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The Shifting Border of Food Perceptions and Cultural Identity in Maghrebi[1] Muslim Migrants. History and the Contemporary Experience of Cultural Mediators in Northern Italy

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Abstract: In recent decades, Italy has become a point of entry to the EU and, for many migrants from the Southern shores of the Mediterranean, a final destination (IOM Report, 2011). As massive inflows have often caused emergencies, the pressing needs of these populations in the areas of housing, healthcare, education, etc. have been examined and addressed (data: Regional Authority and Milan Diocese Observatories). Realizing that the cultural implications in the area of food, had not been systematically studied thus far, the author developed a three-year project, focusing on northwest African Muslim migrants and the change in their perception of food, particularly in light of the strong religious implications that food has historically had to Arab populations. After reviewing the key traits of Arab-Berber food history, their translation into contemporary life in the countries of origin and destination was investigated, through interviews with, primarily, cultural mediators, as well as anthropologists, food experts, food chain professionals, and the migrants themselves. The overall research delves into the migrants' views of food back in Northern Africa and Maghrebi[3] and other food in Italy, with an emphasis on ideas of purity and identity (in culinary practices, ingredients, celebrations, table manners, the restaurant system and distribution).

Keywords: migrations; gastronomy; food rules; Islam; northwest Africa

1. Introduction

Maghrebis are the single largest group of people observing Islamic food precepts in Italy (ISTAT Report, 2011), and have formed relatively large communities in Northern Italian cities. Despite the exchanges of the past between the northern and the southern shore of the Mediterranean, major differences exist including most

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notably religion, as well as social organization, ideas about time etc. that expose the contrast between the Maghrebi Muslim food model and the increasingly multicultural Western model in Italy over and above any other clash – and integration – of gastronomies associated with modern-day migrations.

The Muslim food rules have always been an effective factor of unification and identification of a vast majority across nations from the Atlantic to Indonesia, since Arab populations usually lived in countries that were under their political rule. And this, despite the fact that other food-defined perceptions of one's own community, and – most importantly – of other, neighboring social groups, have caused the cultural border between "the civilized" and "the barbarians" – or "us" and "them" – to shift over the centuries, even within the Nation of Islam, most notably contributing to defining the food-related identity of the Maghrebi.

Since the second half of the 20th century, the demographic and cultural frontiers have begun moving well beyond the political borders of Islamic countries, mostly bringing Muslims, particularly Maghrebis, in contact with life in Europe. There, their first generations have become a community-centred religion-defined minority in countries where the Enlightenment-inspired Declaration of Human Rights puts all the emphasis on the individual as a beneficiary of civil liberties and rights, and one who, in theory, has little or no duty of allegiance to his/her group, which is more of a hindrance to universalization than an asset. (Kurth, 2006)

2. Related Work

Given the relatively recent status of Italy as a destination for migrants, few relevant studies have been published on Muslim migrants in this country, and fewer still on their food habits as identity markers. Giacalone, in Balsamo et al. (2004) focused on child care and feeding in Moroccan migrant families; Ghiringhelli (2008) has studied the integration of second generation migrants in schools and the food habits in mixed-nationality couples; Parisi (2009) presented interesting insights into food as a language in Italian-Moroccan couples, and Giovine (2012) on the issue of halal food in Milanese schools. As for the choice of cultural mediators as an elective source of information, a full discussion of their role can be found in De Pury (2005) with reference to ethno-psychiatry (see also see the Methods section), while an exemplification of this approach is provided in Balsamo et al. (2004).

3. Objectives

The paper aims to illustrate how Maghrebi Muslim migrants' relationship to food was historically defined and how, now, it is currently changing as a consequence of their relocation in Italy, and speculates as to the key factors that bring about this

change in their practices and discourse, with insights into elements of history and identity.

