FOOD FOR THOUGHT: MEANINGS OF FOOD IN A CAPE MUSLIM COMMUNITY

BY SINDRE BANGSTAD, INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF ISLAM IN THE MODERN WORLD (ISIM), LEIDEN, THE NETHERLANDS[1]

"Well, at least I know how to cook an egg!"

Muslim male in his fifties, Mekaar 2000.

Introduction

This statement, uttered in a self-mocking, ironical, and slightly defensive manner by a Muslim male in his fifties in Mekaar during my fieldwork in the year 2000 points to some of the multiple meanings evoked by food. In all known societies, the production, consumption and exchange of food are basic acts of communication, and intimately bound with social relations of inclusion and exclusion. Anthropologists undertaking research in Muslim communities practically anywhere in the world will have noted the great importance attached to food, whether it is for ceremonial or everyday purposes. Yet similarly to what has been the case in general anthropology, to the extent that anthropologists of Islam have taken an interest in food, it has often been subsumed under expositions of ritual, gender relations and material economy.[2] **It may therefore be that in practice, anthropology does not always attach the same analytical importance to everyday minutiae or to what our informants regard as significant as one would like to think.** Food is in general part of the everyday, and thus may not be sufficiently exotic for that construction of otherness on which much anthropology has historically been premised.

The aims of this article are relatively modest. Based on fieldwork data from research in the Muslim community of Mekaar,[3] an underprivileged coloured township in Cape Town from May to December 2000, I suggest that household allocation in the form of consumption of food is an important key to the discursive construction of differential social status, and of Muslims as an elite, within this specific coloured community.

The Local Setting

Mekaar is a coloured township located on the urban periphery of Cape Town with an estimated population of 30 000 as of 2000. Approximately 13 per cent of these were Muslims. Mekaar is a dormitory township established for coloureds forcibly removed from the surrounding areas under the Group Areas Act Proclamation in the year 1968. Mekaar is in the proximity of the black African informal settlement of Abanthu Yethu and the predominantly white residential suburb of Whitewater. At the time of my fieldwork, an estimated 30 per cent of the population of Mekaar was unemployed. In the course of the 1990s, there had been a shift from employment in relatively well-paid work in secondary sector industries to mostly low-paid work in the tertiary sector among residents of Mekaar, and an increase in levels of unemployment. This shift generally seemed to have favoured female rather than male employment.

Making food 'Islamic'

In Cape Town, where approximately ten per cent of the population is Muslim, there is a rich culinary tradition that goes by the popular name of 'Cape Malay cooking'. The misnomer 'Cape Malays' for Cape Muslims has lingered on as a term of self-reference in the coloured Muslim community as well as a term by which Cape Muslims are referred to by non-Muslims in the Cape, long after its demise as an official term used by segregation and apartheid authorities.[4] During my fieldwork I noted that among Muslims in Mekaar the term 'Cape Malay' was part of a flexible repertoire of terms of self-reference, but was more likely to be used when referring to culture rather than religion. The term was used for these purposes by Muslims of all social strata, even if it appeared to be more frequent among working-class Muslims. Excepting the basic distinction between food that was *halal* (permissible) and *haram* (prohibited), which must be seen as part of religion, in general it appeared that Muslims in Mekaar marked their cuisine as part of the realm of culture. **'Cape Malay cuisine' constituted a historically and socially variable repertoire of dishes that in Muslim families in Mekaar were referred to as 'Cape Malay food'.** Part of this repertoire has in latter years been successfully commercialised by Cape Town

