

Constructing the Many Facets of Identity in the Nation of Islam Through Food

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Introduction:

“You are what you eat” – a common idiom used to convey the inherent connection of food quality to physical well-being. Food acts not only as a determinant for health but also for identity. The French are known for eating baguettes and brie while Nigerians are known for eating Jollof rice. Yet, food constructs not only national identities but religious identities as well. Take for example the Jewish tradition of keeping kosher which dictates the type of food devotees can eat, as well as how to prepare the food for consumption according to Jewish law. Gujarati Hindus are known for their vegetarian diet. Similarly, those who follow the tradition of Islam eat Halal in accordance with the rules of the Quran. The respective food culture of each religion is a key element of expressing membership to the religion. Furthermore, people will engage with certain food customs to align with specific subsets of a religion that go beyond the spiritual realm which arises in the case of the Nation of Islam – a majority Black Islamic tradition founded in the United States of America. In this sect of Islam both racial and religious identity coincide, and the distinctions have been justified on dietary habits. In order to better understand how food constructs identity for religious groups, this paper will explore the food customs of the Nation of Islam (NOI). More specifically it will investigate how food constructs multiple facets of identity for its members, including an Islamist tradition and an alternative Black identity.

History of the Nation of Islam

The Nation of Islam was founded during the Great Depression after Master Wallace Fard Muhammad, known as The Master, endeavored to resurrect the Tribe of Shabazz from the Lost Nation of Asia who had been forced to participate in the Transatlantic Slave Trade¹. According to the Nation of Islam’s website, “his mission was to teach the downtrodden and defenseless

¹ Mother Tynetta, Muhammad., "Nation of Islam in America: A Nation of Beauty and Peace." Nation of Islam/NOI.org. Last modified March 28, 1996. Accessed December 11, 2018. <https://www.noi.org/noi-history/>.

Black people a thorough Knowledge of God and of themselves, and to put them on the road to Self-Independence with a superior culture and higher civilization than they had previously experienced.” During a stint of preaching in Detroit Michigan, Master Fard met Elijah Poole and deemed him his Divine Representative to carry out the mission. After three and a half years of training under Master Fard, Elijah Poole emerged as the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and from 1934 onwards he would minister to inspire the gradual conversion of Black individuals to Islam across the United States. This spurred the beginning of the NOI as an established movement and religious sect.

Though the organization experienced steady growth under Elijah Muhammad it was the energy and eloquence of minister Malcolm X that catalyzed its advancement. He credits himself with expanding membership from approximately 400- 40,000 and increasing the number of temples from four to over one hundred². During the height of NOI the public regarded it as a Black Nationalist movement devoted to black economic independence and black pride. These ideas followed the suit of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) – a Pan Africanist organization which peaked in the mid 1920’s. “For the UNIA as well as the NOI, the topic of African American pride and self-respect lay at the doctrinal core,³” demonstrating the racial intersection of the motivations that fueled the religious identity of the NOI.

In fact, the many of the beliefs of the NOI are founded upon racial principles and Moorish history. A catechism from the organization states, ““The Original Man is the Asiatic Black-man, The Maker, The Owner, the cream of the planet earth, God of the Universe,””⁴

² Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 290; Clifton E. Marsh, *From Black Muslims to Muslims: The Transition from Sep-aratism to Islam, 1930-1980* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1984), 7

³ Ernest, Allen. "Religious Heterodoxy and Nationalist Tradition: The Continuing Evolution of the Nation of Islam." *The Black Scholar* 26, no. 3/4 (1996): 2-34. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41068679>.

⁴ Allen, *Religious Heterodoxy*, 10

further corroborating the centrality of blackness to religious tenants. Additionally, the teachings of Islam are not directly manifested in the early days of the NOI considering there is no mention of the prophet Muhammad in its lessons nor any direct correlation to the Holy Qur'an's scriptures. Instead, the *notion* of Islam attracted followers including its connection to mathematics which was viewed as a means to economic welfare.

