



ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Salam Meets Shalom: The Impact of Moroccan Traditional Food on Moroccan Jewish Diasporic Identity

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There is substantial research investigating the relationship between traditional ethnic food and diasporas for other ethnicities. Yet, there is a lack of research investigating the relationship between traditional Moroccan food and Moroccan Jewish diasporic identity. Although numerous studies have examined how traditional Jewish practices—as a religious artifact—influence Moroccan Jewish diasporic identity, the role of ethnic identity artifacts like food has yet to be adequately explored. Therefore, this qualitative ethnographic study explores the effect of traditional Moroccan food on Moroccan Jewish diasporic identity through a case-study approach examining one Moroccan-born participant residing in Toronto, Canada in detail through a semi-structured interview.. The participant was asked about his food practices, such as food preferences, food eaten at home vs outside, and the role of Moroccan cuisine in his life. The interview was then followed by inductive thematic analysis, which extracted the following themes: (1) acculturation, (2) apprehension, (3) cultural connection, and (4) normalcy. Overall, these findings align with the surrounding literature regarding the relationship between traditional Moroccan food and Moroccan Jewish diasporic identity. It was found that the consumption of Moroccan food generally strengthened Moroccan Jewish identity within diasporas, thus placing the results parallel with those of similar studies conducted regarding other ethnic groups. Ultimately, this study concludes that there is a positive relationship between the consumption of traditional Moroccan food and Moroccan Jewish diasporic identity. It is recommended that further research be conducted on a cohort of varying socioeconomic status, age, place of residence, and birthplace to examine the effects of Moroccan traditional food on a more diverse participant population.

Though now considered a Muslim-majority state, Morocco boasts a rich history of diverse ethnic groups within its region. The pre-Islamic society of Morocco was inhabited primarily by Amazigh tribal groups, more commonly known as Berbers, who established civilization across the various terrains of the country [1]. However, during the period of 'Peripheral Islam,' when Islam and Judaism were introduced into North Africa, the Amazighs converted to both faiths, thus establishing the beginnings of Judaism in Morocco [1]. However, due to environmental barriers, their influence was limited to Eastern and Northern Morocco [1]. Following the 8th century, the first Arab invasion of North Africa occurred, resulting in the widespread conversion of the Berbers to Islam [1].

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Sephardic Jews—Jews from the Iberian peninsula—entered Morocco in considerable numbers, settled in major cities, and naturally formed Jewish communities with a European character that differed greatly from the communal nature of the Muslim civilizations there as a result of their cultural and religious differences [2]. As such, a cultural and religious schism that had previously not existed formed within Morocco between the Muslims and the Jews [2]. To further strain relations, upon the French colonization of North Africa in the nineteenth century, the French favored many Jews due to their marginality in North African society. As a result, they often received preferential treatment in French establishments, such as schools [2]. Moroccan Muslims viewed the Jews as part of the op-

pressive French colonial forces, which contributed to their eventual departure from Morocco.

French colonization and shifting demographics within the Arab world led to the emergence of the Nahda movement, also known as the Arab Renaissance: a nationalistic and traditional reformist attitude overtook Islamic society. The Nahda began in 1850 and ended in 1970, from as East as the Levant to Morocco [2]. During this era, many Jews emigrated from Morocco because they were “inexorably linked to governmental discourse” and faced mistreatment and dwindling political freedom from Muslims, given their new radical attitude [3;2]. As such, Moroccan Jewish diasporas, or international communities, have flourished, with the most studied diasporas being those in Montreal and Israel. For this study, the term “diaspora” will be defined as “cultural-social-political entities, created as a result of either voluntary or forced migration from a homeland, whose members are and regard themselves as of the same ethnonational origin and who permanently reside as minorities in one or several host-countries” [4]. Additionally, the term “cultural/national identity” will be defined as “identity formation outside the homeland and a characterization of diaspora as a lived experience” [5].

Despite their migration, Moroccan Jews have maintained Moroccan cuisine even during the diaspora. Examples of traditional Moroccan food include tagine, couscous, bastilla, and zalouk. The effect of ethnic food's contribution to diasporic identity is significant because it provides insight into the impact of strictly cultural products on diasporic communities and identity.