publishers through titles such as 'The Cape Malay Cookbook' (Williams 1993) and 'The Culture & Cuisine of the Cape Malays' (Abrahams 1995), and by restaurateurs in and outside Cape Town. In the upmarket and predominantly white suburb of Constantia in Cape Town, as well as in the consumer paradise of the Waterfront there are now 'Cape Malay' restaurants, providing Cape Malay food along with exclusive South African wines for its patrons in what would appear to be thoroughly de-contextualised settings.[5] In most Muslim households in Mekaar, cooking is primarily the responsibility of females, regardless of whether they are employed outside the home or not, or whether the cooking is for private or ceremonial purposes. Muslim females in Mekaar are socialised into assuming responsibilities for cooking from an early age. Young Muslim girls who show a lack of interest in cooking risk being characterised as 'lazy', or worse, as unfeminine. But it would be all to facile to inscribe this responsibility for cooking in an Orientalist discourse on the alleged gendered oppression of Muslim females: most Muslim females in Mekaar took great pride in their cooking, and would have been extremely reluctant to surrender control over it. That cooking should be one of the primary responsibilities of females has become taken for granted. The few Muslim males in Mekaar I encountered that did the cooking in the household in the place of their wives were at best seen as somewhat effeminate. "Food gave women power", writes Baderoon (2002: 9). It is a pertinent observation, with the caveat that Baderoon writes as if this power was altogether something of the past.

Many Muslim females in the community make some use of the aforementioned recipe books – especially that of Williams (1993) – a book that is seen as closer to their own cooking, and less commercial. But since improvisation – or at least the idea of it – is the mark of the artist in the kitchen, these recipe books are often kept from the view of outsiders. In any case, it seemed to me that in most cases, cooking had become part of a routine that implied that they were seldom required. What is of particular interest in the discourse about 'Cape Malay food' is that it defines certain dishes as exclusive expressions of an ethno-religious identity as Muslim. It therefore essentialises culinary practices in a socio-cultural context in which the distinctions

between culinary practices are remarkably fluid and historically shifting. Dishes marked as 'Cape Malay', such as *chicken curry* and *beryani*, are namely also part of the repertoire of cooking of non-Muslims in Mekaar. Given that 28 per cent of Muslims in Mekaar marry partners born as non-Muslims (Bangstad 2004), and many households consist of members that are Muslims and non-Muslims this should hardly be surprising. The dishes included in the discourse on 'Cape Malay' food among Muslims in Mekaar have also seen significant shifts over the last fifty years. Informants who had been forcibly removed from the seaside town of Bayside in the period between 1968 and 1978 reported that they consumed far more fish and seafood when they lived there, than what was the case at present. For example, seabirds like *mamok*, which had been part of the staple food among Muslims residing in Bayside, was no longer consumed by Muslims in Mekaar. *Crayfish* and *hike* was still common, but less so than only a couple of decades ago. It would also seem that the consumption of poultry and lamb has turned into a symbol of middle-class status among Muslims in Mekaar.

Even on average weekdays they make dishes that require hours to prepare. It is a question of honour on the part of many Muslim females not to prepare fast food for supper. A favourite topic among females after important social functions, such as weddings, the *doopmal* (name-giving ceremony after the birth of a child), birthdays, and the *mouloet* (the annual celebrations of the birth of the Prophet), is the quality and the variety of food served**. Extraordinary skills in cooking and preparing food is highly praised among Muslim females, and females with such skills can often turn their skills into a source of extra revenue for the household by preparing food for special occasions.**

Halal and Haram

In the Islamic tradition, the digestibility of food is of course defined on the basis of notions of purity. Food consumed by Muslims should ideally, except in cases of duress, hunger or unintended mistakes be halal, that is, it should stem from animals that are pure according to Islamic traditions, and should have been slaughtered in a way that is compatible with religious

prescriptions. In the modern age, in which the process of turning live animals into meat have been industrialised to such an extent that the average consumer has little insight into the process, the maintenance of the distinction between halal and haram depends to a large extent on a relation of social trust between Muslim consumers and the producers of halal meat, who may of course be non-Muslims. **A female in the family in which I lived pointed out that it was hard to imagine that butchers who produced halal poultry recited the *takbier* (i. e. 'Allahu Akhbar', God is great) over each and every chicken slaughtered on an assembly line, as this would represent significant additional costs to the producers.** She asserted that "one simply has to trust certain things, seeing that we live in a Western country."