Following 1975, and the death of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, leadership of the NOI was passed to his son Wallace Muhammad, who now goes by Warrith Deen Mohammed. He transitioned the organization to a Sunni Islamic community that was more integrated with the larger international Muslim community. In 1976, Mohammed renamed the NOI to the World Community of al-Islam in the West (WCIW) and rebranded the organization again in 1980 to the American Muslim Mission (AMM) which has since disbanded⁵. During Wallace Muhammad's reorganization of the NOI there were groups of followers that splintered from his leadership. The most popular minority faction is led by Minister Louis Farrakhan who disagreed with the new vision of Warrith Deen Mohammed and strived to carry out the mission of the original NOI. He retained the name of the NOI for his organization. However, the focus of this paper will be on the original iteration of the NOI before 1975.

Black Identity and Food

The question still remains how food contributes to the construction of a religious identity for members of the NOI. Given the racial basis of the NOI, it is worth noting the traditions of Black identity and food in general. The concept of Blackness as it manifested in the United States has a strong connection to food. In the early days of the union, enterprising and enslaved food vendors would sell food to earn enough money to establish brick and mortar businesses or

⁵ Allen, *Religious Heterodoxy*, 1

to purchase the freedom of loved ones⁶. In the years following reconstruction, food was used to indicate social status where “African Americans were considered “natural born cooks” and relegated to preparing the best foods for whites while eating the worst food themselves,”⁷ however Blacks did not assume such a subordinate identity among themselves. “Soul food was a response to racial caste dictates as African Americans asserted their humanity,”⁸ where they turned the white population’s food waste into cultural delicacies. Furthermore, during the civil rights era, there were a host of restaurants and cooks dedicated to literally nourishing the movement. A famous restaurant in New Orleans called Dooky Chase became the site for Black activists and white progressives to convene and plan out the next phase in the movement against employment discrimination and segregation in eateries⁹.

Partaking in soul food remains a hallmark of the Black church where people bring dishes to church revival meetings and picnics. Sunday suppers featuring fried chicken are also still an emblem today of the Black Baptist tradition harkening back to the days of slavery. As put by Rev. Calvin Butts, executive minister of Abyssinian Baptist Church, ““It has to do with communion. Communion was a meal, a feast of love. It is a kind of extension of our Africanness,””¹⁰. Religion, race and food have an intimate history outside of the Black Christian church too. A religion derived from the Yoruba tradition in Cuba called Lucumí, popularly known as Santería receives much of its credence from food and food preparation. “The seemingly trivial kinds of activities involved in ceremonial cooking turn out to be emotionally

⁶ Frederick Douglass Opie, *Southern Food and Civil Rights: Feeding the Revolution* (Charleston, South Carolina/USA: American Plate, 2017), 144.

⁷ Adrian Miller, *Soul Food: The Surprising Story of an American Cuisine, One Plate at a Time* (Chapel Hill, NC: Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 9.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Opie, *Southern Food*, 89-97.

¹⁰ Miller, *Soul Food*, 60.

and somatically intricate sites in which individuals are socialized,¹¹ demonstrating how food, belief and identity are interdependent in Lucumí tradition.

Halal Food Constructing Muslim Identity of NOI

The NOI builds on the legacy of food and Black History but through the lens of Islam. The founders of NOI hailed from the South and sought to modify its food traditions to implement its tenants of black economic independence but also to adhere to traditional halal practices. “Converts removed pork and alcohol from their diets and ate one meal a day. They abstained from gambling, smoking, drinking, overeating and buying on credit,”¹² which allowed them to live more fruitful and healthy lives. These behaviors correspond to the edicts of Allah as outlined in the Quran: “[Allah] has only forbidden to you dead animals, blood, the flesh of swine, and that which has been dedicated to other than Allah... 16:115,¹³”. There are also clear instructions about the consumption of alcohol: “They ask you about wine [al-khamri] and gambling. Say ‘In them is great sin [ithmuhuma] ...2:219¹⁴” further connecting the NOI customs to traditional Islam. Moderation was also important to members of the NOI as evidenced by avoiding credit and eating excessively. Elijah Muhammad stresses the importance of eating only one meal a day. The Quran condones such practices even though not always explicitly referenced in Muhammed’s writings. He even connects the teachings of halal eating to the NOI race- based mythology, citing the Qur’an 2:168 when the prophet Muhammad commanded his followers to “eat the lawful and good things out of what is in the earth, and do not follow in the footsteps of the devil.¹⁵” He then subsequently contextualizes the claim in the belief of the NOI, explaining

¹¹ Elizabeth Pérez, *Religion in the Kitchen: Cooking, Talking and the Making of Black Atlantic Traditions*, North American Religions (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2016), 2.

