

“We are very proud and very tempted and determined to make this food”: How Immigrant Muslim Women Preserve Cultural Identity Through Food

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Abstract

Food plays a critical role in an individual’s maintenance of cultural identity and social connection. The process of preparing, sharing, and consuming cultural food (i.e., cultural foodways) serves to connect immigrants to their families, communities, and cultures—especially when experiencing a new way of living in an unfamiliar environment. Limited access to cultural food resources can contribute to feelings of isolation or a loss of culture; therefore, continual engagement in cultural food practices is crucial for migrants to maintain their identity and well-being. This study explores the relationship between cultural foodways, identity maintenance, and well-being among immigrant Muslim women. Through semi-structured interviews conducted with two immigrant Muslim women and through personal self-reflection, the intersections between gender, religion, and culture reveal the complexity of immigrant lives in relation to food. Participants describe their experiences navigating cultural food accessibility and identify how cultural food practices, especially the sharing of cultural food, affirm their cultural identity and contribute to their well-being. By engaging in cultural foodways, the participants situate their identities in the present, connect to their cultural histories, and imagine opportunities for the continued transfer of food knowledge.

Keywords: identity; food knowledge transmission; food accessibility; cultural food practices; cultural foodways

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Introduction

The process of immigration requires people to sacrifice significant aspects of their cultural and familial connections, to uproot themselves from familiarity, and to learn new ways of living. Often new immigrants experience “limited social support, economic exhaustion, and negative health outcomes” in unfamiliar environments (Salma & Salami, 2019, p. 615). This experience of dislocation can cause immigrants to feel a deep sense of isolation or grief for their former identity and ways of living. As a result, food can be a source of comfort for many immigrants and a practical way to stay connected to their culture. While extensive research has been undertaken on the impacts of food on the maintenance of cultural identity and well-being, research has yet to fully explore how immigrant Muslim women in Canada perceive this relationship. This article therefore examines the intersections between gender, religion, and culture to consider the accessibility of food resources and food preparation processes in the lives of Muslim immigrants in Canada.

The section that follows will review extant literature about the intersectional relationship between cultural identity, well-being, and food. Next, this article will provide a detailed account of the experiences of two Muslim women who immigrated to Canada, as captured through semi-structured qualitative interviews. Lastly, this article will apply a thematic analytical framework to address the following research question: how is accessing and preparing culturally relevant food significant to immigrant Muslim women in Canada in terms of their sense of identity and well-being? The themes developed from these narratives are as follows: (a) participant navigation of time constraints and overlapping responsibilities; (b) perceptions of cultural food availability; (c) the relationship between cultural food and cultural identity; (d) and the relationship between cultural food practices and social connections to the past, present, and future.

This study illustrates how food can act as a source of connection and communication within different cultures and within the religious traditions of Islam. This research applies a narrative framework in order to understand how immigrant Muslim women perceive their cultural identity, and how they maintain cultural foodways through continued engagement with traditional food practices and the sharing of cultural food. Further, by incorporating my own self-reflections, I illustrate how the perspectives of immigrant Muslim women may overlap and vary. This study has implications for future explorations of how immigrant Muslim women practise, engage in, and maintain cultural foodways while living in Canada.

Positionality

As an immigrant from Bangladesh, I have often felt a sense of grief for a culture that I will never fully know, and I imagined that other immigrants may have had similar experiences after arriving in Canada. By engaging in cultural foodways, I make meaningful connections with my culture and family; however, I question the authenticity of my experience with food, since I have limited access to culturally relevant and Halal ingredients.² During my childhood in Canada, I moved from province to province and resided in small towns, each located a few hours from the nearest city. My family was often the only Bengali or Muslim family to settle in towns otherwise

² Halal is an Arabic term that refers to practices permissible in Islam. Halal food refers to the ingredients Muslims are permitted to eat. Farm animals, for example, must be slaughtered according to Islamic law, and permissible processed food must contain only Halal ingredients (see Wright et al., 2021b, p. 650).

dominated by white Christians. This lack of diversity made me realize how much I have been impacted by the absence of people from my own religion and culture.

While living with my family, I never thought deeply about my relationship to food or how this relationship correlated to my identity and well-being. As a child and adolescent, I recognized that the dislocation of moving to rural towns with limited cultural diversity, combined with experiences of racism and Islamophobia, impacted my self-perception. In order to assimilate to the dominant white culture that undergirds Canadian society, I slowly lost my connection to my first language and authentic cultural practices, and I began to feel insecure about openly practising Islam. After moving away from my family to attend university, I realized the significance of food to the expression of my cultural identity and well-being.