Literature Review

There is extensive literature that examines how cultural cuisine is used as a way to form identity and community amongst various ethnic diasporas [5;6]. For example, Cuban food is often a “marker of identity” for Cuban-Americans, meaning it is a way Cuban-Americans claim their ethnic identity despite being nationally American [5]. Similarly, “food practices help to create a sense of diasporic identity” amongst South Asians in the neighborhoods of Huddersfield and West Yorkshire in the UK, further demonstrating how ethnic food helps those in diaspora claim their identity through various contexts [6]. These examples and similar literature illustrate that cultural cuisine is not only practiced in diasporas but also creates a sense of identity amongst them. While some sources demonstrate that traditional food contributes to diasporic identity amongst other ethnic groups, there is a lack of research regarding the contribution of conventional cultural food to Moroccan Jewish diasporic identity. This research is necessary because scholars such as Alex Weingrod and André Levy of Ben Gurion University state that Moroccan Jews have “established their diasporas by contributing to the processes that generated nostalgic feelings among them.” However, there is a lack of measurement of what specifically generates these nostalgic feelings [7]. Traditional Moroccan food should be understood as a catalyst for this sense of nostalgia because Moroccan Jews, like other diaspora groups, may also experience/generate “nostalgia in diaspora” through food in that it helps them connect with their Moroccan identity [6]. Although the cultural contribution to Moroccan Jewish diasporic identity is yet to be studied, past literature has analyzed how religion has created a sense of Moroccan-Jewish diasporic identity. Throughout diasporas, it was a “religious identity that was moveable and yet could be transformed into an ethnic identity concerning other Jews in Israel, France, and other parts of the Moroccan Jewish dispersion” [8]. This is further elaborated upon by Henry Green of the University of Miami, who states that Moroccan Jews overseas “continue to practice folkloric Jewish traditions” [12]. A clear example is preserving “a traditional Jewish education” abroad [3]. A common theme has emerged: religious practices and traditions of Moroccan Jewish diasporas have created a sense of identity overseas. There is a lack of research examining the purely cultural Moroccan contribution to Moroccan Jewish diasporic identity, which can be achieved through the investigation of Moroccan traditional food and Moroccan Jewish diasporic identity.

Both in and out of Morocco, the Moroccan Jews are a unique group whose cultural and religious combination’s effect on identity has been largely understudied. Other researchers, such as Daniel Schroeter of the University of California, Irvine, believe that the study of how cultural products contribute to a Moroccan Jewish diasporic identity is necessary to understand the antisemitic history of Morocco. He states that since Moroccan Jews have had a “real absence and dwindling presence” in Morocco throughout the past decades, it is ambiguous as to whether cultural products themselves are indicative of Moroccan Jewish identity overseas, thus prompting further research [8]. General thematic research of traditional Moroccan food, a purely Moroccan cultural product, and diasporic identity does not seem to account for Moroccan Jewish communities, warranting further research regarding the link between the two in this specific context. Through this analysis, it will be possible to understand the extent to which Moroccan Jews claim their cultural heritage as a part of their identity. The religious

aspect of Moroccan Jews and their historical presence in Morocco distinguishes them specifically from broader, diasporic communities: Specifically, ethnic communities where the correlation between food and diasporic identity has been studied. By employing qualitative research methods, such as ethnography, further research should be conducted to determine the existence of this relationship. The analysis of the impact of ethnic food on Moroccan Jewish diasporic identity may not only aid in determining how historical events have impacted Moroccan Jewish culture regarding national identity, but also emphasize how diasporic identities evolve amongst generations.

Methodology

The following research question was developed to guide the paper: “By employing qualitative semi-structured interviews, to what extent does traditional Moroccan food contribute to diasporic Moroccan identity for second-generation Jewish-Moroccans in Toronto, Canada?”

As stated, the study was qualitative in nature, “gathering participants’ experiences, perceptions, and behavior. With this specific study, all aspects of the given definition of qualitative research were examined.

More specifically, the research drew upon the subsection of ethnography: a qualitative research method employed “to describe the characteristics of a particular culture/ethnographic group” [9]. In this sense, the chosen ethnographic group was Moroccan Jews. Ethnography is explicitly used

to examine how certain groups adapt to change and how their beliefs, values, and traditions fare through constancy and change.

The first seminal source was Alfonso’s thematic analysis of Cuban food practices and traditions in London. Alfonso conducted interviews with Cubans of varying ages and socioeconomic backgrounds living in London to gauge their conceptions of Cuban food and diasporic identity. Therefore, the method of semi-structured interviews was adopted conceptualize Moroccan food and diasporic identity for this cohort. In this study, various questions were asked regarding food and identity to apply to the interview.

The second seminal source was Chapman and Beagan’s case study of the analysis of food practices of Punjabi-Canadian families [10]. Chapman and Beagan conducted individual semi-structured interviews with typical Punjabi-Canadian women who exemplified the greater demographic. Striving to replicate this method, it was decided to revert from Alfonso’s multiple participants and instead focus on an intensified case study of a single individual representing the greater Moroccan Jewish community. As such, the participant elected was a 20-year-old ethnically Moroccan-Canadian citizen who had spent most of their life in Canada.