¹² Opie, *Southern Food*, 147-148.

¹³ Febe Armanios and Ergene Bogaç, *Halal Food: A History* (NY, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 13.

¹⁴ Armanios and Bogaç, *Halal Food*, 15.

¹⁵ Elijah Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom* (1957; repr., Newport News, Va.: National Newport News and Commentator, n.d.), 34.

that “the [blue-eyed] devils referred to are not other than the white people who eat the hog and other things forbidden by Allah.”¹⁶ Subsequently, members can orient the principles of the NOI in a religious text. This is crucial given that many of Elijah Muhammad’s other claims are substantiated by the authority of Master Fard rather than the Quran directly.

As such, the NOI forges an Islamic identity for its members. The aforementioned behaviors were uncommon for most Black communities especially within the Black church (as it pertains to consuming pork specifically). Here lies the religious foundation by which NOI established its identity within the Black community following the sentiment that “within the Islamic tradition, a person’s spirituality and the purity of one’s soul are very much tied to the food and drink we consume,¹⁷”. However, the realization of the Islamist identity of the NOI would not always be directly related to teachings of the Quran. Often times the spiritual tenants of the NOI were linked to social action and politics.

Food Constructing Black Nationalist Identity of NOI

The Nation of Islam used its affinity to food to bring about more social change derived from its religious mission. A key tenant of the NOI was to establish the Black individual economically, more precisely the goal was to allow Black communities to sustain themselves without support from White Americans. In order to realize this goal Elijah Muhammed created an Economic BluePrint to galvanize Black communities to stop the cycle of poverty and disenfranchisement by building businesses. He promoted food businesses in particular and in between 1965 and 1966 the NOI owned and operated ten thousand acres of farmland in

¹⁶ Ibid., 23. For more information on the religious fundamentals of NOI see also Rouse, Carolyn, and Janet Hoskins. "Purity, Soul Food, and Sunni Islam: Explorations at the Intersection of Consumption and Resistance." *Cultural Anthropology* 19, no. 2 (2004): 226-49. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3651555> and Curtis, Edward E. "Islamizing the Black Body: Ritual and Power in Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam." *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 12, no. 2 (2002): 167-96. doi:10.1525/rac.2002.12.2.167.

¹⁷Armanios and Bogaç, *Halal Food*, 3.

Michigan, Alabama and Georgia¹⁸. Moreover, the NOI opened cafeterias, grocery stores and high-end restaurants all across the nation where Black Americans could get access to healthy food options. Consequently, sourcing and selling food directly corresponded to the mission of the Nation of Islam. Economic stability from the food produced by businesses presumably allowed NOI to establish a positive reputation among the Black community while reinforcing its identity as a Black economic empowerment organization.

Food Constructing Alternative Black Identity of NOI Members

In addition to establishing its identity as a Black nationalist organization through food, NOI also distinguished its members as an alternative Black population. Many of the decisions it made were in relation to mainstream Black tendencies. For example, it is described that “*in contrast to soul food restaurants, the Nations’ restaurants served beef and fish meals with brown rice, fresh vegetables, bean soup and bean pies,*”¹⁹ insinuating that soul food featured less quality options. Thus, members of the NOI were distinguishing themselves from unhealthy foods central common to the mainstream Black community. In his book, *How to Eat to Live* Elijah Muhammed actively rejects foods central to the history and homes of Black communities. He writes, “Do not eat field peas, black-eyed peas, speckled peas, red peas or brown peas,²⁰” which are staples in Black American cuisine. Black eyed-peas especially are essential to Black culture often prepared and consumed on the first day of new year for good luck. Muhammed goes further to forbid cornbread because “it is hard on the stomach” but is also a recognized dish within the Black community especially within the church. Even fried foods are frowned upon, another important food of the Black church and Black family at this time via cookouts, fish fries

¹⁸ Opie, *Southern Food*, 151.

