media and politicians do not often address or even recognize the difficulties immigrants had to endure in their home countries. Immigrants, instead, are identified by their religious beliefs, and often these religious beliefs are regarded as negative features. All immigrants coming from Africa are described as Muslim. Muslims, some Italians believe, want to import Islam to Italy. Often Islam is portrayed by the media in connection with violence and terrorism. Immigrants, instead, use their religion as a way to reinforce their self-esteem and their sense of identity.

The Islamic presence in Italy and Europe:

Islamic religion and the cultural identity of the believers are not monolithic but variegated and difficult to define. There are geographical reasons for the differentiation of Islam. Muslim migrants come from regions as different as Turkey and Nigeria. While they have the same religion and may speak a particular dialect of the Arabic language, they do not share similar customs. Even when we try to define Islamic identity inside a single country, we may

encounter difficulties. In Pakistan, for example, after the 1951 *Ahmadi* riots, the government tried to create a definition of what it means to be a Muslim. It took 20 years to do so and yielded few results: Muslims believe in a single god, and Muslims believe in the finality of Mohammed's prophethood (Eickelman, D. & Piscatori J., 1990).

The five pillars of the Islamic religion are often described as common to all believers. One of the pillars, *hajj* (pilgrimage), not only is common to all Muslims, but it unites them through the international community (*umma*) that travels to Mecca. Often the pilgrimage is done in groups, and often different groups from different countries get to know each other in the process. This characteristic explains an important network association that connects Muslims from all over the world and connects Muslims to Saudi Arabia, where Mecca is. Because of this, each Muslim participates in a "global" Muslim identity, as well as a local, individual identity.

It is difficult to pinpoint what defines Muslim identity according to nationality and religious tradition, but it is also difficult to pinpoint, at a personal level, somebody's identity. As in any other culture, individuals have a number of identities according to the different social contexts they happen to be in. A study on Moroccan women pointed out how, for example, when living in their own community, their religious identity played a very small role in the way they saw themselves. In their own land, what defined them was, in the first place, their family, then their community, and their role in the community, and lastly their religious identity. Instead, while traveling on pilgrimage, for example, their immediate religious community and religion defined them. We can extrapolate, thus, that Islamic identity can play a number of different roles when a Muslim happens to be a migrant worker in a foreign country (Eickelman, D. & Piscatori J., 1990). One aspect related to Muslim identity and migration is called *hijra*.

Among the duties of the faithful in the Muslim religion are two connected ones, *jihad* and *hijra*. *Jihad* refers to the struggle Muslim believers have to overcome. There is a greater struggle,

that is the personal struggle to change himself/herself to become Muslim and to be a good Muslim, and then there is the lesser *jihad*, that is to fight against those who attack the Islamic faith. However, when living in a country that is hostile to the Muslim faith, Muslims have the possibility to migrate, which is called *hijra*. Just like other concepts in Islamic religion, *hijra* too is interpreted in different ways. Some say that it only refers to the migration of the prophet Mohammed from Mecca to Medina in the sixth century, while other interpretations see *hijra* as a way for a Muslim believer to move to a country where they can get an education or earn money. Once they have acquired these means, then they can use them to help the Muslim community back in their country. Moreover, some see *hijra* as a way to bring the Quran to other non-Muslim countries and, thus, try to convert the non-believing population to the Islamic religion. While it is difficult to ascertain the importance of *hijra* in the life of individual migrants, *hijra* remains a very important concept among international brotherhoods and nationally sponsored international networks of the Muslim community.

Italian culture identifies *hijra* as a defining aspect of the Islamic religion and interprets it thus: ‘Muslims want to import their religion to our country’. Islamic religion recognizes Christianity and Judaism as “religions of The Book” and sees its own religion as a continuation of these two other religions. Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world. Some interpretations of the Quran argue that Islam accepts all monotheistic religions, while other interpretations of the Quran proclaim the superiority of the Islamic faith. It would be very difficult to argue that migrant workers from North Africa came to Italy with the intent of converting Italians to their belief. However, most Italians see Islam as a monolithic religion that wants to dominate other religions, and they see the migrant workers as bringing customs, traditions, and dress that are part of this religion. So, because of economic policies, and historical legacies, migrants are attracted into the Italian country; however, while they are identified as class-B citizens because of their low status jobs, they face difficulties in defining their own faith

in their own terms.

Until the early nineties, Italy had a strong communist party and, in general, a strong leftist movement. With the collapse of the U.S.S.R., the capitalistic global economy has become the only economic option. The leftist Italian parties have dissolved, and, more importantly, the people that voted for those parties are left without a political identity. Whereas nationalism has never been a strong sentiment among Italians, political affiliation gave personal identity to the great majority of Italians, more than nationalism. While, obviously political identity divided the Italian population into political factions, it united them through the means of political debates and elections. Until the nineties, voter turn-outs in Italy were among the highest in the world, while, since the mid-nineties, voter turn-out has been dwindling.

The Communist party ceased to exist shortly after the fall of the Berlin wall. The Communist newspaper *L'Unità* in the early nineties stopped to define itself as *Organo del Partito Comunista Italiano* (Organ of the Italian Communist Party), and the communist party reinvented itself as *Partito Democratico della Sinistra* (Democratic Party of the Left). What are, then, the core differences between the moderate left, what the communist party had become, and the moderate right? While there certainly still are differences in everyday politics, as for example, in their beliefs regarding worker's rights and social welfare, it has become more difficult to pinpoint differences- at least among the common people- for the core issues of politics. Both people in the moderate right and the moderate left, for example, describe themselves as believers in tolerance and accepting of differences.

This openness toward the 'other,' however, is often portrayed in the media as the missing value of the Islamic culture. Some Italians of both persuasions, those on the left who have lost their strong identity, and those on the right who traditionally have more nationalistic beliefs, describe themselves as tolerant in opposition to non-Western cultures. Muslim countries, where

the Wahhabis version of Islam is present, are often seen as non-tolerant countries. Saudi Arabia with its authoritarian regime, negation of human rights, and the ill-treatment of women is perceived as the very symbol of Islamic religion intolerance. Interestingly, this perceived intolerance of the Islamic religion makes the moderate left and the moderate right in Italy much closer than it would normally be.