4. Methods

The paper provides a qualitative analysis of the existing context in Northern Italy, and more specifically Milan. An in-depth study of the historical cultural bases for Muslim, and specifically Maghrebi, food identity has set the scene for a number of interviews (eventually approx. 20, but still in progress) with cultural mediators, i.e. individuals who help translate between the culture of an institution and a migrant individual or family "[…] *in order to enhance understanding, share information, and create a relationship*" (according to the Colorado Department of Education definition available at www.cde.state.co.us). The interest in working with intermediaries who are well acquainted not just with verbal languages, but with the cultures and the myriad of non-verbal languages that go with them, was regarded as a primary criterion, while possible interferences with their personalities were kept into consideration. Indeed, the choice of cultural mediators as primary interlocutors was natural for the author, who is well-acquainted with the workings of language mediation: the role of a cultural mediator as a facilitator of communication is not only to reproduce speech in a different language, but above all to expose the different meanings, images, experiences, responses, etc. that a given situation or speech will generate in a different culture (De Pury, 2005; Martìn, 2009).

The interviewees included women and men of different ages (mostly 1st generation migrants, age 35-55, married or separated, with and without children, who have been in Italy for at least the past 10 years, and have been mediators for at least 5 years), Maghrebi (largely Moroccan) and other African nationals who deal with Maghrebi migrants or descendants, fluent in Arabic and/or French as well as Italian, Muslim and non-Muslim contracted or employed by the relevant institution(s) who kindly cooperated in recruiting most candidates. The interviews were conducted in Italian – in one case, Italian and French – by interactively developing key themes (ideas about food and identity, changes in habits, food genderization etc.), rather than following a fixed questionnaire. The interviews were filmed using a Cisco Flip Mino camera whenever permission was granted by the mediators; all the interviews were also directly recorded using Rozan's note-taking system (Rozan, 1965). Countries and areas of origin, gender and age groups of the migrants were broadly differentiated during the interviews in connection with individual themes or statements. Extra support was sought from anthropologists and food historians, as well as food chain professionals, institutional representatives etc. whenever needed.

5. Results

The results discussed in the paper reflect the progress made so far in the underlying theoretical research and field work, both of which are still in progress, although more ground has been covered, logically, in the former than in the latter. In particular, while the general framework for the processes described herein has been largely clarified and tested, there remain a number of grey areas to probe and analyse, in particular the food production, processing and retail distribution mechanisms and the Maghrebi ethnic restaurant industry in Italy. In connection with the study of the historical evolution of the Muslim and Maghrebi food identity, the author has gained extensive insights into the formation of such identity, and has described the steps of that process, which will be briefly expounded here. Each step has led to the redefinition of the food-model borders in food discourse, more than in food practices, and has promoted the perpetual renewal of Arab gastronomy by differentiation and integration, all the way to its Arab-Berber version, with French and international influences (recently, in particular via satellite TV), which is present-day Maghrebi cuisine and food culture. The study goes on to examine the relevance of food in defining the Maghrebi Muslim identity, as well as the mechanism through which migrants become relocated from a community-centred form of social organization to an individualistic and universalistic Western society, and the impact of that shift on their livelihoods, with a focus on food availability, manipulation and consumption, and the qualitative changes in food choice that come with the so-called 2nd and 3rd generations. The two principal outcomes of that mechanism, as brought out in the interviews, are: a) that the food model – more specifically, the religious precepts that ensured their integration with the community of origin – is now what isolates them from the rest of their everyday world, alongside with making their daily life more complicated and stirring nostalgia and reflexivity, but also curiosity to discover the food that the “others” eat; b) that the difficulty of replicating genuine Maghrebi cuisine in Italy, first and foremost for lack of time, ultimately causes them to trade their food symbols for the Italian gastronomic identity, first in their practices, and then in discourse too.

6. Discussion

6.1. The Ummah: a Religion-based, Food-defined Nation

The post-industrial re-focalization on food as a key element in the anthropology and sociology of ethnic groups as opposed to the globalization of the Western agricultural and food models has drawn particular attention onto the areas – or, as we shall see, the borders – where the two opposites of ethnicity-identity versus globalization-universalism converge, clash and coalesce. In this respect, the geography of migrations has many a story to tell, with relatively similar plots, no

matter what the setting and who the actors may be. Yet, while migrations generally provide a good representation of the food-related identity mechanisms at play – whatever the country or the migrants' origin –, the resulting frictions and the consequent adaptive mechanisms are particularly evident, and logically so, wherever the migrant group is representative of a culture which largely uses foodways and/or food rules to represent its own identity.