As the Muslim community of Cape Town is relatively numerous, supermarkets as well as restaurants in Cape Town do put significant efforts into attracting Muslim customers, especially if they are located close to residential areas where large numbers of Muslims live. The largest retail supermarkets in Cape Town, such as *Pick'n'Pay* and *Shoprite* have a range of products marked as halal. Supermarkets and corner-shops owned by Muslims will as a rule sell only food certified as halal. In the area surrounding Mekaar, the supermarkets only have poultry certified as halal. There is a halal butcher's shop in the community of Mekaar, but most Muslims found the meat there prohibitively expensive. The highest administrative organ for Sunni Muslims in Cape Town, the Halal Committee of the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC), certifies food as halal. This Halal Committee is exposed to conflicting interests: were they to certify a large amount of supermarket food as halal, they risk incurring the wrath of Muslim butchers throughout the Cape Peninsula, who are battling to survive against the competition of retail supermarkets. This may be part of the reason why informants who had requested the Pick'n'Pay supermarket in the surrounding area to open a halal fresh food-counter were told by Pick'n'Pay managers that they did not find it worthwhile. Consequently, in most Muslim households in Mekaar, people regularly went 'up the line' (i. e. to suburbs closer to Cape Town) in order to buy fresh meat in bulk from Muslim butchers, such as Poppy's in the suburb of Retreat.

Food and social stratification

In the academic literature on coloureds in Cape Town, Muslims have historically been represented as elite in the coloured population (cf. du Plessis 1944, O'Toole 1973 and Shell 1994 for illustrations). As conceptualised by recent academic literature, ethnic stereotypes are based on a reciprocal process of ascriptions by members of a particular group themselves, and by significant others (Jenkins 1996). The idea that Muslims are the best 'craftsmen' or artisans, that Muslims in general distinguish themselves from the *deurmekaar* [6]by not consuming alcohol, and that Muslim women have straight rather than curly hair (i.e that Muslims are phenotypically distinguishable from black Africans and coloureds of Khoisan descent)[7], are among the most common stereotypes mobilised in the self-ascriptions of Muslims in Mekaar. Ethnic stereotypes are, as Eriksen (1991) has pointed out in a critique of Barth (1969), never completely arbitrary. Stereotypes mobilised in the self-ascriptions of Muslims in Mekaar contribute to the constitution of Muslims as elite in the coloured population of Mekaar. However, the observations I made in the course of my fieldwork, visiting more than a hundred Muslim and non-Muslim homes, lead me to doubt the a priori assumptions that Muslims were an elite in socio-economic terms. In fact, background material from the official population census in 1996 from Statistics South Africa indicated that 20 per cent of all Muslims in Cape Town lived below the official poverty datum line at the time, and that 45 per cent of Muslims in Cape Town subsisted close to this line.[8]

One of the most central markers of Muslim elite status in the Muslim community of Mekaar was food. In conversations I had with Muslims in Mekaar, a recurring statement was that "in a Muslim family, there will never be a lack of food." At important social functions in the Muslim community of Mekaar, the amount and variety of food would without exception be dramatically in excess of the actual requirements as well as the actual consumption taking place. This fact was often masked by providing the invited guests with plates of food to take home after the function. This gift was referred to as a *barakat*. The underlying notion was that a gift of barakat was meritorious both for giver and recipient. The barakat could last for days thereafter,

but in any case it was the rule rather than the exception that large quantities of it ended up in the garbage cans of individual homes.

From the works of the late French social scientist Pierre Bourdieu (1984), we have learnt that food cannot be analysed independently of lifestyles, as the taste for certain plates is associated with a particular conceptualisation of the household's economy and the sexual division of labour. **Bourdieu demonstrated in his study of social tastes in the French context that it was primarily the working-class meals that were characterised by abundance, excess and freedom. In contradistinction, the meals of the upper class were characterised by asceticism and discipline.** Bourdieu argued that the working-class was entrapped in a process in which economic necessity is transformed into virtue, and therefore characterises the working-class taste as the "taste of necessity."[9] With reference to Bourdieu, it could therefore be argued that the consumption of food of coloured Muslims in Mekaar is inscribed in, and attains its meaning in relation to a field characterised by a working-class taste similar to that outlined by Bourdieu. In other words, a world in which abundance, excess and freedom marks - a largely imaginary- prosperity relative to that of non-Muslims.