Anti-Islamic sentiment became part of the media and political talk in Italy around the year 2000. Political parties of the right, *La Lega Nord* and *Movimento Nazionale*,⁴ were the first parties to identify Italian identity in opposition to what they perceived to be the “Islamic threat.” They rallied political support among the masses by calling for an end to the entrance of the “foreign invader,” but, once in power, they passed legislation that indirectly promoted immigration. After September 11, anti-Islamic sentiments became stronger and more precisely defined. One of the strongest anti-Islamic voices in Italy after 2001 was the famous journalist Oriana Fallaci. Politically she was described as left-leaning. She is the author of three recent books that negatively portray Islamic religion and Islamic immigrants: *The Rage and the Pride*, *The Force of Reason*, and *Intervista a Se Stessa: L’Apocalisse* (An Interview with Herself: The Apocalypse). In her latest book, she accuses Muslim immigrants of trying to invade Italy because, according to her, Muslim religion teaches to spread its credo with force and violence (Fallaci, 2004 b). Even if she epitomizes one of the extreme reactions against Islamic culture, she is giving a voice to an important part of the Italian population. However, there are aspects, both of Islamic identity in the Italian context and of Italian identity that are important but rarely taken into consideration.

Catholicism is an essential element of Italian culture. Churches have been part of the

⁴ La Lega Nord is the separatist party from Northern Italy that wants to divide Italy and refuses to fly Italian flags on official buildings. The Movimento Nazionale is the former fascist party.

Italian landscape for millennia, and it could be said that the ringing of church bells is as natural to Italian ears as the singing of birds. In March of 2011, the European court affirmed the right for Italian public schools to have crucifixes hanging in each schoolroom. In Italy, schools are not required to have crucifixes hanging on the wall, but it is a custom that virtually all schools in Italy have adopted.

Displaying crucifixes in schools in Italy does not breach the rights of non-Catholic families, the European Court of Human Rights has ruled. The court ruled there was no evidence that a crucifix hung in a classroom would influence pupils. The ruling overturned a previous decision made in November 2009, which angered the Roman Catholic country (“School crucifixes do not breach human rights” 2011, para. 1-2).

In reality, the crucifix is one of the most important religious symbols: it hangs above the altar of every Catholic Church. The Catholic Church and the Italian public, in general, have welcomed this ruling. This ruling highlights the fact that being Catholic in Italy is a natural attribute. Crucifixes are “not an influence” because everybody is expected to be Catholic. The fact is that Italians see Catholicism as part of their national identity.

Historically, some segments of the Italian population like to identify Western culture as anti-Islamic; the idea being that, in antiquity, the reaction against the rise of Islam is what created Europe. The crusades are the symbol of such a view. History, of course, is more complicated. If we go back to the Roman Empire, for example, we see that the cultural imprint that the Romans left in Western law and administration is still present today. However, the Roman presence was stronger in North African countries and in the Near East than in Northern Europe (Ireland, Scotland, and Northeast Europe), where the Romans never got a foothold.

The roots of the Italian Renaissance, the historical process that made Italy important worldwide for a second time, are in the Arab Culture. Al-Haytham is considered one of the first

optical scientists. He discovered how our eyes perceive images. His discoveries are linked to the invention of the telescope (Galileo Galilei) and perspective (Giotto, Duccio). Many old manuscripts were rediscovered in the Renaissance thanks to the Middle East, where they were preserved. Christopher Columbus “discovered” the Americas thanks to the astrolabe, an instrument invented and used by Muslims and originally used to orient oneself toward the Mecca when praying. History shows that Islamic culture and Western cultures interacted and influenced each other and were able to live one next to the other.

The Muslim presence is part of Italian history, but it is often a forgotten history. Sicily, Italy’s largest island, was under Islamic power from the ninth to the eleventh century. Interaction with the Muslim world continued on and off throughout the centuries. Radio Bari broadcasted in Arabic before the B.B.C. did. Although Italy tried, it was not able to become a colonial power; however, Mussolini portrayed himself as a protector of Islam and described Italy as a great Muslim power in 1928 (Allievi, 2003). In the seventies, student immigrants from Syria, Jordan, and Palestine founded the Union of Muslim Students in Italy (USMI). Even if it was a small presence, it was able to create mosques and Islamic centers. Although these mosques and Islamic centers were conceived by the student community as a way to create an Islamic identity in Italy, around the year 2000 they became gathering places for the migrant workers coming from North Africa.

Different poles shaping Islamic identity

Coincidentally, around the beginning of the new millennium, at the same time that the Italian media “discovered” the new fear of terrorism related to Islam, many Muslim immigrants had been living in Italy for at least 10 years. What role does their religious credo have in the way they define themselves? The Italian media seems to see religious affiliation as greatly important. The Rushdie Affair (1988-1989), September 11, 2001, the July 7 bombing in London, the

publication of Oriana Fallaci's anti-Islamic books, the opening of Islamic centers, the opening of businesses such as halal butcher shops oriented to serve only costumers of Islamic faith have become events through which the Italian media sees and portrays Muslim immigrants.

If we look at statistics by the ISTAT, we can see a change in the demography of the immigrants arriving in Italy. The migrant population changed profoundly between the early nineties and 2003, not only in numbers, which are growing, but in the demographic connotations: the number of women and married individuals is greater. The presence of immigrant women and the formation of families of Islamic religion have changed the migrant's identities, making it stronger and more visible. Thus, right when the media were looking for the connection between Islam and terrorism, the Islamic presence in Italy was becoming more visible.

In these same years, Muslim cultural associations become more active in spreading their own interpretation of Islamic religion. Islamic religion is not monolithic. "The word 'orthodox' is not quite accurate for Islam, which has no church doctrine" (Keddie, 2006, p.177). Islam does not have a church hierarchy either, as for example the Catholic Church: it could be described, in fact, as a leaderless community with many international organizations that unsuccessfully claim leadership. The Saudi kingdom sponsored the creation and the building of mosques in Italy. Saudi Arabia, through *Islamic World League*, financed the building of the Great Mosque in Rome finished in 1995. Another very important cultural and religious organization in Italy is the Islamic Cultural Center. The leadership of the Islamic Cultural Center in Italy was in the hands of people from North African countries, but in the year 2000, because of its financial support, Saudi nationals gained the leadership of the Cultural Center. There are a few students and skilled laborers from Saudi Arabia in Italy, but very few migrant workers are Saudi nationals. Saudi Arabia's presence in the International Islamic community is due to its desire to propagate its particular doctrine of Islam.