¹⁹ Opie, *Southern Food*, 153

²⁰ Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live: Book 1* (Chicago, IL: Muhammad's Temple of Islam No. 2, n.d.),63.

and holiday feasts.²¹ Moreover, food restrictions extended to the packaging of food seen when Muhammed states, “Stay away from all meats and vegetables that are canned in metal cans as much as possible,²²” which created economic barriers from partaking in the NOI practices. In order to participate, people had to commit to joining the NOI in order to reap the economic benefits needed to build the lifestyle it demanded.

Though the restrictions are founded upon the basis of health and adherence to the will of Allah it has a secondary effect of rejecting mainstream Black food customs. Consequently, these differences in practice would create cleavages between the Black community, especially since food functions to facilitate fellowship among people. If members of NOI and other Black communities could not commune together then they could not coalesce as one community. The rules of food effectively require Black individuals to renounce elements of their heritage, communities and culture. Albeit, the lifestyle change would physically benefit an individual and encourage her to support Black businesses it also requires an identity shift. In NOI, a person is not mainstream Black in America but rather a member of the Nation. What members of the NOI consume establishes them as alternative members of the Black community. They are not relying on white institutions for nourishment which is the case for most Black communities and are choosing less traditional foods to consume altogether. The NOI constructed a new way of existing as a Black individual in America by disassociating negative stereotypes from its members and creating self-sustaining businesses to fuel members’ new way of life.

Food Constructing Conservative and Female Identities for Members of NOI

Edicts of dietary behavior for the Nation of Islam were very specific featuring guidelines for all substances of consumption, not only food, and for different demographics of the

²¹ Miller, *Soul Food*, 83.

²² Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live: Book 1* (Chicago, IL: Muhammad's Temple of Islam No. 2, n.d, 92.

community. Females were encouraged to feed their babies breast milk in order for proper nourishment. It is distinctly prohibited that the children be fed normal solid food; “we must not get the idea that we can nurse the baby with everything we eat. This is what will start sickness and disease in the family.”²³ The NOI charges mothers with the nourishment of her children with no mention of her husband and his role in the process. Conservative nuclear family structures are thus formed and encouraged by the organization through this practice. Additionally, the NOI expressly condemns the use of birth control likening it to suicide. Elijah Muhammed emphasizes that “[the white priest] offers you death in a pill for your future generations of children,”²⁴ as a means to enslave the black people of earth. Traditional teachings of Islam do not condemn the use of birth control. It is said that Muhammed (the prophet) knew of contraception methods and approved of them in within the context of marriage.²⁵ It is interesting that NOI takes a such staunch stance against birth control and family planning. Following this logic, NOI situates itself on the politically conservative end of the spectrum. Rules surrounding eating habits extended also to physical appearance but exclusively for the female form. A woman named Reformer Burnsteen Sharrieff, secretary to Master Fard, communicated his dietary dictates for females via the Moslem Girls’ Training and General Civilization Class (MGT-GCC). In the program girls were required to maintain a standard weigh of 120 pounds. Sharrieff also repudiated overweight (200 pounds and over) women claiming they stole air molecules from the fit woman. In her articles she pleads the reader, “sister, quit digging your grave with your knife and fork,”²⁶ to

²³ Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live*, 67.

²⁴ Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live*, 83.

²⁵ Musallam, Basim F. *Why Islam Permitted Birth Control*. Arab Studies Quarterly 3, no. 2: 181-97. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41854903>. 1981.182-183. For more information about the birth control use in Muslim countries see Rinker, Cortney Hughes. *Responsible Mothers, Anxious Women: Contraception and Neoliberalism in Morocco*. *The Arab Studies Journal* 21, no. 1 (2013): 101-25. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41968270>.