This holds particularly true in the case of Muslim migrants. From North America to South-East Asia, Muslim identity is not primarily rooted in ethnicity, but in religion. Allah's Prophet himself proclaimed that the new nation of 622 A.D. was defined no longer by descent, as in pre-Islamic Arab tribal societies, but by faith in God. This is clearly stated in one of the very first articles of the founding document of the Ummah, the Medina Charter, where the converted clans (and, only initially, the other citizens of Medina) "*are one community to the exclusion of all men*" or, according to other translations, "*form one and the same community as against the rest of men*", or "*shall form a constitutional unity as distinct from other peoples*." While in the Constitution of Medina (as it is also called) faith relationships are set above blood ties, tribal identities were still important around year 1 of the Hijira, and were accurately listed in the Charter to refer to the different groups. Later on, as it will be discussed, this expansionary religion ended up including a much more diverse population, for whom blood relations to the original Ummah did not exist, and religion alone was the one unifying factor.

But how should the newly-established, metaphysically-based nation physically – and thus visibly – differentiate from any "other people", or "all men" referred to in the Medina Charter? Verse 102 of Sura III comes to help: "O you who believe! Fear Allah (by doing all that He has ordered and by abstaining from all that He has forbidden) as He should be feared. [Obey Him, be thankful to Him, and remember Him always], and die not except in a state of Islam (as Muslims) with complete submission to Allah." What Allah has ordered to do or to abstain from doing is clearly stated in the Quran, later complemented by fiqh (jurisprudence) and the hadiths (the sayings and doings of the Prophet). The orders correspond to the five "pillars" of Islam – shahada (creed), salat (daily prayer), sawm (Ramadan fasting), zakāt (almsgiving in kind), and hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) –, while there are five prohibitions: "*Forbidden to you is the flesh of an animal which dies of itself, and blood and the flesh of swine; and that on which is invoked the name of one other than Allah; and that which has been strangled; and that beaten to death; and that killed by a fall; and that which has been gored to death; and that of which a wild animal has eaten, except that which you have properly slaughtered (before its death); and that which has been slaughtered on an altar. And forbidden is also that you seek to know your lot by the divining arrows. That is an act of disobedience*."

At a closer look, the five pillars and the five prohibitions reproduce the metaphysical-physical structure of the beliefs and practices that qualify any

Muslim as a member of the Pan-Islamic nation. The first pillar, shahada, grounds the metaphysical foundations of unity in the creed in one God; the following pillars state how that creed needs to translate into visible, recognizable (physical) actions. Such actions are largely connected with food, either directly or indirectly. Food is central in sawm and zakāt. In salat, it becomes a reward in Heaven for praying (always paired with giving alms), or a response to prayers, or, in the case of wine, a hindrance to proper prayer, while it is a means of atonement for non-compliance or something subject to special conditions in hajj . On the other hand, all five prohibitions are associated with food, including maysir, a game of chance with food prizes popular among Bedouins. Throughout history, obedience to all these physical rules is proof of one's faith in Allah, and of one's allegiance to the Ummah, while overtly transgressing these prescriptions has always equated to relinquishing one's community and, therefore, one's identity as well.

6.2. Across the Borders in History: the Three Steps in the Making of a Maghrebi Food Identity

The Ummah has provided the general framework for a number of transitions in history since the writing of the Quran. With each of them, the borders of the nation – or those of part of it – have shifted, redefining who was in a given community and who was outside it, most often in the role of the "other people", the foreigners, the "barbarians" who do not share the same culture and customs as the community members. Although the food rules of Islam have never changed, the food discourse has found "others" to differentiate from, both inside and outside the nation of Islam. The three main shifts in food-discourse-defined community borders that historically led to the definition of the Muslim nation and of a Maghrebi component within it were: 1) the very creation of Islam, with its differentiation from its pre-Islamic background, 2) the conquest of the Persian Empire, i.e. the centre of Middle East gastronomy and refinement, and 3) the expansion westwards into North Africa. A number of other border shifts and intercultural contacts have ensued, with their consequences on food-mediated identity perceptions, such as following French colonization in 1830, which brought the Western frontier well into Muslim countries; however, the most relevant redefinition of borders has resulted from 20th- and 21st-century Maghrebi migrations into Western countries, most notably France and Italy.