The Saudi version of Islam is called *wahabi* and follows a rigid interpretation of Islam and a rigid application of Islamic law: *shari'a*. This version of Islam is not open toward modernity, democracy and pluralism nor to the respect of the Universal Declaration of Human rights. Saudi Arabia has never subscribed the 1948 Human Rights Declaration or the subsequent document, because these declarations were considered to be in disagreement with their interpretation of Islam. Whereas most immigrants are not disciples of this doctrine, this is the doctrine that most Italians associate with the Islamic faith.

National Islamic organization

As a reaction to the Saudi influence, the Moroccan government opened a number of embassies in different Italian cities to support their nationals in Italy and to give them an alternative Muslim presence. Morocco, different from Saudi Arabia, has a large number of nationals living in Italy, and it has interests in maintaining relations with its citizens. However, Morocco tries to influence Muslim organizations abroad also because it wants to control Muslims abroad. Muslims abroad are free to form organizations that could possibly be hostile to the Moroccan government. Other North African governments also have increased their relations with migrants from their country. Tunis, for example, supports a Tunisian community by funding a school where both Arabic and French are taught. Iran also created a connection for Muslim Shia believers. Differently from the other nations, however, *Shias* are not, for the most part, Iranian nationals and Iranian nationals are, for the most part, political or religious refugees with no relations to their mother country.

The Muslim brotherhood is an Islamic political organization born in Egypt. The Muslim brotherhood has gained much importance in Europe in general and in Italy specifically. While the Muslim brotherhood was banned from most North African countries, many of its members moved to Europe, where they thrived thanks to generous contributions from the countries of the

Persian gulf. Politics, national interests and power struggles among international players in the Muslim world are behind the financing of this organization. Ghaleb Immat, a Syrian with Italian citizenship was at the head of the Muslim Brotherhood from 1973 until 2003. Himmat traveled freely through Italy, Germany, Switzerland and the U.S., and founded the “Bank of the Muslim Brotherhood.” Himmat directly funded terrorist organizations. This organization has gained much attention in the Italian media and it has shaped Italian perception of Islamic religion.

Financial support from Saudi Arabia influences Muslim networks. This connection, though, is not simply between Muslim nations and international networks, but between Muslim nations with oil money and Muslim international networks. I argue that Saudi Arabia can influence Islamic networks and Islamic religion all over the world thanks to its financial power. Thanks to their money, Saudis export their Wahhabi doctrine. This fundamentalist version of Islam is what the Italian media and population see as Islam. Other religious groups, as for example, the Murids from Senegal, have no connections with these networks. The Murids have established a number of *dahire*: that has established meeting places for their members. Immigrants from Senegal are followers of this particular branch of Islam and they are mostly settled in the northern part of Italy, where most of these *dahire* are present. This brotherhood keeps a tight connection with the same organization in Senegal.

However, even if the number of mosques, brotherhoods, meeting places, and cultural organizations has multiplied in recent years, the number of people that are identified as Muslim and the number of people that actually actively participate in Muslim religious activities do not coincide. According to Stefanini (2004), only a small percentage of Muslims in Italy regularly frequents the mosque on Friday. Thus, this multiplication of mosques cannot be explained simply with the arrival of a larger Islamic population. It seems, instead, that there has been and is still an active organization that tries to recruit the Muslim population. These various organizations seem to propose a monolithic and rigid version of Islam that does not appeal to the

majority of the Muslim immigrant population. Muslim immigrants find themselves between a rock and a hard place. While they still want to hold on to their Islamic identity, they do not want to associate themselves with the Saudis or the Muslim brotherhood. Italian culture perceives Islam negatively, and Islamic networks want to impose a specific doctrine that does not coincide with the immigrants' faith. In this context, I believe, we can understand the emergence of *halal* butcher shops. These are places that create a local community tied to Islamic traditions.

A fifth of all Italian slaughter houses can butcher animals according to the Islamic tradition. The number of halal butcher shops is increasing in Italy, especially in the northern and central regions. These shops are an important aspect of the convergence of Italian and Islamic culture. Food is important as an everyday celebration of deep rooted tradition. *Halal* butcher shops sell *halal* meat, slaughtered according to Muslim tradition. *Halal* butcher shops are ethnic entrepreneurs for a niche ethnic market. Larger Italian cities such as, Milan, Turin, Genoa, Florence, and Rome are the main centers where we see a large number of *halal* butcher shops. The first city to have these shops was Milan, one of the global cities and a hub for immigrant workers.

Halal (legal) and haram (illegal) foods

Halal butcher shops sell meat slaughtered according to the Islamic tradition. Ritual slaughtering in the Islamic tradition consists of cutting the throat of an animal in the name of Allah -*Allah al Akbar*. This animal must be one of those whom it is permitted to eat whose meat is permitted. The animal is laid down on its left side with the head turned toward the Mecca. The slaughterer has to raise the head of the animal with his/her left hand and cut the throat with one single incision of a knife that severs trachea, esophagus and jugular vein. The butcher kills the animal in the name of God. The butcher has to be an adult and in possession of his/her mental faculties.

Halal, however, does not refer only to meat. In general all foods are permitted and only a small percentage of foods are not. Foods are not permitted because of their impurity or harmfulness. Even things that are 'doubtful' should be avoided. Carcasses of dead animals, blood, pork, any animal killed not in the name of Allah, alcoholic beverages or other intoxicants are forbidden. However, in dire situations, it is acceptable to consume limited quantities of haram food so as to be able to survive. While, in reality, the number of prohibited food is very limited, it could happen, for example, that small amounts of haram food, (an enzyme derived from pigs in cheese production) can contaminate other food making them haram (Riaz & Chaudry, 2005).

