

## The Shifting Border of Food Perceptions and Cultural Identity in Maghrebi 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<sup>1</sup> 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; 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 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Maghreb is conventionally defined as the area of today's Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia (plus the disputed territory of Western Sahara), while the Grand Maghreb also includes Libya and Mauritania. This study focuses on French-speaking Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Mauritania).

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. Other than that, the cultural borders based on general food-defined perceptions, however, have been shifting over the centuries, including within the Nation of Islam. As discussed later, each time, these perceptions of one's own community versus other, neighboring social groups have caused the cultural border between "the civilized" and "the barbarians" (Montanari 2005) – or "us" and "them" – to be redefined, leading eventually to the definition of the food-related identity of the Maghrebi and of other cultural groups within Islam.

Since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 the life in Europe. 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 on the 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 the 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 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 the way in which it is currently changing nowadays as a consequence of their relocation in Italy. I will also provide an analysis of the key

factors that bring about this change in their practices and discourse, with insights into the elements related to 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<sup>1</sup>, but still in progress) with cultural mediators<sup>2</sup>. Cultural mediators are 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](http://www.cde.state.co.us)). The interest in working with intermediaries who are well-acquainted not just with the 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 appropriate 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; Martin 2009).

The interviewees included<sup>3</sup> women and men of different ages (mostly 1<sup>st</sup> 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<sup>4</sup> contracted or employed by the relevant institution(s)<sup>5</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> This number is based on the potential availability and willingness of cultural mediators who deal with this population.

<sup>2</sup> Cultural mediators are workers who assist migrants with language as well as cultural problems in many public settings: hospitals, schools, immigration authorities, etc. They are generally hired in the framework of projects by the relevant institutions, and have a role akin to that of community advocates in the UK.

<sup>3</sup> The first term identifies the prevailing condition (e.g. “women and men” means more women than men, as it generally happens in this job, given the general closed-ended nature of most underlying contracts).

<sup>4</sup> Only one was not a Muslim. Out of the Muslim women group, 60% did not wear a headscarf.

<sup>5</sup> The contacts were made either through individual social workers or through public, private and Catholic institutions. The contacts of the institutions were provided at my request by the relevant Family Department of the Lombard Regional Authority.

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-centered 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 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 the genuine Maghrebi cuisine in Italy, first and foremost for lack of time, ultimately makes them trade their food symbols for the

Italian gastronomic identity, first in their practices, and then in their discursive practices.

## 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 food ways 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*<sup>1</sup>, the Medina Charter, where the converted clans (and, only initially, the other citizens of Medina) "are one community to the exclusion of all men"<sup>2</sup> or, according to other translations, "form one and the same community as against the rest of men"<sup>3</sup>, or "shall form a constitutional unity as distinct from other peoples."<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Literally, the Nation or the Community.

<sup>2</sup> See [http://www.constitution.org/cons/medina/con\\_medina.htm](http://www.constitution.org/cons/medina/con_medina.htm). (accessed Oct. 30, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> See [http://www.constitution.org/cons/medina/constitution\\_medina.doc](http://www.constitution.org/cons/medina/constitution_medina.doc). (accessed Oct. 30, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.constitutionofmadina.com>. (accessed Oct. 30, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> The idea, here, is that of a "portable" nation, defined by intangible - god(s) - or tangible (but movable) – e.g. food – identity references. Compare to the case of the oath of Agraulos in ancient Athens, where the "portable" values of wheat, barley, vines and olive trees legitimized the Greek colonists to identify as Greece any land where their identity foods grew, such as what consequently

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.”<sup>1</sup> 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.”<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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<sup>4</sup>, while it is a

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became Magna Graecia. See *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* by Plutarch, translated by John Dryden at <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/plutarch/lives/complete.html>.

<sup>1</sup> From a commented version of the Quran at [www.dar-us-salaam.com/The Noble Quran/index.html](http://www.dar-us-salaam.com/The+Noble+Quran/index.html). (accessed Sep. 11, 2012) For all other quotations, unless otherwise specified, the sources are the English version of the King Fahd Complex for Printing the Holy Quran ([www.pdfquran.com/download/english/english-quran.pdf](http://www.pdfquran.com/download/english/english-quran.pdf)) (accessed Oct. 29th, 2012) or the translation by Dr. Maulvi Sher Ali at <http://www.alislam.org/quran/search2/index.php> (accessed Aug. 8, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Sura V:3.