The first border was drawn by the Prophet Muhammad himself, to separate the new Nation of Allah from the Bedouin polytheists, who stood for all unbelievers. Islam was initiated following the model of the monotheists he had come into contact with: the Jews who lived in Arabia (a small community in Mecca, and a larger group of tribes in Yathrib, later renamed Medina), and the Christians of Syria and Axum, the Christian merchants and monks who travelled to the Hijaz, and those in

Mecca who had been influenced by them. To differentiate his new community from the other (polytheistic) Arabs, not only did Muhammad adopt the food rules of these monotheists in his own simplified variation, but he adopted bread – and barley bread, more specifically – as his and his lineage's identity food, whereas the frugal Bedouin nomads has always prized and coveted meat and flaunted slaughtering and generous banquets, lavishly celebrated in their poetry. Several anecdotes about the Prophet tell about his moderation and his preference for tharida (a soup made of breadcrumbs) and, despite his own grandfather's feats in competitive camel slaughtering, the hallmark of his descendants was his great-grandfather's nickname of Hashim – the Bread-Crumbler.

Thus Muhammad drew a separation between his new community, united around their ascetically-portrayed spiritual leader and devoted to frugality, and the other Arabs, whom he ideally exiled from and later readmitted to the Nation when they were conquered by Islam. This border, however, divided two peoples whose discourse equally opposed the food pleasures of the Sassanid court in Ctesiphon, Persia. After the death of the Prophet and of his first four "rightly guided" caliphs, however, the new Umayyad reign in Damascus, followed by the conquest of Persia and the foundation of Baghdad, in the 8th century, led to the definition of a new border – one that relegated the Arabian peninsula, with all the piety and moderation of early Islam, to a role of "barbarity", replacing the Arabs' frugality with precisely the quest for luxury and pleasures of the palate that the former had despised. The Abbasid period, from the name of the Baghdad-based dynasty that reigned over the broadest expanse of Muslim conquests, was marked by far-flung development in Arab gastronomy (largely influenced by the Persian model), as well as in gastronomic and dietetic literature, which reflected and celebrated the new interest of the higher classes in culinary pleasures and in a rich and varied diet, while the Arab model of the days of Muhammad was likened to that of the uncouth Bedouin, and the loathed image of the "lizard-eater".

This model of "conspicuous consumption" was carried on in the construction of the next border. The conquest of North Africa was completed in the mid-7th century, just before the Umayyad caliphate in Damascus was overthrown by the Abbasids. One century later, Umayyad al-Andalus (Moorish Spain) became a second centre of power with the Maghreb (literally, the Arab West), mostly politically separated from the Abbasid Mashreq (the Arab East). With time, the cultural separation and competition between the two, and the rise of al-Andalus and Maghreb as Baghdad declined, also brought about a wave of culinary pride. The high culinary standards of Baghdad had merged with the gastronomic traditions of the Berbers and the Iberians – and later on of the Turks too. In the process, the recipes had been democratized and revitalized, granting the West gastronomic leadership over the East, as hinted at by 13th-century cookbook author Ibn Razin al-Tuyibi. As mentioned before, other food- and identity-related borders were defined in the

course of the following centuries, most notably within the Maghreb under the French rule, where the French culinary tradition left an imprint, as usual. However, the most interesting frontier in defining food-related Maghrebi Muslim identity was set only in 20th-century Europe.