The third seminal source was Parveen’s thematic analysis of food practices and traditions of South Asians in the UK. Parveen, like Alfonso, conducted interviews with South Asian women living in the UK regarding their food practices and their relation to their identity. Parveen searched specifically for themes of nostalgia in her interview responses, which was adopted as a part of the thematic analysis for this study.

Based on the literature review, it was hypothesized that themes of nostalgia would emerge in the interview responses and that there would be a correlation between diasporic identity and traditional Moroccan food practices. Specifically, the consumption

and cooking of Moroccan traditional food would strengthen diasporic identity among Moroccan Jewish communities overseas.

The participant was sent a consent form in which they consented to being interviewed and recorded. All interview questions were sent to the participant with adequate time (approximately 3 to 4 days) prior to the interview. So, in the event there was any arising trauma or discomfort, participants were able to report it, and the question(s) be reconstructed accordingly. The participant was asked “Can you name some Moroccan dishes you eat at home or just know of generally?” and “Can you define Moroccan food using adjectives?” [5].

These questions both gauged the participant’s food practices and their perception of their Moroccan Jewish identity.

The guide to thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) was followed, and inductive thematic analysis was conducted. Braun and Clarke’s publication was cited in a parallel study examining the foodways of people from different ethnicities residing in Singapore [11]. The guide encompasses six different steps: (1) familiarization of the data, (2) code generation, (3) theme generation, (4) thematic review, and (5) theme definitions and naming. This ensured that a clear understanding and approach to inductive thematic analysis was obtained and the most detailed and accurate themes possible from the interview were extracted.

Firstly, the interview was transcribed and reread multiple times to complete the familiarization stage. Then, the text was broken down into codes, which are specific labels that pertain to a specific text. These codes were then joined to form broader, overarching themes, which were analyzed in relation to Moroccan Jewish diasporic identity. Through this, it was determined whether or not traditional food practices impact Moroccan Jewish diasporic identity.

Results

Upon reading and thematically analyzing the interview with the participant, five themes emerged (sorted alphabetically): (1) acculturation, (2) apprehension, (3) cultural connection, and (4) normalcy.

Theme 1: Acculturation

The first theme identified during the study was that of acculturation. Acculturation is described as “the total adaptive process that occurs in cultural patterning and value systems, group alignments, systems of control, social organization and economy, and in the psychological structures and functions of individuals” [9]. The participant affirmed that living in Canada did lead to assimilation into Canadian culture and way of life in a culinary sense. The following quotes exemplify this:

“When I’m out with my friends, though, we usually eat fast food or at a Western restaurant.” “In that case [that I miss breakfast], I usually just have some mint tea or coffee or something quick like oatmeal.”

The mention of explicitly Western restaurants and popularized Western dishes such as oatmeal signifies acculturation into Canadian culture through a culinary lens instead of strictly Moroccan cuisine, which would have likely been the response had the respondent grown up in Morocco. For the participants, Moroccan food and culture are not necessarily the dominant foods and cultures to which they are most exposed. The acknowledgment of this

exemplifies the effects of the host country’s culture on the participant’s identity and cultural resonance. The assimilation into Canadian culture is also seen beyond the kitchen into communication when the participant states:

“I only speak English when I’m with my Canadian friends.”

Adopting the English language as opposed to strictly speaking Darija, the Moroccan-Arabic dialect, signifies acculturation in a linguistic sense through growing up in Canada. More broadly, in terms of identity, when asked where they are from, the participant responded with:

“I would say I’m Moroccan but raised in Canada.”

The acknowledgment of their Canadian upbringing signifies the presence of a Canadian identity, which is obtained through acculturation. The respondent felt that it was significant to mention that they were raised in Canada, which implies that their host country holds importance in their identity.

Overall, acculturation is prominent in the respondents’ questions of identity, which puts into perspective the actual influence of Canadian culture on the participant’s perception of their identity and familiarity.