While living on campus during my first year of undergraduate studies at the University of Victoria (UVic), I became aware of how much I missed eating food cooked by my mother—a sentiment shared by many of my peers, who often mentioned how fond they were of their own “mother’s cooking,” and how the food served in the university cafeteria could not compare to home-cooked meals. When asked to participate in a UVic survey on how to improve the quality of students’ dining experiences, I encouraged my non-Muslim friends to suggest that UVic add Halal menu options to ensure that food (especially meat) would be accessible to Muslim students. The food I ate in the cafeteria was not satisfying, familiar, nor Halal. Consequently, I grew resentful because I would second-guess if a meal was permissible and would often be left hungry. I counted down the days before I returned home because I knew I would not have to concern myself with whether the food I consumed was Halal, tasty, or nutritious.

Upon moving off-campus, I started cooking for myself for the first time. My mother supplied me with all of the necessary spices and aromatics to prepare Bengali recipes. This gift made me think seriously about the importance of learning how to cook Bengali dishes and the significance of having access to Halal food. As I learned about staple ingredients and cooking techniques from my mother, I also thought about how this practice enabled me to sustain a meaningful sociocultural connection to my family, despite our physical separation. In videocalls with my mother, I learned her recipes while we updated each other about our lives. Since we lived one province apart, these videocalls allowed me to bond with my mother while also learning how to prepare my favourite meals. Furthermore, the practice of preparing and consuming Halal food made me realize how detrimental the lack of access to culturally appropriate food was for my physical, mental, and spiritual health, even if for short periods of time. Ultimately, these experiences made me determined to both understand and articulate Muslim immigrant women’s relationships with food after relocating to Canada.

Cultural Connections to Food

Scholarship has shown that immigrants rely on food as a way to maintain critical connections to their cultural identity and well-being (Locher et al., 2005, p. 275; Power, 2008, p. 95; Wright et al., 2021b, p. 637). Prior research has revealed that food can bring comfort during times of psychological stress, especially if an individual feels isolated from their surrounding community (Locher et al., 2005, p. 74; Wright et al., 2021b, p. 638). “Foodways,” a term that refers to the preparation, distribution, and consumption of cultural food, influence how immigrants perceive and define their cultural realities as well as forge connections between past and present regional and religious identities (Abarca & Colby, 2016, p. 4; Ishak et al., 2012, p. 360; Wright et al., 2021b, p. 649). As such, cultural food preparation functions as both a method for and indicator

of traditional food knowledge transmission and communication (Wright et al., 2021a, p. 706). Cultural food practices have been found to help immigrants connect to familial and community networks as well as gain knowledge of cultural and historical traditions; therefore, cultural foodways have been associated with strengthening immigrant sociocultural ties, well-being, and perceptions of identity (Ishak et al., 2012, p. 361; Wright et al., 2021a, pp. 702, 706).

Minority groups that wish to maintain their unique identities within a dominant culture often rely on traditional food practices to sustain critical connections within their communities. For example, women from rice-cultivating Gullah communities³ used their cultural foodways to reinforce “African-derived cultural practices that stress motherhood, self-reliance and autonomy, extended family, and community-centered networks” (Beoku-Betts, 1995, p. 550). Gullah women accentuate their culture through their food preparation methods, including through the ingredients and seasonings used, types of food grown, and cooking techniques employed (p. 547). Despite similarities with cultural foodways practised by other communities, Vanessa Buck, a Gullah woman, observed how “the ingredients may be a little different [but] the taste is definitely different” (p. 547). These subtle differences help the Gullah community to resist dominant cultural practices (p. 547). Immigrant communities from cultural minority backgrounds, such as the Bengali and Egyptian participants in this study, similarly use cultural spaces to share, transmit, and maintain cultural food knowledge.

As the reviewed literature demonstrates, cultural minority communities use traditional foodways to retain cultural connections and give cultural definition to familial and communal roles. Indeed, the act of food preparation and consumption has become socially analogous to womanhood in many societies (Beoku-Betts, 1995, p. 552; Niewiadomska-Flis, 2011, p. 1). Since food can be considered a source of connection and care that often evokes loving memories, it is frequently associated with characteristics typically attributed to a gender identity perceived to be feminine, such as expressions of “empathy and emotionality” (p. 2). As such, women play a crucial role in food preparation processes and the transfer of traditional food knowledge. Domestic areas over which women have historically exercised control enable expressions of agency. Through cooking, women can develop interpersonal relationships with other women, with their families, and with their communities (Beoku-Betts, 1995, p. 551). Women often manage these relationships through community networks and everyday practices (p. 550). Within spaces traditionally occupied by women, food preparation is often intimate and nostalgic, which potentiates powerful memories of bonding (Locher et al., 2005, p. 282). Cultural food sharing is also associated with positive emotions: both sharing and receiving food have been found to generate positive emotions and memories, which may come to symbolize the presence of love and care within a relationship (Locher et al., 2005, p. 281; Wright et al., 2021a, p. 708).