6.3. Across the Mediterranean and out of the Borders of Islam

The succession of multiple "migrations" described in the previous section were accompanied by political conquest, one way or another. While this led the Arab Muslims to blend different gastronomic cultures and constantly enrich their initial body of culinary know-how, the Quranic food rules have remained unchanged and have always been imposed upon whoever they converted as proof of their allegiance to the Ummah. In the past century, their borders have shifted again, although this time as a consequence of peaceful migrations across the Mediterranean. Nowadays, in France, people of Maghrebi origin – les arabes – constitute a large ethnic group, while in Italy French-speaking northwest African migrants rank second by numbers after Romanians, with Moroccans up to 452,424 units in 2011 from 294,945 in 2005 and Tunisians up to 106,291 from 78,230, while Algerian and Mauritanian legal migrants together account for just above 25,000 people. This study has focused on Lombardy, where data as at Jan. 1st, 2011, reckon 136,473 official Maghrebi residents, of whom 109,245 Moroccans, 22,109 Tunisians, 4,916 Algerians, and 203 Mauritanians; at the same date, the city of Milan had 7,634 residents of Moroccan origin, 1,595 Tunisians, 665 Algerians, but a larger population lived in the outskirts, where rents are generally lower. In total, just below 10,000 people, out of a Milanese population of 1,324,110, and the second largest Maghrebi community after Turin.

As a result of 20th- and 21st-century migrations into Europe and North America, a relatively large proportion of Moroccan and Tunisian Muslim citizens now live outside the political borders of their countries, where Islam still regulates everyday life – and specifically food. If the transition from mainstream to minority status, from a community-centred to an individualistic society, from an extended to a nuclear family is a recurring theme in migrations, it bears very specific implications for Muslim migrants, whose religious and social identity rests on age-old Islamic food rules, that dramatically restrict their choice in countries where, paradoxically, any ingredient or dish is within everybody's reach – in theory. There, the Quranic food rules no longer apply to everybody's fare, and are often overlooked even by public catering services in schools and hospitals, while there is no time in the households for the elaborate dishes developed in a different social context, where women usually live in extended families and work at home. There, two different cultural standards are at play: contemporary Europe, with its individualistic perception of rights, and the Northern-African Arab heritage –

indeed shared by most non-Western societies – of a community-centred universe, where the community exists at different levels – from the Ummah to the family, from ethnicity to the village. In a more general way, and also in connection with the food discourse, as has been pointed out before, the community is a source of identity, based on shared food rules and religious festivities, with all the conviviality that goes with them.

As several mediators have stressed, although things are changing fast in the age of globalization, life in Maghreb was, and is still, marked by community rituals, where all family celebrations – from birth to burial – involve the participation of relatives, friends and neighbours, with whom mutual support relations are the accepted rule. Community notables and the poor are also a constant presence – almsgiving is an obligation written in the Quran and deeply engraved in such a social structure. This is an enclosed social system, based on an extended social group, that works like an efficient habitat, where not even banquet leftovers are wasted, but become food for the poor on what is known as "Allah's table". And, just like in any ecosystem, everyone has a role to play for the benefit of the group, including women, despite their apparently complete subjugation. Their main task, traditionally, has consisted in administering the house, and taking care of the offspring and the elderly, to the extent that Moroccan men, even today, would never be seen going to the market to buy food on an ordinary day or cooking, or would even be admitted into the kitchen. In this ecosystem, everybody at home sits around a round table with no clear hierarchy in seats – a hallmark for all homeland Maghrebis, which preserves all its traditional power especially in the rural areas, from where most of the recent flows seen in Europe have come.

The lifestyle and world view shaped by this social organization ends up clashing violently against the inevitable isolation most migrants experience from their community of origin and those in the destination country. With community ties severed, and only partially recreated through arranged marriages to girls back in the homeland, or connections in Maghrebi neighbourhoods in Italy, or French-speaking Arab satellite channels, the individual migrant – typically a man – is left to his own devices when it comes to support, and particularly food. Usually, single men or men awaiting a family re-unification share rooms with others like themselves, awkwardly trying to cook a meal using fresh ingredients from the street market, hoping they can reproduce a semblance of their African dishes. But Maghrebi cuisine is based on couscous and tajines (meat or fish stews of Berber origin), which take hours to make, and is generally lacking in fresh vegetables, while it uses little cheese (more of a mountain product made by Berbers). These men, who often work long hours in menial jobs, are not prepared to tend to their meals for so long, and often opt for alternative temporary food solutions, waiting for better times, or, if they can afford it, with food purchased at kebab&pizza takeaways or in Arab groceries and butcher shops in the cities.