Theme 2: Apprehension

The second theme identified during my study was that of apprehension. The respondent demonstrated apprehension in their responses to the Moroccan community in Toronto. When asked, “Do you feel involved in the Moroccan community here in Toronto?”, the participant responded:

“Kind of. I have some Moroccan friends, and there are other Moroccans at the synagogue.” The lack of surety in the respondents’ answers illustrates apprehension in their interactions with other Moroccans and the sense of community in Toronto. This may demonstrate a decreased sense of belonging and unity within the Moroccan community through different aspects of diasporic identity, such as traditions, language, and customs, due to lack of exposure outside of the home environment. Furthermore, when prompted about the type of food that is eaten with other Moroccans, the participant responded:

“It depends. At the synagogue or during Shabbat, we eat traditional Jewish dishes, like Matzo ball soup or challah. However, when my parents’ Moroccan friends come home, we only eat Moroccan food.” The duality of the answer signifies apprehension towards choosing one identity over another: the respondent instead mentions both in their context without bias. This, in turn, indicates the mixed religious and ethnic identity of the respondents and showcases the impact of both identities on the food that they consume.

Theme 3: Cultural Connection and Nostalgia

The third theme identified was cultural connection. Despite being based in Canada, the participant responded to specific questions with an overarching theme of food and cultural connection to Morocco. For example, when asked about what Moroccan food means to them, the interviewee responded:

“Moroccan food is really a way to connect to my family and my ancestry. It’s like a thing of patriotism, pride, and celebration of my culture.”

The response highlights that Moroccan food has a connection

to the respondent's heritage and culture through relation to family and heritage, emphasizing the importance of Moroccan food in maintaining ethnic identity. Furthermore, when asked which adjectives describe Moroccan food, the interviewee responded with:

"Delicious, flavorful, nostalgic, reminiscent."

Including "nostalgic" and "reminiscent" exemplifies the connection to Moroccan heritage that Moroccan food brings, stimulating cultural connection via food. In addition, when asked, "Does eating Moroccan food help you identify more with your heritage?" the respondent answered:

"I think it does. Since I don't get to travel to Morocco often, and since food is such an important part of Moroccan culture, eating food like Tajine and Bastila makes me feel more Moroccan in a sense. It is a way for me to relate back to Morocco and that part of my identity whilst living in Canada."

The importance of Moroccan food in Moroccan culture drove the participant to associate Moroccan food with Moroccan culture and identity in the diaspora, as they explicitly mentioned in the context of Canada. For the respondent, Moroccan food is a key component in maintaining Moroccan identity whilst living abroad, thus aligning with the theme of cultural connection when asked about Moroccan food.

Theme 4: Normalcy

The fourth theme identified was that of normalcy. The interviewee demonstrated various signs of consistency in their food practices in their daily life. When asked if they have always eaten Moroccan food at home, the participant responded:

"Yes, almost always."

When followed up with when they eat Moroccan food, the participant answered:

"Usually for lunch and dinner when I'm at home."

The extent to which they eat Moroccan food exhibits consistency and normalcy in their everyday cuisine, demonstrating an increased connection with Moroccan identity. The participant exhibits signs of being nurtured with Moroccan food from a young age, which exemplifies its normalization in everyday life. This, in turn, depicts the correlation between Moroccan food and Moroccan identity throughout the participant's life as a result of their diet, thus magnifying the significance of Moroccan food on Moroccan Jewish diasporic identity.

Overall, the participant demonstrated themes of acculturation, apprehension, cultural connection, and normalcy when prompted with questions regarding the connection between Moroccan food and their identity as an ethnic Moroccan, which was generally a positive relationship.

Discussion

The Moroccan participants living in Canada provided valuable perspectives into their perception of Moroccan traditional food, revealing four significant themes extracted within the context of those mentioned in the results. (1) Residing in a foreign country, despite the large size of the Moroccan diaspora there, results in acculturation to that culture; (2) Identification of Moroccan diasporic identity through food does not guarantee identification through other mediums; (3) Moroccan food serves as a form of cultural connection and incites nostalgia, and (4) Identification of

Moroccan identity through Moroccan food is contingent upon its consistent consumption in daily life. In this discussion, conclusions will first be derived from the results, and then the significance and contextual alignment of my findings with existing literature will be discussed. Finally, the potential implications of the study will be indicated, as well as its limitations.

After analyzing the interview, a key finding emerged: regardless of exposure to Moroccan traditional food, gastronomical acculturation still occurs in Moroccan Jewish diasporas. Although the participants affirmed that they frequently consume Moroccan food, they simultaneously consume Canadian food and are still subject to the effects of acculturation, including less Moroccan food consumption. The concurrent frequency of consumption of Canadian and Moroccan food may hamper the extent to which Moroccan food may be concluded as a positively impacting factor on Moroccan Jewish diasporic identity. This generally agrees with the other emerging theme that the identification of Moroccan food with Moroccan Jewish diasporic identity is contingent upon the frequent consumption of Moroccan traditional food. Should the participant have accumulated even more to Canadian food consumption, to the point where it overshadowed Moroccan food consumption in their daily life, it is plausible that the extent to which Moroccan food positively impacted Moroccan Jewish diasporic identity would have been even less. Another relatively significant theme is drawn from the interview: Moroccan food serves as a way for the participant to connect with their heritage and incites nostalgia. However, although they believed that Moroccan traditional food was a way for them to identify with their Moroccan heritage, the same notion was not necessarily expressed when questioned about other mediums, such as traditions and gatherings. This is generally inconclusive with literature surrounding diasporic identity, which states that traditions and practices are a factor of identification for Moroccan Jews abroad [12]. However, it is essential to note that Green's study applies to Jewish religious traditions and not ethnic traditions but relates to Moroccan Jewish diasporic identity.