Halal butcher shops have to follow Italian legislation. 1927 regulations established rules to insure the rapid death of the animal either by bullet or the cutting of the medulla oblongata. After that, animals can be hanged and bled. Later legislations followed the European Union directive of keeping the killing process fast, but it made the stunning of the animals mandatory prior to the killing. However, both the European legislation and the Italian implementation had to concede exception for ritual killing. Particularly in Italy, Muslim influence changed the law. Because Italian law provided an exception for the Catholic religion, Muslim communities were able to make use of that same exception to secure its position in the Italian legal sphere. Specifically for Islamic ritual killing, Italian law agreed that it had to be performed quickly only by qualified personnel using very sharp knives. Subsequent legislation gave more authority to local regional Italian governments on the implementation of the present legislation.

Halal methods of slaughtering are seen by Italians as both a symbol of a violent religion and as a lack of respect for the animal. Mostly this view of *halal* rituals is caused by ignorance and prejudice about the Islamic religion. Italians apply their Christian understanding of religion to the Muslim one. They see the rules regarding what a Muslim is allowed or not allowed to eat as a punishment or a limitation of personal freedom. These rules are passed down as a religious law, but some interpretations give to them a rational basis. In Islamic culture, for example, pigs

were seen as unclean animals that in domesticated situations could eat their own feces, so there could be health reasons. Other rules that regulate which animal should be killed, how and when, are also given as a prescription, a guidance to help Muslims make the right decisions⁵.

Italians see the very *halal* rules that regulate the killing of animals as inhumane and cruel toward the animals. It is difficult to establish when killing, done for the purpose of harvesting food, can be humane, since it assumes the killing of a young, healthy animal. However, it is interesting that Islamic religion, which sets rules that protect the well-being of animals, is often portrayed in the media as cruel toward the animals. In this religion, for example, it is prescribed that the animal ready to be slaughtered not see other animals that have been slaughtered, which is meant to keep the animal from suffering psychologically prior to the slaughter, or as written in the Quran 'to kill it twice'. Moreover, Islamic tradition prescribes a certain age requirement for slaughter, for example, a year for sheep, two years for beef. Italian cooking traditions do not have such regard for the animals' ages: lambs for example are slaughtered at six months or younger. In the Muslim tradition, male non-castrated animals are always preferred, while Italian traditions prefer castrated animals. The negative perceptions on the part of the Italians are a consequence of a perceived identity of the Islamic religion, perhaps that sort promoted by the Saudi doctrine. This has caused Muslims in Italy to find their own local identity. Halal butcher shops symbolize this need.

In different parts of Italy, the opening of *halal* butcher shops is a symbol of a presence of an ethnic enclave. Turin, for example, has the largest concentration of Moroccan immigrants. In Turin there are three kinds of ethnic businesses: illegal street sellers, small Italian-style stores like *Tabacchi* (Italian tobacco stores), bakeries that mostly serve the local Italian population, and *halal* butchers and phone centers that almost exclusively serve the immigrant Muslim

⁵ Islam, as other religions, regards God's word as inscrutable, and thus does not welcome explanations for Islamic religious rules, even dietary ones.

population. *Halal* stores also sell imported goods coming mostly from Morocco. There are now 13 halal butcher shops in Turin because of the high demand from the immigrant population (Malchionda & Franco, 2009).

Businesses run by immigrants in Italy have experienced a large increase in recent years. While immigrants comprise 6% of the population, they produce 9.2% of the Italian GDP. Specifically, while the number of new businesses opening went down by half of a percentage point in general, the creation of new businesses opened by the migrant population went up by 12.5%. Of all the new businesses, the great majority deal with food, from shops and markets to restaurants. People from Morocco represent the majority of business owners (Castagnone, 2009).

Openness toward immigrant entrepreneurship in cities like Turin is visible. Porta Palazzo is a neighborhood in Turin which is mostly populated by Moroccan immigrants. Close to this neighborhood many ethnic businesses have started that serve both the Italian and the immigrant population (Ambrosini & Castagnone & Gasparetti, 2008). In another city, like Lucca, Tuscany, the local government has banned ethnic food that is not local (of local Italian tradition) inside the city limits. In general, the Italian reaction toward Muslim culture is variegated and while certain cities have welcomed the differences others have shown an intolerant side. We can argue however, that some Italian politicians from Italian main parties have used some aspects of the Islamic culture related to the Wahhabi version of Islam to portray a negative picture of Islam. The Wahhabi international organization, also, has tried to influence the Italian Muslim population by sending Wahhabis *imams*. The immigrant population, instead, has found the strength to create their own identity through the creation of ethnic businesses. *Halal* shops and other ethnic businesses have become an alternative venue for maintaining their personal religious identity away from prejudice and Muslim international organizations.

Findings and Discussion:

The following table summarizes the preliminary statistical data of the interviewees. The table represents the limited variety of the sample I was able to take. I was unable, for example, to find female interviewees except for one. The only female interviewee I found was through a snow ball method, where a son volunteered his mother for the interview. In general, however, all the people answering the phone for businesses, Islamic Cultural Centers, and Mosques were male. Also, when the respondents suggested other possible candidates, the suggested ones were male.

Table⁶:

Origin	Sex	Permanence	Residence	Contact	Un/Married
Morocco	Male	20	Brescia	Mosque	Unmarried
Morocco	Male	20	Brescia	PIZ	MTI
Tunis	Female	9	Brescia	RES OB	MTC
Morocco	Male	12	Brescia	ICA	MTC
Morocco	Male	30	Brescia	ICA	MTI
Morocco	Male	20	Firenze	PIZ OB	MTC
Tunis	Male	10	Firenze	HBS	MTC

⁶ **Legend** ICA: Islamic Cultural Association; OB: out of business; HBS: Halal Butcher Shop; RES: restaurant; PIZ: pizzeria; MTC: married to immigrant with same nationality; MTI: married to Italian.