Marriages and family re-unifications also serve the purpose of recreating the Maghrebi lifestyle, including Maghrebi cuisine, at home in Italy. Regardless of the increasingly widespread presence of Arab food shops, however, this objective can only be attained if the woman stays at home, a frequent situation when the wife has just arrived in Italy and cannot speak Italian, or if she comes from a rural, i.e. more traditional background. But, in due time, some women too will look for a job if educated or pressed by need (and allowed to), thus reducing the amount of time they can devote to cooking, or will agree to innovate their culinary practices with what the supermarkets have to offer to please their school-age children and save time to be more independent and lead a better life (as confirmed by Sercia, 2010). Increased exposure to Italian media, thanks to a better degree of fluency in the language, also contributes to favour their progressive adoption of the Italian (and Western) food model, which enjoys an excellent reputation in the Maghreb.

The however partial adoption of the Italian model (beginning with what is not in conflict with the Muslim precepts) is accelerated by the contact of the migrants' children with their non-Arab schoolmates and friends. Children who start school and "eat out" for the first time in cafeterias often mark a turning point in their parents' lives too. The parents lose control over their kids, and may not even be allowed to bring them home for the midday meal, as is the case in many schools in Milan, where integration is a primary goal. As the mediators have frequently highlighted, the Muslim children's food requirements receive varying degrees of attention, including in terms of communication, thus often causing distrust and uncertainty in the parents, who are not sure whether their little ones will end up eating forbidden ingredients, and insecurity and distress in children, to whom all sorts of food become suddenly available, but often without a clear and reassuring distinction between the "clean" and the "unclean" ones, which significantly adds to the problem of having to cope with different tastes and table manners. At the same time, the contact with a multicultural alimentary social space and the realization of their previously less glaring, unproblematic food restrictions prompts them to question their diversity, and ultimately their identity, more forcefully, while opening the door of their homes to popular children's favourites, like pizza and pasta.

Once these children reach high school age, their natural curiosity and their readiness to transgress their parents' directions and stick with their peers make them eager to experiment more than they are ready to confess (ham, haram meat, alcohol, but also sodas and international foods), while still feeling divided between the culture of their family and that of the country where they live. Only later in their lives, as young adults, will their ever-present human need for an identity lead them to choose their "virtual" citizenship: frequent social rejection, or bashing in public discourse, or lack of models that are perceived as ethically strong, or merely for reasons that range from their parents' nostalgia all the way to arranged

marriages, cause them to seek refuge in the community where they've always been told they belong, thus rediscovering its practices (if nothing else, formally), from food purity prescriptions and rituals to the use of the headscarf for women and daily prayer.

6.4. The Outcome: How Food Perceptions and Practices Change

Based on the interviews conducted so far, the process described above affects food perceptions and practices mainly in two ways. Firstly, once in Italy, the food that the migrants used to eat back in Maghreb stops being everybody's food; this, in turn has several consequences: from disrupting the individual's set of symbols and meanings to eliciting a desperate reconstruction of a homeland of the mind – including fantasies about the dishes of one's youth –, or causing distress, such as in little children who discover that their food makes them different from the "normals". All this while the large offering of different and/or prohibited food ends up prompting the creation of retail networks for Maghrebi ingredients and halal products. Secondly, Maghrebi migrants, like many others, feel the impact of a different social organization, where time constraints cannot be coped with with the help of the extended family, and which becomes incompatible with the long cooking times and the very idea of conviviality behind traditional Maghrebi dishes.