By Way of Conclusion

The entry point to this article was a remark made in the course of my fieldwork by an unidentified Muslim male in his fifties. He was in fact the senior male in the small extended family in which I lived. The remark fell after a supper on August 9 2000. I had managed to convince the females of the household, in whose power such decisions ultimately lay, that I should for once be allowed to prepare supper on the occasion of South African's Women's Day. But I had to put up with constant surveillance when preparing the meal. I served imported and expensive Norwegian salmon with sour cream and potatoes, rounded off by strawberries and vanilla ice cream. The remark was self-mocking, ironic and self-defensive, and prompted by mild teasing from his wife and daughter – who, having duly had my supper, had started to compare my abilities as a cook to those of him and his son-in-law for the sake of flattering me. My host

knew that he had been set up as a bad cook, and to the extent that he had understood what hosting a social anthropologist might mean, he also knew that his role in the household for that reason might easily be construed by me at some point in the future as that of a traditional Muslim male. He did not cook. But the truth of the matter is that – with this one exception- neither did I. The females of the household did not trust my abilities in that field – and probably rightly so.

---

[1] The paper on which this article has been based was first presented at a seminar at the Centre for Contemporary Islam at the University of Cape Town on October 10 2001. I would like to thank the centre and its former director, Prof. Abdulkader Tayob, and the students and academics that were present for valuable comments and suggestions. Furthermore, I would like to thank the following for comments and input on issues raised in this article: Aslam Fataar, Shamil Jeppie, Ebrahim Salie, Heinrich Matthee, Anh Nga Longva and Inge Tvedten. Last, but not least, I thank the residents of 'Mekaar' for their generous hospitality and excellent food, both of which I am happy to report that I have been provided with in excess over the years. As in the case of much 'Cape Malay' food, it would be apposite to consume this article with a pinch of salt.

[2] Exceptions are to be found in Ewing 1963, Buitelaar 1993, Benkheira 1999.

[3] Fieldwork in Mekaar was undertaken from May to December 2000. Throughout that period I lived with a Muslim family in Mekaar, and shared their meals. Please note that the name of the community, as well as of informants have been altered.

[4] The best analysis of the uses to which the term 'Cape Malay' was put during segregation and apartheid remains Jeppie 1988. Jeppie 1996 provides a critique of the somewhat surprising re-appearence of the term during the Tercentenary of Islam in South Africa in Cape Town in 1994.

[5] The distancing effects of post-apartheid commercial appropriations of multiculturalism: According to the websites promoting 'The Cape Malay Restaurant' in Constantia, a restaurant with a 'traditional and upmarket ambiance' and 'award-winning wine list' which appears to have been established under the auspices of the very same Mrs. Abrahams, the recipe-book-writer, 'Cape Malay cuisine' was developed by Malay and Indian 'settlers', and not, as an elementary history lesson would have been likely to force one to

admit, slaves and exiles. *Post-colonial indeed.* See 'The Cape Malay Restaurant' at www.eating-out.co.za and www.restaurants.co.za. But alas, the waiters at 'The Cape Malay Restaurant' dress and perform as if they were all Muslims.

[6] To be deurmekaar means to be muddled, confused, disorganised (Silva et. al. 1996). Among Muslims in Mekaar it was used as a term by which people perceived to have low moral standards (who, as it happened, were generally poor) were referred to. People who are deurmekaar may for instance be involved in drug-dealing or drug consumption and/or gangsterism, consume alcohol, have children out of wedlock and so forth.

[7] In the elaborate racial hierarchy of apartheid, which was effective precisely because it was based on common-sensical ideas about race (as suggested by Posel 2001), the distinction between straight and curly hair became a marker of social status (van der Merwe 1962), and no more so than in the coloured population, with its heterogeneous origins.