<sup>3</sup> In this case, the reference is religious and cultural, although political Pan-Islamist movements have existed, and grown particularly from the 19<sup>th</sup> century on, including parts of the Muslim Brotherhood.

<sup>4</sup> Among the four remaining pillars, prayer is the most strictly connected to creed and the most loosely connected with food. ” Surely, thy Lord knows that thou standest up praying for nearly two thirds of the night, and sometimes half or a third thereof [...] Recite, then, as much of the Qur’an as is easy for you. [...] recite of it that which is easy for you, and observe Prayer, and pay the *Zakat*, and lend to Allah a goodly loan. And whatever good you send on before you for your souls, you will find it with Allah. It will be better and greater in reward.” (Sura 73:20), to be read in combination with ”A description of the Garden promised to the righteous: therein are rivers of water which corrupts not;

means of atonement for non-compliance or something subject to special conditions in *hajj*<sup>1</sup>. On the other hand, all five prohibitions are associated with food, including *maysir*, a game of chance with food prizes popular among Bedouins.<sup>2</sup> 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 of 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 (Giovine 2012): 1) the very creation of Islam, with its differentiation from its pre-

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and rivers of milk of which the taste changes not; and rivers of wine, a delight to those who drink, and rivers of clarified honey. And in it will they have all kinds of fruit, and forgiveness from their Lord.” (Sura 47:15). “And remember the time when you said: ‘O Moses, surely, we will not remain content with one kind of food; pray, then, to thy Lord for us that He bring forth for us of what the earth grows — of its herbs and its cucumbers and its wheat and its lentils and its onions.” (Sura II:61). “Satan desires only to create enmity and hatred among you by means of wine and the game of hazard, and to keep you back from the remembrance of Allah and from Prayer”. (Sura V:90). On oaths: “Allah will not call you to account for such of your oaths as are vain, but He will call you to account for the oaths which you take in earnest. The expiation for this is the feeding of ten poor persons with such average food as you feed your families with, or the clothing of them or the freeing of a neck. But whoso finds not the means shall fast for three days. That is the expiation of your oaths when you have sworn them.” (Sura V:90).

<sup>1</sup> “And complete the *Hajj* and the *Umrah* for the sake of Allah: but if you are kept back, then make whatever offering is easily available; and do not shave your heads until the offering reaches its destination. And whoever among you is sick or has an ailment of the head, should make an expiation either by fasting or almsgiving or a sacrifice. [...] But such of you as cannot find an offering should fast three days during the Pilgrimage, and seven when you return home; these are ten complete.” (Sura II:196). “O ye who believe! kill not game while you are in a state of pilgrimage. And whoso amongst you kills it intentionally, its compensation is a quadruped like unto that which he has killed, as determined by two just men from among you, the same to be brought as an offering to the *Ka'bah*; or as an expiation he shall have to feed a number of poor persons, or fast an equivalent number of days, so that he may taste the penalty of his deed. [...] The game of the sea and the eating thereof have been made lawful for you as a provision for you and the travellers; but forbidden to you is the game of the land as long as you are in a state of pilgrimage.” (Sura V: 95-96).

<sup>2</sup> Similar to a lottery, played with arrows; nowadays, interpreted as a prohibition of gambling, including financial speculation. See Sura V:90.

Islamic background; 2) the conquest of the Persian Empire, i.e. the centre of Middle East gastronomy and refinement; 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 the French colonization in 1830, which brought the Western frontier well into Muslim countries. However, the most relevant redefinition of borders has resulted from 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-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 (Armstrong 1999): 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,<sup>1</sup> but he adopted bread – and barley bread,<sup>2</sup> more specifically –, as his and his lineage's identity food, whereas the frugal Bedouin nomads have 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<sup>3</sup> 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,<sup>4</sup> however, the new Umayyad reign in Damascus, followed by the conquest of Persia and the foundation of Baghdad, in the 8<sup>th</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> The reason given for making many more foods permissible is that the Jews had deserved more prohibitions because of their impiety. Thus, Sura IV:160: “So, because of the transgression of the Jews, We forbade them pure things which had been allowed to them, and also because of their hindering many men from Allah's way”.