Cultural food insecurity, or a lack of access to traditional food, may limit the ability of recent immigrants to Canada to engage meaningfully with their culture (Briones Alonso et al., 2018, p. 114; Power, 2008, p. 95; Wright et al., 2021a, p. 707). Individuals who experience cultural food insecurity cannot anticipate where or when they will regain access to traditional food, either due to the poor quality or limited quantity of such food (Coates et al., 2006, pp. 1439S, 1442S). Relocating to a new country may cause culture shock and acculturative stress, and immigrants who cannot engage in their cultural food practices may feel culturally dislocated and isolated (Coates et al., 2006, 1445S; Locher et al., 2005, p. 281; Wright et al., 2021a, pp. 707, 708; 2021b, p. 638).

³ The term “Gullah” refers to communities descended from African slaves that now reside in the coastal regions of the Sea Islands, Georgia, and South Carolina in the U.S. (see Beoku-Betts, 1995).

For example, many international students attending American universities reported experiencing cultural food barriers that impacted their well-being (Wright et al., 2021b, p. 636). Many students attributed their experiences of cultural food insecurity to the unavailability or unaffordability of culturally appropriate food (p. 646). These barriers often caused discomfort, exhaustion, and unhappiness. One student shared how negative emotions often made them disinterested “in eating at all,” while a second student described how they were limited to purchasing “the cheapest” food they could find (p. 647). Even students who felt mentally prepared to cope with navigating an unfamiliar culture found their lack of access to culturally appropriate food stress-inducing.

When religion structures dietary choices and habits, immigrants to Canada may experience another form of food insecurity (Wright et al., 2021b, p. 650). For practicing Muslims, vetting and consuming Halal food is a critical part of their religion. While certain food products may contain only Halal ingredients, most restaurants, food vendors, and food manufacturers do not explicitly state whether the food provided is Halal. This lack of information limits Muslim consumers’ access to permissible food in Canada. Indeed, Wright et al. (2021b) found that many Muslim students enrolled in American universities experienced anxiety due to their limited access to Halal food (p. 650). Elnoor, a Muslim international student, described how complicated it was to search for Halal food. When shopping, Elnoor had to “go through all the ingredients and see if there is something that I cannot eat” (p. 650), which made the process of finding food arduous and stressful.

Extrapolating from the findings of the reviewed literature, similar perspectives may also influence how Muslim immigrants in Canada perceive cultural foodways, food (in)security, and cultural identities. To my knowledge, there have been few, if any, studies that explore how religion, gender, and cultural disconnect influence perceptions of food and culture among immigrant Muslim women in Canada. This study documents how two immigrant Muslim women perceive their relationship with cultural food, how they transfer their food knowledge, and how they maintain their cultural identity within a Canadian cultural context.

Methodology

Sampling, Recruitment, and Data Collection Methods

This project was initially undertaken as part of a required qualitative research methods course in sociology at the University of Victoria, which provided course-based research ethics approval (Protocol #20-0397). This course stipulated the inclusion of a maximum of three research participants, a maximum of 45 minutes to conduct interviews (either in-person or over Zoom), and a focus on low-risk topics and participant populations. Researchers were permitted to interview participants they already knew. Moreover, all participants had to fulfill the criteria for minimal risk according to Tri-Council Policy. Due to these restrictions, I came up with specific questions related to the topics of food, cultural identity, and well-being, then recruited participants who I intuited could address these topics. My goal for this article was not only to contribute to an observed gap in literature but also to empower the voices of women who are dear to me. Prior to undertaking the interview process, I recognized that pre-existing relationships with participants have the potential to introduce a new and unequal power dynamic between the researcher and participant (Richie et al., 2014, p. 124). However, my familiarity with the participants assured me that I could centre their voices in a respectful and meaningful way. Operating within the parameters established by this course project, this research sought to understand the experiences of immigrant

Muslim women—particularly those who have children, are responsible for household care, and have lived in smaller Canadian towns. After accepting my invitation to take part in this study, both participants expressed their gratitude for the opportunity to share their experiences in this article—a sentiment that I share.