In connection with the first outcome, i.e the transition from being mainstream eaters to becoming diasporic diners, a number of consequences come from that major change, some of them common to most migrant groups, while others are more visible or even unique to Muslim migrants and their Maghrebi variation. Because they have to do with self-representation, and because many migrants to Italy have recently come from the rural areas – far from the historical prevalence of the French haute cuisine model in many hotels in Moroccan and Tunisian tourist destinations – these consequences have been only marginally mitigated in the latest waves of migration. Again, because the phenomenon developed in Maghrebi cities – and not in rural areas – they are almost unaware of "exotic" foods, such as sushi in restaurants in Rabat, Casablanca or Tunis, or international recipes on thematic satellite TV channels.

Sourcing and eating a minority food as a migrant has to do with the loss of community cohesion, and, as a consequence, of the inextricable convivial character that food has to certain societies. This makes it impossible for Maghrebis to understand how an Italian can gulp down a cup of espresso standing at the bar on his/her own, let alone eating a sandwich in the same situation. It not only becomes hard to find ingredients and keep mealtime habits or table manners like sitting on the floor or eating with one's hands from common dishes (i.e. sharing), but, most tragically, eating necessarily becomes an individual act, or, at best, the act of a nuclear family. Thus, if fasting alone for Ramadan is difficult but possible,

celebrating Ramadan nightfall or any Islamic festivities does not make sense, and is often given up, although in recent years, the growth of Maghrebi communities and associations has favoured a resumption of these rituals. Moreover, cooking more servings than needed in order not to cut a bad figure with guests, as is the custom for Maghrebis, will result in lots of leftovers, which is an offence to God – living in an individualistic society, also means that you are not necessarily in ready contact with poor people to feed. The enclosed, circular ecosystem is finally broken when the children start eating Western food and place their parents in a minority position even at home.

The mainstream-collective food turned minority-individualistic also becomes the food of sadness and reflexivity. And it's the food that is "good to eat" (Harris, 1985) and "good for them", in other words, the food that is theirs, that their mothers built their children's bodies with, that, alone, can make them feel healthy or heal them, repairing the damage in their body, in their soul, and reconnecting them with the community. To buy that sort of genuine Maghreb ingredients, migrants who live outside the main Muslim destinations in Italy are ready to travel miles, despite their generally medium-to-low income. For all these goods, retail shops and distribution networks have been created by migrants . Migrants are also often seen in regular supermarkets and discount stores; not unfrequently, the husband can be seen picking the goods while his wife watches – men often act as translators, given that they are more fluent in the language, but also drive their wives to the stores, and occasionally interact on their behalf to "preserve" them from contacts with what the Arab world perceives as a corrupted society. A few younger migrant men also learn how to cook, especially in mixed nationality couples.

Side by side with the quest for Arab food, there is curiosity for the food of the "others", in particular, predictably, Italian food. Through the tales of return migrants, family or friends, the press, and satellite TV, as well as going to the seemingly affordable pizzerias that exist in their country of origin, Maghrebis develop expectations vis à vis Italian food, particularly pizza and, secondly, pasta. Both of them will become a staple in Italy, as we shall see, also because they are generally safe from a religious point of view. The availability of prohibited foods also attracts a lot of attention, particularly from adolescents who have discovered alternative food models in school canteens earlier in their lives, and who tend to imitate their peers and to transgress their parents' rules, perceived as coming from an archaic world in comparison to Western modernity. Although Maghrebis are less strict than most other Muslims on food, they are very picky about Moroccan or Tunisian restaurants in Italy. Some will declare they are vegetarian, as many Muslim travelers do out of convenience, so as not to be served non-halal meat or pork, although vegetarianism is almost totally foreign to their culture, just like fresh vegetables are to their food habits.