Overall, the findings of this study around the impact of Moroccan traditional food on Moroccan Jewish diasporic identity generally align with the conclusions of existing literature employing qualitative methods in the field. This, essentially, affirms that Moroccan traditional food positively impacts Moroccan Jewish diasporic identity through the following: familiarity, identity connection, and nostalgia [5,6]. This study contributes to the existing literature by analyzing the effects of traditional food on diasporic identity, specifically for Moroccan Jews and through an ethnic lens, ultimately affirming a positive correlation between the two. Furthermore, in addition to closing the gap in existing research on Moroccan traditional food's impact on Moroccan Jewish diasporic identity, this study also highlights a potential method for Moroccan Jews overseas to connect with their Moroccan heritage through gastronomy, given that the results of the study affirm that Moroccan food has a positive impact on Moroccan Jewish diasporic identity.

However, the study results have also illuminated significant limitations and disregarded the complexities of this research. Firstly, the themes following inductive thematic analysis of the interview demonstrate that Moroccan traditional food's impact on diasporic identity is often regarded within the context of other cultural artifacts that may impact diasporic identity. For example, the

participant spoke about their lack of involvement and participation in traditional Moroccan gatherings and their consumption of Canadian food compared to Moroccan food. Both of these cultural products may be considered measures of diasporic identity. In my hypothesis, I predicted that Moroccan traditional food would impact Moroccan Jewish diasporic identity. However, my hypothesis fails to recognize Moroccan traditional food's effects on Moroccan Jewish diasporic identity comparatively and does not account for other cultural Moroccan products. This would have provided a more encompassing perception of Moroccan traditional food and its comparative impact on Moroccan Jewish diasporic identity. Such inconsistency was reflected in my research methodological process, with no questions referring specifically to Moroccan traditional food's importance to diasporic identity within the broader context of other cultural products and practices. Therefore, this limitation may undermine the study's validity in terms of the extent to which Moroccan traditional food impacts Moroccan Jewish diasporic identity. I recommend further research that analyzes the simultaneous diasporic identity impacts of Moroccan traditional food and other cultural products to provide a more holistic understanding of the impact of various determinants of Moroccan Jewish diasporic identity.

Furthermore, a critical limitation to my findings is that due to the small sample size of only one participant due to the niche and slightly inaccessible population of Moroccan Jews overseas in Canada, the results obtained could not be generalized to a larger population of both the Moroccan Jewish diaspora in Canada and other hotspots worldwide, such as Israel and France. Additionally, the aspects of accessibility and religiosity concerning the participant's place of residence are disregarded. The participant selected in this case study is of a median income background and has the resources and funds to consume Moroccan food consistently. However, that means that these results are not only unrepresentative of the Moroccan Jewish diaspora as a whole geographically but also in socioeconomic terms. The answers and results may vary depending on the financial ability of Moroccan Jews overseas to obtain ingredients essential to Moroccan food or the availability of these ingredients in their community. Therefore, this method of a singular case study diminishes the study's applicability to broader Moroccan Jewish populations and their sentiments towards Moroccan food's impact on their identity within the diaspora.

Conclusion

In closing, this study was conducted to identify whether or not Moroccan traditional food impacts Moroccan Jewish diasporic identity in Canada. My inductive thematic analysis reveals that there are four main themes surrounding the topic of Moroccan traditional food and diasporic identity: (1) residing in a foreign country, despite the size of the Moroccan diaspora there, results in acculturation to that culture; (2) Identification of Moroccan diasporic identity through food does not guarantee identification through other mediums; (3) Moroccan food serves as a form of cultural connection and incites nostalgia; and (4) Identification of Moroccan identity through Moroccan food is contingent upon its consistent consumption in daily life. By capturing the experience of a Moroccan Jew living in one of the largest Moroccan Jewish diasporas worldwide, this study adds significant value to the existing scholarly knowledge on the formation of Moroccan Jewish diasporic identity.

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