Tunis	Male	18	Firenze	HBS	Unmarried
Tunis	Male	15	Torino	ICA	MTC
Tunis	Male	13	Padova	RES OB	MTC
Egypt	Male	22	Viterbo	PIZ	Unmarried
Egypt	Male	9	Milano	RES OB	Unmarried
Algeria	Male	20	Barletta	Mosque	MTC
Pakistan	Male	15	Rome	RES	Unmarried

The years of residence in Italy for each immigrant is an important variable in understanding the changes in dietary habits. I assumed that the longer the immigrants resided in Italy, the stronger would be the changes in his/her dietary habits. I thus tried to diversify the sample. I avoided calling only businesses, even though I was interested particularly in halal butcher shops, assuming that immigrants who were able to open a business would have had a longer stay in Italy. However, the shortest residence in Italy among all interviewees in my sample is 9 years, still a long time. I remedied this problem by asking how their dietary habits changed throughout the years of residence in Italy. In the few cases in which I was able to reach an immigrant that had a very short period of permanence in Italy, I was not able to communicate with him for lack of a common language. In short, it was impossible to find interviewees with only a few years or a few months of residence in Italy.

The ISTAT reports that the greatest number of legal immigrants from 1992 to 2002 was from Morocco, followed by Tunisia (6th place), Egypt 14th place and Algeria (30th place). In more recent years, just as many or even more than from Morocco or Tunisia the great majority of

immigrants came from Eastern European countries, Albania being at the first place. Interestingly, also, the male/female ratio has been changing dramatically in the last decades. While, for example, in 1992 only 9.2% of Moroccan immigrants were female, in 1997 20.6% of Moroccan immigrants were female, while in 2002, 32% of immigrants were female and, in 2007, 37% were female. Other North African countries follow a similar pattern showing that a growing number of women are reuniting with their spouses or families, or looking for jobs, following the example set by men of their countries before. This development in the immigration pattern shows that the country of origin played the most important role in deciding the connections for social networking. While the Muslim religion seems to play a very important role in the way most immigrants are categorized, it does not seem to play such an important role in the way immigrants connect to each other.

Food has an important symbolic meaning in every society. Hunger is a symbol of death and desperation and many societies have ritual and religious ceremonies to keep hunger at bay. This power of life and death, thus, gives food a strong symbolic meaning. In opulent societies where often obesity is more of a problem than starvation is, people have lost the connection with the symbolic value of food as giver of life. In tribal societies, as for example the society where Islam came to life, the symbolic value of food was very strong. The directions that the Quran gives for the ritual slaughtering of permitted animals are an expression of this powerful symbolism connected with food. Food is a gift from God, and ritual slaughtering is an everlasting reminder of the importance of this gift.

In my interviews, I tried to understand how the respondents interpreted and understood the rules for halal ritual slaughtering. One first aspect all the respondents talked about was what their understanding of what can be considered halal was. One respondent explained to me that he considered all the meat that one can buy in Italy (anywhere, not specifically in a halal butcher shops or meat marked as halal) to be halal. He believed that the point of these rules for ritual

slaughtering was to ensure that the animals to be eaten were safe to eat, and free from dangerous bacteria. This responder described himself as a practicing Muslim, who went to mosque every Friday and was married to an Italian woman who converted to Islam. I found his explanation very interesting and revealing as to his identity.

When I asked him if he missed Italian food when he returned to his country of origin for vacation or to visit relatives, he said that he did not. When back in his native land, he only ate the local traditional food. I also asked if he brought any Italian food to give as presents to his relatives, and he said that he only brought chocolates and candies for his younger relatives. He explained that his relatives enjoyed them as novelties, exotic food, but that they never expected nor did they become part of their daily diet, not even during the short period of his stay. Food, for this respondent, meant culture, and culture meant connections with others. In other words, food for him, was like a language, and he adopted the language of his host community.

Food taboos and religious guidelines, however, go much deeper than cooking traditions. In Islamic culture, men are the ones that slaughter meat and/or buy meat at the butcher shop. Men are, thus, those that make sure that religious rules are followed inside their families. In the case of this Moroccan informant, he decided for himself and his family what is halal and what was not. This decision could be explained by considering the fact of his long residence in Italy (30 years) or by his personal interpretations of the religion. For example, he explained to me that, when he bought chickens he made sure that the chicken's head was still attached to the body (the presence of the head could be a sign that the animal was slaughtered according to some halal rules).

Another informant explained that instead he believed that halal meat was only meat ritually slaughtered. He explained that at times he would eat meat that was not ritually slaughtered, as long as it was not pork, and simply invoke the name of God, or God's forgiveness, before eating it. He also explained that, if halal meat could not be found, he would

buy kosher meat and, if even that could not be found, he would buy meat from the supermarket as a last resource. He explained that he would eat pork, if nothing else was available, and if he were hungry.

This respondent explained that he would only trust halal butcher shops and not halal meat from a supermarket. He explained that he had seen fish marketed as halal in the supermarket. Fish, he told me, cannot be halal or not halal. There are no guidelines for “butchering” fish, and thus he believed that big companies were trying to captivate Islamic customers by selling halal products improperly labeled⁷. He also explained that he only used one butcher shop, the one owned by a person of his same country. All the respondents that bought meat at a butcher shop only used butcher shops owned by people of their same nationalities, thus Moroccans went to Moroccan butchers, Tunisians to Tunisian butchers and so on. Another respondent explained to me for example, that he drove 60 miles once a month to buy all the meat he needed for his family and himself. He actually lived in Rome and he knew that there were other halal butcher shops and supermarkets that sold halal meat in town. However, he only trusted this butcher shop owned by a person who also came from the same region in his country of origin.

I received similar results from the interviews with halal butcher shop owners. One owner explained that he had no Italian customers and that most of his customers were from his nation of origin. Another halal butcher shop owner, instead, told me that his customers were of all different nationalities, but mostly of one nationality, the same as the owner’s. Bonne’s research (2008) seems to confirm these findings:

⁷ There are halal rules regarding fish processing: even if there are no rules for killing fish, it should not suffer. For example, they should not be scaled or skinned while they are still alive. Also not all sea creatures are halal. My understanding is that the interviewee was unaware of these rules.