²⁶ Ula Yvette Taylor, *The Promise of Patriarchy: Women and the Nation of Islam*, The John Hope Franklin series in African American history and culture (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 47.

encourage woman not to overeat and become susceptible to heart disease, kidney disease and high blood pressure. The advocated eating behavior was not exclusively for the physical benefit of woman's health but also to push them towards a certain aesthetic. Again, the teachings of the NOI contribute to a conservative ideal through its vision for women's' bodies. The identity of a model woman of the NOI incorporated having a petite frame and weighing a certain amount which ultimately influenced women's eating habits.

Relevance of Food Customs Today

Food in the Nation of Islam created multiple facets of identity for its members during its height and these ideas still prevailed following its disunion of the NOI in 1975. In a 1988 speech the Honorable Louis Farrakhan, leader of the second iteration of the NOI, advises his followers to heed the advice in the Honorable Elijah Muhammed's *How to Eat to Live*²⁷. He highlights the important principle of abstaining from pork while highlighting other important instructions including eating in moderation. Even in the contemporary context, the ideas of Muhammed's book are still encouraged to members of the NOI demonstrated by a lecture series promoting a vegetarian diet from Minister Alif Allah of Allah's Temple of Islam No.12 in Philadelphia, PA²⁸. As it relates to producing food, the NOI's official website describes a ministry responsible for the agricultural preservation and, "the development and maintenance of a system of sustainable agriculture to provide wholesome, natural food to the members of society."²⁹ The NOI struggles to maintain its own farmland but does still produce³⁰. Furthermore, by carefully searching bean

²⁷ "How to Eat to Live," video file, 1:33:42, Youtube, posted by IRONMUHAMMAD68, September 14, 2014, accessed December 12, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IxNwFrfs7g>.

²⁸ "How To Eat To Live Series - Pt 1 (The Vegetarian Diet)," video file, 45:53, Youtube, posted by Rashid Allah, January 11, 2015, accessed December 12, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TiIqIyv_CGw.

²⁹ "Introduction to the Ministries," Nation of Islam/NOI.org, accessed December 12, 2018, <https://www.noi.org/the-ministries/>.

³⁰ "Muhammad Farms," Muhammad Farms, accessed December 12, 2018, <http://muhammadfarms.com/>.

pies can still be found in city centers as well³¹demonstrating the lasting effect of the NOI food businesses.

Conclusion

Food played an instrumental role in realizing the mission of the NOI and its members identities. Interaction with halal principles connected the organization to traditional Islamist practices and reinforced a religious identity for members. However, the NOI served as more than an organized religion but also as a social movement and business center. Food was central to these elements of the NOI's identity as well. Bakeries, grocery stores, and restaurants were built to realize the mission of economic independence for its members. Furthermore, NOI members attempted to ameliorate the state of Black people by creating an alternative lifestyle to the way they lived. Food restrictions in the NOI distinguished its members from mainstream Blacks by discouraging traditional cuisines and by extension congregational pastimes creating a new Black way of life for members. Women's identities were also fashioned by the food principles of NOI propelling them towards smaller physiques and breast-feeding practices. These behaviors were fundamental to the model woman in the NOI. Accordingly, food is not used as merely an object of ritual or ornamentation but as a tool for NOI to establish its identity and carry out its social mission. If food is regarded as the substance from which beings are comprised then NOI's dedication to food, food sourcing and distribution becomes clear. Food allowed the organization to become economically independent and create an exemplar model for a healthy Black individual during a time when the Black community was actively exploited and deprived.

³¹ Mike Sula, "Bean pie, my brother? The Nation of Islam's iconic dessert is still around, if you know where to look.," Chicago Reader, last modified November 13, 2013, accessed December 12, 2018, <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/bean-pie-noi-sweet-potato-imani-muhammad/Content?oid=11544239>.

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Followers of the NOI were living a lifestyle of black empowerment. Through the Nation of Islam, one can behold the power of food to facilitate physical and mental self-actualization.

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