[8] I owe this information to Heinrich Matthee, who was generous enough to provide the background figures. It should be noted that these figures included Indian Muslims in Cape Town (who in general have significantly higher income levels than coloured Muslims), and that the percentage of coloured Muslims living under or close to the poverty datum line may therefore have been higher than what the figures would seem to suggest.

[9] Developments in the post-industrial USA and Europe, where obesity is a public health problem, but far more prevalent in lower social strata, and among the former working-class, would seem to validate Bourdieu's hypotheses.

References

Abrahams, Cass. 1995. *The Culture & Cuisine of the Cape Malays.* Cape Town: Metz Press.

Baderoon, Gabeba. 2002. 'Everybody's mother was a good cook: Meanings of food in Muslim cooking' *Agenda* 51, pp. 4-15.

Bangstad, Sindre. 2004. 'When Muslims Marry non-Muslims: Marriage as Incorporation in a Cape Muslim Community', *Journal of Islam and Muslim-Christian Relations* 15 (2), pp. 349-64.

Barth, Fredrik. 1969. 'Introduction' in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*. Ed. by. F. Barth. Bergen: Universitetsforlaget.

Benkheira, Mohammed Hocine. 1999. 'Binding and Separating: The Ritual Functions of Meat in the Islamic Home,' *L'Homme* 152, pp. 89-114.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Transl. R.Nice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Buitelaar, Marjo. 1993. *Fasting and Feasting in Morocco: Women's Participation in Ramadan*. Oxford: Berg Publishers.

du Plessis, Izaak David. 1944. *The Cape Malays*. Cape Town: Maskew Miller.

Eriksen, Thomas Hylland. 1991. 'The Cultural Contexts of Ethnic Differences,' *Man* 26 (1): 127-144.

Ewing, J. Franklin. 1963. 'Food and Drink Among the Tawsug,' *Anthropological Quarterly* 36 (2), pp. 60-70.

Jenkins, Richard. 1996. *Social Identity*. London: Routledge.

Jeppie, Shamiel. 1996. 'Commemorations and Identities: The 1994 Tercentenary of Islam in South Africa'. In *Islam and the Question of Minorities*. Ed. by Tamara Sonn. Atlanta: Scholar's Press, pp. 73-91.

Jeppie, Shamiel. 1988. 'I.D du Plessis and the "Re-invention of the "Malay", c. 1935-1952'. Unpublished seminar paper, Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town.

O'Toole, James. 1973. *Watts and Woodstock: Identity and Culture in the United States and South Africa*. New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston.

Posel, Deborah. 2001. 'Race as Common Sense: Racial Classification in Twentieth-Century South Africa,' *African Studies Review* 44 (2), pp. 87-113.

Shell, Robert C. H. 1994. *Children of Bondage: A Social History of the Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope 1652-1834*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.

Silva, Penny et. al. 1996. *A Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles: South African Words and Their Origins*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

van der Merwe, Hendrick W. 1962. 'Social Stratification in a Cape Coloured Community,' *Sociology and Social Research* 42, pp. 302-311.

Williams, Farieda. 1993. *The Cape Malay Cookbook*. Cape Town: Struik Publishers.

Pull Quotes:

It may therefore be that in practice, anthropology does not always attach the same analytical importance to everyday minutiae or to what our informants regard as significant as one would like to think.

'Cape Malay cuisine' constituted a historically and socially variable repertoire of dishes that in Muslim families in Mekaar were referred to as 'Cape Malay food'.

Extraordinary skills in cooking and preparing food is highly praised among Muslim females, and females with such skills can often turn their skills into a source of extra revenue for the household by preparing food for special occasions.

A female in the family in which I lived pointed out that it was hard imagine that butchers who produced halal poultry recited the *takbier* (i. e. 'Allahu Akhbar', God is great) over each and every chicken slaughtered on an assembly line, as this would represent significant additional costs to the producers.

Bourdieu demonstrated in his study of social tastes in the French context that it was primarily the working-class meals that were characterised by abundance, excess and freedom. In contradistinction, the meals of the upper class was characterised by asceticism and discipline.