These findings result in the Islamic butcher being the most important place of purchase for halal meat. Buying at the Islamic butcher is exemplary for behavior where product authenticity and trust are mediated through personal interaction... Our results also confirm the conclusions ... that familiar butchers, with whom consumers have personal contact, are by far the most trusted source for information on the credence characteristics of meat (p. 121)

Consumer's trust is based on personal interactions. People trust people of similar background, and having a common nation of origin is an important characteristic. In Bonne's findings (2008), for example, Muslim consumers sometimes used butcher shops not belonging to their national origin, when their preferred butcher was on vacation; while they trusted that the meat was halal, they were concerned about other aspects: "during summer when the butcher goes on holiday, halal meat availability is a problem. I am then obliged to buy meat at that one butcher who is open, even if I know the meat is not fresh and the hygienic conditions are unacceptable" (p. 121).

Another important component of food and identity is social status. The term social status, however, does not render the complexity and the diversity of the immigrant population in Italy. Gadji (2000), a rare example of an immigrant writer, in his introduction to his fiction explains this complexity. Gadji points out that to talk about a Senegalese community in Milan, for example, is a stretch. In Senegal, as in most North African countries, the existence and the value of different tribes and ethnic groups, further divided into castes, is still very important. This structure holds African society together. This structure also influences personal identity of immigrants in Italy.

An important festivity for those of Islamic religion is the *Eid al-Adha* (Festival of the Sacrifice). This festivity celebrates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his eldest son.

To celebrate this Muslims slaughter sheep, goats, cows, or camels, depending on their local tradition and availability. In Morocco, for example, this festivity is also called “The Day of the Ram” because they traditionally sacrifice rams. The tradition calls for the slaughtered animal to be divided into three parts. One part is to be given to the poor, one part is to be given to your neighbor, and one part is for the owner of the animal. As a researcher, I assumed that such a festivity would bring together Muslims of different national origins to celebrate together.

This celebration and specifically the ritual slaughtering that celebration involves, highlights the important difference between Muslim and Italian culture. When, more than ten years ago, Muslims started celebrating this festivity publicly in Italian towns, they encountered hostility and surprise from the Italian population. Some of my informants explained that the killing itself is part of the celebration and that families and children participate in it. Children, for example, would try to touch the animal when still alive. Italian urban culture, instead, shies away from the killing part. In Bologna, for example, slaughter houses are hidden away from the center of the city and, as the anthropologist Dore (1998) conducting research about Eid al-Adha, pointed out, Italian culture prefers not to know how the animal dies. A culture instead, such as the Muslim one, that celebrates the killing as a form of respect and celebration to God, is seen as barbaric. Little attention is given to the fact that the religious ritual killing protects the well-being of the individual animal, while large slaughter houses that process almost all the meat Italians consume take no consideration for the well-being of each animal before slaughter.

My respondents explained the ways they celebrated *Eid al-Adha*. One respondent told me that he did not celebrate this festivity regularly since he emigrated from Morocco. Only when he found himself among close relatives and friends did he go back

to his tradition. He and his relatives had found a farmer from whom they could buy a live animal and they were able to perform the ritual slaughtering. They gave part of the slaughtered animal back to the farmer, as an offering to the needy, and cooked the rest of the animal to celebrate the festivity with family and close friends.

Not all respondents performed the ritual slaughtering for Eid al-Adha. Some respondents did not perform the slaughtering when they lived in their country of origin and did not start doing it in Italy. They did celebrate the festivity by consuming more and celebrating with friends and family. Actual performance of the slaughtering depends on the traditions and social class the immigrants belonged to. The Pakistani respondent, for example, explained to me that in the village where he was born, there was no electricity and thus there was no way to keep meat for long periods of time. He remembered that his family and his ethnic group only slaughtered animals during certain periods of the year; they always did it as a group and consumed all the meat quickly. One of the Tunisian respondents, instead, explained that it was not in the tradition of his family to directly slaughter animals, not even for Eid al-Aidha, and thus he had no experience performing such a task. For this holiday, his family celebrated together with other families who did the ritual slaughtering and was able to receive some meat from them. The two halal butcher shop owners confirmed that sales of halal meat increased during this festivity, while one of the Egyptian respondents explained that traditionally the meat for this festivity should not be bought (already slaughtered).

All my respondents, in general, celebrated this festivity inside their family and close kinship. In some cases people that were directly related to the family celebrating participated at the festivity. The people invited were of the same country as origin the people celebrating. My understanding is that this festivity is a way to reinforce immigrant's identities. This is done by reenacting the way the celebration happened in their village or town of origin. The traditions that are celebrated are the ones that make

the ties among family and close friends stronger. Close contact with people that share the same traditions reinforces personal identity and belonging. Eid al-Adhid reinforces ties with close relatives and friends, but does not seem to create new links with other Muslims. Moreover, this festivity does not seem to favor interactions between Muslims and the local Italian population, with the exception of the business interaction between local farmers that sell live animals and the Muslim buyer.

Many large companies are trying to find a way to exploit the halal market in Italy. Most of these companies, however, have a narrow and business oriented vision of halal food. For example, internationally accepted halal guidelines for the butchering of chickens specify:

Mechanical or machine slaughter of birds, which was initiated in Western countries, is gaining acceptance among Muslims. Almost all countries that import chicken accept machine-killed birds. A Muslim while pronouncing the name of God switches on the machine. One Muslim slaughter person is positioned after the machine to make a cut on the neck if the machine misses a bird or if the cut is not adequate for proper bleeding. In commercial poultry processing, generally the machine does not properly cut 5 to 10% of the birds. A Muslim then cuts the missed birds. The Muslim back-up slaughter person also continuously invokes the name of God on the birds while slaughtering and witnessing the machine kill. The height of the blade is adjusted to make a cut on the neck, right below the head, and not across the head. A rotary knife should be able to cut at least three of the passages in the neck. Any birds that are not properly cut may be tagged by the Muslim slaughter person/inspector, and used as non-halal. Two slaughter persons might be required to accomplish these requirements, depending on the line speed and efficiency of the operation. (Riaz & Chaudry, 2005, p. 58)

Halal slaughtering methods call for respect of the animal. The Quran calls for a one to one

relation between the slaughterer and the victim. The slaughtering method described in the above paragraph portrays a method that, while it tries to follow the letter of halal guidelines, does not respect the meaning of it. Such procedures may not be possible for an industrialized production; nevertheless companies are trying to force halal guidelines to be able to sell to niche markets.