<sup>2</sup> As al-Ghuzuli points out, “princes eat semolina bread, the élite eat white bread, the populace eat bread made with coarse flour, and ascetics eat barley bread”. In Van Gelder G.J., *God's Banquet*, page 99. A tell-tale detail in Muhammad's projected image.

<sup>3</sup> Including the dynasty currently in power in Jordan, the Hashimites.

<sup>4</sup> The Rashidun, or the Orthodox Caliphs (632-661 A.D.): Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali.



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,<sup>1</sup> 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”<sup>2</sup> was carried on in the construction of the next border. The conquest of North Africa was completed in the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century, just before the Umayyad caliphate in Damascus was overthrown by the Abbasids. One century later, Umayyad al-Andalus (Moorish Spain) became a second center 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 13<sup>th</sup>-century cookbook author Ibn Razin al-Tuyibi.<sup>3</sup> 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. However, the most interesting frontier in defining food-related Maghrebi Muslim identity was set only in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Europe.

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

The succession of multiple “migrations” described in the previous section was 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,

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<sup>1</sup> The best-known work is Ibrahim ibn al-Mahdi’s collection of recipes, dating back to the early 9th century A.D.

<sup>2</sup> A phrase borrowed from Thorstein Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899).

<sup>3</sup> He wrote a renowned Late Medieval Arab cookbook: *Fadilat al khiwan fi tayybat et-ta’am Wa-I-alwan* (roughly translated as “Delicacies of the table using the best sorts of foods”)

with Moroccans up to 452,424 units in 2011 from 294,945 in 2005 and Tunisians up to 106,291 from 78,230,<sup>1</sup> while Algerian and Mauritanian legal migrants together account for just above 25,000 people.<sup>2</sup> This study has focused on Lombardy, where data at Jan. 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011,<sup>3</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century migrations into Europe and North America, a relatively large proportion of Moroccan and Tunisian Muslim citizens<sup>4</sup> now live outside the political borders of their countries, where Islam still regulates everyday life – and specifically food.<sup>5</sup> 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. 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-centered 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 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 still is marked by community rituals, where all family celebrations – from birth to burial – involve the participation of relatives, friends and neighbors, 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

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<sup>1</sup> ISTAT (Italian Statistical Institute) Report on foreign residents in Italy (2005 and 2011).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.comuni-italiani.it/statistiche/stranieri/africa.html> - the official website of Italian municipal administrations (accessed Oct. 18th, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Morocco and Tunisia have a total population of 32.2 million and 10.7 million respectively (source: [indexmundi.com](http://indexmundi.com), 2011).

<sup>5</sup> At least, apparently, and in accordance with the Malikite *fiqh*, which is less strict than elsewhere, but still recognizes the five pillars and the five prohibitions.

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<sup>1</sup> 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<sup>2</sup> 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 neighborhoods in Italy, or French-speaking Arab satellite channels, the individual migrant – typically<sup>3</sup> 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 choose alternative temporary food solutions, waiting for better times, or, if they can afford it, buy food from 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.

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<sup>1</sup> During the conference previously referred to, the need to serve a role in a larger community was given as a reason to explain why second or third generation “liberated” youths in Europe will not generally oppose arranged marriages; on the other hand, for the similar reasons of connectedness and responsibility to others in the group, it is hard for a young woman to break an engagement, as that will bring disgrace onto the other women of marriageable age in the family. The need to preserve the integrity of the community is particularly evident in the “hypocrisy” of the “sleeping child”, whereby a woman can declare that her baby’s father is her deceased husband up to one year after his death.

<sup>2</sup> It should not be forgotten that people who migrate to Italy can hardly ever speak the local language on arrival.

<sup>3</sup> Only Moroccan women are known (and blamed) for migrating on their own.