The issue of taste goes hand in hand with that of table manners. In particular, first generation children in school canteens are not at ease with tall, occasionally rectangular tables: they are used to eating seated on cushions on the floor, and the table is generally large and round to accommodate an extended family and favour conviviality. Moreover, the generalized use of cutlery is also very different from what they've grown up with – eating with their hands – and which has had very intimate implications from their weaning on, while now it is frowned upon by the school personnel, committed to "correcting" any inappropriate behaviour. Eating with one's hands is the preferred way of bringing food to one's mouth also for adults; despite the influence of the French colonists and their consequent adoption of forks and knives, they still think they cannot truly enjoy their meal unless they establish hand contact with it, let alone a Maghrebi meal, which was historically co-engineered with its customary table "implements." Add to this that the usual way of presenting dishes is not an individualistic, shrink-wrapped, sterile single portion, but a big bowl or tray where the community members dip their bread, and you've made Maghrebi Muslims complete strangers at the canteen table in public places.

A second area of major change is related to time. As pointed out above, traditional dishes require long preparations and cooking on an open fire. Therefore, it is highly impractical to cook Maghrebi food on weekdays, including, obviously, Fridays and the days when Muslims celebrate their religious festivals (Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Feast of the Sacrifice, end of Ramadan). So, while festivities can end up being neglected outside the homeland because they would lose their essential convivial component, the big Friday meal too is shifted to the weekend, typically to Sundays, when the family eats together. The most common dish prepared on such occasions is couscous, the Moroccans' and Tunisians' national dish.

Now, when asked about the food Maghrebis identify with, all the mediators answered "couscous" – with one exception, who said bread –, saying that couscous is almost as frequent on Maghrebi tables as pasta is in Italy, both being recognized staples to their respective peoples, and based on carbohydrates, as all historical staples. Yet, when Maghrebis cook in Italy on an ordinary workday, and have no time – or competences, if it is the man who is cooking for the children when his wife is at work –, pasta ends up replacing for couscous. And that almost every day. Many mothers start to cook it frequently because they no longer have the time or willingness to cook couscous daily as a result of their isolation from their extended family, and pasta is religiously safe and the source of carbohydrates closest to couscous in Italy, on top of being cost-effective and well-liked by children. To schoolchildren, pasta and pizza are the one chance to share food with their peers and ensure some level of "clean" calory intake in school canteens (obviously, without haram meat sauce or other forbidden ingredients). Therefore, pizza, but, most importantly, pasta, provides a well-accepted common ground for students,

families, schools and catering operators alike. When asked about the food Maghrebis identify with Italy, all the Mediators answered "pasta" – this time with no exceptions, invariably adding that Italians are jokingly referred to as "pasta-eaters" back in the Maghreb, and that a typical commonplace is that they eat too much pasta. And here the discourse becomes evidently separated from the practice: Maghrebi migrants say they are "couscous-eaters", but because of not having enough time to cook it, they eat a lot more pasta instead. And this while still maintaining candidly that Italians suffer from a real pasta-mania. However, Maghrebi migrants themselves confess that they often end up making a reputation for themselves as Italian food experts when they visit their family in their country of origin. There, they proudly demonstrate how to make Italian pizza and lasagne, but, most of all, how to cook proper Italian pasta al dente, with a large number of different sauces, from ragù to pesto, occasionally with extra spices in them to adapt to local tastes. All of which, the migrants proudly say, is staged in front of their admiring families and friends, in whose eyes the migrants become masters at a different food model. In other words, without even realizing it, the Maghrebis' food identity becomes an imaginary one, while they take on the Italians' food identity for which they actually ridicule Italians. So much so that they end up championing pasta-making with their family and friends in their country of origin. They will even go to such lenghts as to state that "The only real Italian pasta brand that they can find in supermarkets is Barilla; all the rest is low-quality local produce", or even: "People back home can't make real pasta – theirs is overcooked and the tomato sauce is always the same", a commonplace comment typically heard from Italians when they speak about foreigners cooking the Italian identity dish. Curiously enough, food historians have discovered that the very symbol of Italianness, pasta, was introduced to Sicily by the Arabs (Montanari, 2005). In this respect, one must admit, the Maghrebi migrants' identity has come full circle.

7. Future Work

Based upon these and other findings, future studies will develop primarily in the areas of halal and non-halal food in public places and/or institutions, and food models for younger Maghrebi generations, in order to promote a more effective communication on and a better understanding of these issues by the relevant bodies and organizations.

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