A halal butcher shop owner explained to me that all the sheep and lamb meat he sold arrived from abroad. I followed the import/export chain and I found out that most lamb and sheep slaughtered according to halal methods arrived from Australia. Millions of sheep and thousands of cattle annually are shipped from Australia to be slaughtered overseas in halal facilities (Nicholson, 2002). These animals have to endure a sea voyage of over a month. They are enclosed in cages with food and water, but the cages are not cleaned of manure or dead animals until the end of the trip. A large number of them die before reaching their destination. Once they reach their destination they can be slaughtered according to the “halal-industrial” methods.

Temple Grandin, a professor of animal science, has worked in the meat industry for more than thirty years. She designed machinery to implement more humane methods for handling animals. She acknowledges that halal slaughtering does not allow the stunning of the animal. This procedure can cause great suffering if it takes place in a meat processing plant. In a recent article Grandin (2006) described this method:

The animals were shocked multiple times with an electric goad to force them to leap into a box that had a slick floor mounted on a 30 degree angle. This tripped floor caused the animal to fall down. A chain was wrapped around the steer’s back leg and he was dragged out and hoisted up. The whole time the terrified animal was bellowing and struggling. Bellows from the beasts could be heard everywhere in the plant. After the struggling steer was fully suspended a nose tong connected to a powerful air cylinder was

placed in the animal's nose. The cylinder pulled on the nose tong to stretch the animal's neck. This is the most barbaric thing I had ever observed (para. 8).

All respondents, when asked about the meaning of halal procedures, said that they believed that respecting the animal and limiting its suffering was an important part of halal rules. Food industries, however, are only trying to target possible costumers in the Islamic community in Europe.

The interactions among people of different nationalities and religions while consuming food, was another subject of my interviews. When asked if and where they ate in the company of friends or acquaintances, all respondents confirmed that they ate at restaurants or pizzerias with coworkers or other families. When eating out most respondents said that they simply avoided food that could possibly be *haram* for them to eat. Only one of the respondents said that he had no concerns about eating food that he had not personally cooked. All other respondents instead were concerned about most foods. They were concerned not simply about pork or other *haram* meat, but also possible contaminants in sweets and cakes that could have traces of pork or alcohol. In general, all respondents did not feel that dietary concerns created a barrier in the interactions with non-Muslim people. All of the respondents, except for one, when eating out, went more often to halal restaurants and pizzerias than to non-halal places.

All respondents confirmed that they also ate at friends' houses or invited friends for lunches or dinners. When eating at a non-Muslim friend's house, one of the respondents explained, his host avoided cooking any meat and only made pasta. He did not believe that this avoidance of meat created any problem for the interaction. Interestingly, however, similar religious traditions regarding food did not make immigrants of different nationalities any closer. The most important thing in bringing people together was not eating halal food, but how the food was cooked, that is, what

culinary tradition they followed.

I liked to ask all my interviewees if they liked Italian food better or the traditional food of their home countries. This question was an icebreaker. Most respondents gave lengthy explanations on why they liked either their home country recipes or Italian recipes better. They often talked about specific dishes, either Italian or from their home countries. Answers varied, but in general, all immigrants had adopted some aspects of the Italian tradition. Surprisingly for me, most respondents ate more traditional Italian food in the first years of their Italian residence than in later years.

Most of the respondents emigrated to find better jobs (the exception among my interviewees were the Tunisian woman who came to reunite with her husband and another interviewee who was first generation Italian). Most had a difficult beginning due to problems in communicating and finding a job. Often alone and with limited resources, some of the respondents started working as farm laborers, and when out in the field, they often ate whatever the farmer had to offer, or what could be bought at the local store. One respondent, a Moroccan, explained how the farmer where he worked let them use an improvised kitchen in one of the outbuildings. During lunch break⁸ they went to the local store and bought the cheapest merchandise, pasta and sauce, and ate with the other coworkers. Not all coworkers were Muslim. This respondent remembers how one of his coworkers, another Muslim from Morocco that he had known since childhood, had started eating pork. He was surprised about his friend's change. He now, he can be more careful about what he eats, pays much more attention to the provenience and quality of

⁸ Lunch breaks were two hours long, workers started working at 7am when the temperature was still cool and worked until noon. They had a 2 hours break, enough time to cook a plate of pasta, and then went back to work until 5pm.

the food he eats. In his culinary habits he goes back not so much to the recipes of his home country, but to following the *halal/haram* religious guidelines. In general, it seems that my respondents felt better about themselves if they were eating halal food, more than if they were following their own specific culinary tradition.

Following Muslim guidelines created some challenges for many of the immigrants. One respondent from Egypt explained to me that even asking for a loan could be problematic. He said that Muslims are allowed neither to ask for nor to pay interests on loans. For example, he was eventually able to buy a car through a promotional deal, where buyers of new vehicles could pay back a two-year short loan that had no interest. He also explained that he would not buy halal meat from a butcher that had opened his business by obtaining a traditional loan that required interest. The interest, in his view, made that butcher shop not halal.

One respondent had opened a pizzeria and was able to attract both the Italian and Muslim population. Following his religious beliefs, he decided not to serve alcohol. The Italian clientele liked the pizza, but did not come back, because of the absence of alcoholic beverages. Other businesses failed because the local immigrant population wasn't big enough and the Italian population was not too adventurous with non-Italian restaurants. The respondent's impression was that while they, the immigrants, had changed their dietary habits quite a bit, he did not notice any real changes in the dietary habits of their Italian friends or acquaintances. A number of Kebab-sandwich stores are now part of Italian cities, however none of the respondents frequented them or recognized them as their own ethnic food, even if the Kebab meat was halal. Young Italians frequent such places, and are nearly entirely unaware that the meat served is halal or don't know what halal means.

Often ignorance, especially when accompanied by prejudice, is what has made some of the respondents uneasy about openly displaying their religious beliefs. During Ramadan, for example, Muslims cannot eat nor drink during daylight, but must wait until sundown. This abstinence from food and liquids makes it very difficult to work during the day, especially if performing physically demanding work. Some respondents admitted that they were not able to abstain from water and food all day long during their first years of residence in Italy. One respondent from Egypt mentioned how it has been difficult to respect dietary rules during Ramadan. However, he mentioned that what made it most difficult was the “intolerance” he had witnessed. Employers, he said, had no respect or patience for the religious beliefs and dietary changes for Ramadan. He remembered reading how in an Italian town, the mayor⁹ wanted to make it mandatory for workers to drink during Ramadan. The respondent complained that while Italian employers had no respect for his religious practices, they also assumed that they knew them better than he and would suggest that he drink during the day.