But some women will also look for a job if they are 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 favor their progressive adoption of the Italian (and Western) food model, which enjoys an excellent reputation in the Maghreb.

The 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. The parents lose control over their kids, and may not even be allowed to bring them home for the midday meal, as it 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,<sup>1</sup> 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, their ever-present human need for an identity will 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Such as alcohol or lard in bakery products.

#### 6.4. The Outcome: How Food Perceptions and Practices Change<sup>1</sup>

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 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 “normal children”. Meanwhile 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 the help of the extended family, and which becomes incompatible with the long cooking times and the very idea of conviviality beyond the 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 this 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. Since 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 the Moroccan and Tunisian tourist destinations – these consequences have been only marginally mitigated in the latest waves of migration. Since this phenomenon developed in the 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 difficult 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 it is often given up, although in recent years, the growth of Maghrebi communities and associations has favored a resumption of these rituals. Moreover, cooking more servings than needed in order not to cut a bad figure

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<sup>1</sup> In this section, the information and conclusions are based on the mediators' interviews.

with guests, as it is the custom for Maghrebis, will result in lots of leftovers, which is an offence to God – living in an individualistic society. It also means that you are not necessarily in 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 into a minority-individualistic practice also becomes the food of sadness and reflexivity. And it is the food that is “good to eat” (Harris 1985) and “good for them”. In other words, the food that is theirs, with which their mothers built their children’s bodies is the only one that can make them feel healthy or heal them, repairing the damage in their body, in their soul, and reconnecting them with the community. In order to buy 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.<sup>1</sup> For all these goods, retail shops and distribution networks have been created by migrants<sup>2</sup>. Migrants are also often seen in regular supermarkets and discount stores. The husband can frequently 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 the curiosity for the food of the “others”, in particular, 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 regarding the 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 the Western modernity. Although Maghrebis are less strict than most other Muslims on food,<sup>3</sup> 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, 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.

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<sup>1</sup> It must be noted, however, that the price of *halal* meat in Milan is less than half that of average quality beef.

<sup>2</sup> A *halal* meat wholesaler, based in the North-West and managed by the local religious authority, supplies many cities in the area, and bears the tell-tale name of “La Maghrebina”.

<sup>3</sup> Despite contrasts about that point in the *fatwas* on the internet, one (veiled) Moroccan mediator confidently declared that she gives non-*halal* meat to her children, and justified this by saying that the Quran states that the food of the Jews and the Christians is *halal* to Muslims.

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 favor conviviality. Moreover, the generalized use of cutlery is also very different from what they have 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 behavior. 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.” Besides 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 have 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). 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.

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.<sup>1</sup> 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 *couscous* 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” calorie intake in school canteens (obviously, without *haram* meat sauce or other forbidden ingredients). Therefore,

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<sup>1</sup> Bread, instead, is not so well-accepted, as Italian bread is very different from Arabic bread. Maghrebis usually complain about the quality of bread in Italy, saying it is not proper bread. Curiously enough, medieval Italians used to say the same about the Arabs.

pizza, but, most importantly, pasta, provides a well-accepted common ground for students, families, schools and catering operators alike.<sup>1</sup>

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. The mediators candidly stated 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. 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.<sup>2</sup> The migrants proudly say that this ritual is staged in front of their admiring families and friends, in whose eyes the migrants become masters at a different food model.

Thus 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. They end up championing pasta-making with their family and friends in their country of origin. They will even 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 reached a full circle...

## 7. Future Work

Based upon this study 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

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<sup>1</sup> This is also the result of a study conducted in Quebec by Sercia et al. in 2010. See Bibliographical references below.

<sup>2</sup> There are several local pasta brands in Morocco and Tunisia, while Barilla is the only true Italian brand sold there, and it sells at a premium price point. Pasta is generally cooked longer and almost exclusively with tomato sauce (but Berbers break spaghetti and boil them in milk), and is generally thought to make a light meal. There’s a growing market for pizzerias in the Maghreb; most of them are opened by returning migrants, although most Arab *pizzaiolos* in Italy are Egyptian.



communication and a better understanding of these issues by the relevant bodies and organizations.

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