Conclusion

Halal food plays a very important role in how Muslims connect with each other and how they view themselves. Food in general and halal meat in particular, does not seem to create any connections among Muslims of different national origins, or even among people of the same national origin if they are of a different social status or background. Halal meat is only a category, or to put it even more simply, an ingredient. This ingredient does not seem to play a socializing role among Muslims, but it is lived and experienced in very different ways. My respondents only eat together with immigrants of their same country or with Italians. They also use only butcher shops owned by people of their own nationality.

⁹ The mayor’s name was Coletti, the city was Montova, and the date 09/2009 when the mayor proposed to make drinking mandatory for Muslim workers.

The way we cook and what we eat expresses our identity. In my research, all respondents admitted that they abandoned their culinary traditions, and religious dietary guidelines totally or partially during the first years of immigration. All of them also adopted recipes and culinary traditions of their host country. All of them, however, went back to the religious guidelines on *halal/haram* foods when they were able. Even when a respondent admitted to buying and consuming meat bought at Italian supermarkets and butcher shops, he did it in the belief that all meat sold was in fact halal. I have no authority to confirm or negate his beliefs about the “legality” by Muslim standards of Italian meat. However, relation my respondents had with food in general and with their religiosity, it is a very personal relationship. Even if the rules for halal are universal and codified by business regulations, each of my respondents had their personal understanding of what halal meant. Moreover, it was this personal understanding that made them feel good or bad about themselves because of what they ate. Being Muslim was very important for their identities, but it was a personal identity that often did not make them similar to other Muslims, nor did it make them share meals with people of their same faith. Often Muslim identity is portrayed by the media with universal characteristics that render people of different nationalities very similar in the eyes of the public. In my research this idea did not hold. The identity related with halal or traditional food is not an identity that corresponds to a universal Muslim community (*umma*) but is a unique and personal identity that changed for each respondent. The identity of each of my respondents was related with his or her personal interpretation of the religion: the food they ate reflected this personal relationship.

National origin was the next level of importance for deciding what to eat and where to buy food. All respondents either bought meat at the supermarket (for the most part when the supermarket had halal meat available) or bought meat at a butcher shop. Importantly, all my respondents used butcher shops that belonged to owners that came from their same country of origin. Food is a way to define who we are first by feeling good about ourselves and our

adherence to our religious beliefs, and later as a way to connect with the people we trust. Trust, it seems, for most of my respondents and also according to other researchers (Bonne & Verbeke, 2008) is directly connected to a common origin. Tunisians trusted people from Tunis, Moroccans trusted people from Morocco and so on. Having the same origin was more important among my respondents than solely being believers of the same religion.

Most respondents admitted to cooking and eating Italian food and a few mentioned that they preferred Italian food to the food from their nation of origin. All respondents said that they ate either Italian food or traditional food from their mother country; no respondents ate together with other Muslims of a nationality different from their own. More often than not, in fact, all respondents ate with Italians, ate Italian food, or ate at Italian restaurants. Food was not a way for Muslims to connect with other Muslims either at home or when eating out.

The immigrants that answered my questions arrived in Italy to find a job, and in the first years they had to give up many of their traditions to adjust to the new environment. Italian culture grouped them as a single Muslim community. However, my respondents did not belong to such a community which in fact did not exist at all. Their relationship with the Islamic religion was personal. At most it allowed them to connect with their family and other immigrants of their own nationalities. International Islamic organizations also try to create and group immigrants under their wings, but the respondents were not part of any Islamic organization, and again their only connections were restricted to people of their same background. Islam, in spite of what the media and Italian culture proclaims, is an important element for immigrants at the personal level, but did not connect them to the international Islamic community.

Muslim identity, the one imposed by the Western world, carries traits that groups and homogenizes Islamic culture. Not only the media, but politicians and people in general, see people of the Muslim faith as one group, a group of very similar people that uses a common

language and shares common traditions. Among the respondents not only do we see a great difference in culinary traditions, but also how, even when some religious traditions are universal (halal food), there is no direct communication or exchange among Muslims of different backgrounds. Religion did not seem to play an important role in food and in the way my respondents related to other Muslims. Religion was very important for all my respondents but only at the personal level. It made a difference in the way they saw themselves, but did not make them similar to other Muslims only in the name of religion. From another point of view, the force of global capitalism that in the first place causes the international migration movement, is also the force that targets and labels immigrants as possible Muslim halal customers.

Halal food represents an important convergence of identity and misunderstandings about identity. Globalization causes migration, and, while in Italy there is a political rhetoric against immigrants in general and Muslim immigrants in particular, Italy needs the presence of an immigrant work force. Italians see Muslim migrants as members of a monolithic, repressive and oppressive religion that disregards human rights, and as a consequence, animal rights. Islam, however, is not monolithic. Muslim immigrants seek in religion a way to find their own identities. Halal butcher shops have become a place where Muslim immigrants can reassert their Islamic identity away from global influences and in a familiar and local setting that highlights their connectedness with their local space. A fifth of all Italian slaughter houses are halal. Thus, despite the fact that they appear to the Italian eye as the very symbol of Muslim exclusiveness and of a repressive religion, halal butcher shops are actually the very opposite: a break away from a specific restrictive and externally imposed doctrine and also a connection to the local culture and economy.

Further research should investigate if immigrants, in neighborhoods where they are in close proximity with other immigrants of different nationalities, form community and share meals. While all people I interviewed lived in cities that had immigrants of different

nationalities, I am not aware of whether immigrants of different nationalities had the possibility to intermingle. I know that my interviewees in general did not trust halal butcher shops that belonged to Muslims of a national origin other than their own. However, I don't know how physically close the respondents were to immigrants of other nationalities. Studies have shown that first and second generation Muslims in countries like Belgium and France tend to associate themselves with other people of the same religion but of different origin. Is this a development that will happen in Italy too or is the Italian experience going to be different?

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