Ethics

Many immigrants sacrifice both familial and cultural resources, the loss of which may result in feelings of longing and disconnect after arriving in Canada. Despite the participants' connection to their home countries exceeding my own, I intuited that posing questions that might prompt participants to reflect on how their lives have changed could cause strong emotional responses, especially if asked to detail the life changes they have experienced since immigrating to Canada.

The participants chose to be interviewed in their homes over the Zoom video-conferencing platform. Both participants were informed that they could take breaks whenever they wished, that they were not required to answer questions, and that they were free to withdraw their consent at any time. The participants provided voluntary and informed consent. Prior to conducting interviews, protocols related to consent forms and data collection were discussed so that participants understood the purpose of the research project. To maintain their confidentiality, pseudonyms were used, and only demographic characteristics (such as occupation) were included in the transcript. Any information about the participants known prior to the interviews was excluded to maintain confidentiality and to respect the information participants chose to disclose. Identifying their occupations as well as country of origin was undertaken to contextualize the roles and responsibilities of each participant, including what cultural food they tend to prepare, how much time they typically allocate to food preparation, and the significance of cultural foodways to their lives.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Upon completing participant interviews, the audio-recordings of the interviews were manually transcribed verbatim. One participant spoke both Bengali and English during the interview, so her comments were translated and transcribed in italicized Romanized English. During the process of translation, I interpolated the intended meaning of each statement for greater accuracy and authenticity. Thematic analysis and coding are common practices used in qualitative research to identify prevalent themes among the respondents' answers (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82; Ritchie et al., 2014, p. 160; Wright et al., 2021b, p. 642), and I have adapted these methods for this project. The transcribed interviews were reviewed and analyzed multiple times, so that I could familiarize myself with the data and develop codes to identify thematic connections between culturally specific food and immigrant Muslims' experiences in Canada (Abarca & Colby, 2016, p. 2). Specific quotations from the transcripts were highlighted and organized into a chart to illustrate topics that recurred frequently during the interviewing process. I practised ongoing reflexivity by re-reading the transcripts to see if my interpretations of the participants' responses remained similar. If my understandings were consistent, I organized the participants' comments into themes and subthemes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83).

I also used a transnational feminist framework to analyze the participants' answers. As a theoretical perspective, transnationalism emphasizes immigrants' connections to their home country to suggest that these connections affect their current experiences (Salami et al., 2020, p. 745). Geographic boundaries are also critical in determining social relations and social location: transnational feminists have argued that gender plays a paramount role in affecting immigrants' lives, actions, and perceptions of their experiences (Pessar & Mahler 2003, p. 816; Salami et al., 2020, p. 745). As such, this framework incorporates the concept of intersectionality in which various social locators alongside gender, such as race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and nationality, contribute to immigrants' experiences in their home country and the country to which they have immigrated. Thus, a transnational feminist perspective proved particularly well-suited to this project, which studies how immigrant Muslim women navigate their experiences with cultural food in Canada.

Mariam and Raima

Mariam, the first participant whom I interviewed on October 23, 2022, is an Egyptian woman in her 50s who immigrated from Saudi Arabia to Canada in 2008 with her two daughters and son. Although she is Egyptian, Mariam stated that she started the process of immigrating to Canada from Saudi Arabia because it was much easier. Her family moved to London, Ontario, in 2008 but moved back and forth between Saudi Arabia and Canada before permanently settling in Canada in 2011. She works full-time as a sonographer and mother, navigating her responsibilities in healthcare while raising her children in the Islamic faith and performing household duties, such as cleaning, shopping, and cooking. As a Muslim, Mariam looks for Halal food, specifically Halal meat, and tries to avoid any non-Halal food. Living in London, a large city populated by many Muslims, made this dietary choice easy for Mariam to follow. However, Mariam moved with her children to a small town in Alberta in the late 2010s and had to travel to the nearest city to access Halal food and Arabic spices. After moving to the same city to which she had traveled for these food resources, Mariam had an easier time obtaining Halal spices as well as reconnecting with local Muslim and Egyptian communities.

Raima, the second participant whom I interviewed on October 25, 2022, is a Bengali woman in her 40s who immigrated to Toronto from Bangladesh in 2005 with her husband and daughter. Her family moved to Calgary in 2008, then moved to a smaller town in Alberta in 2018. In the interim, Raima had another daughter and a son. While living in larger cities, Raima often found Bengali grocery stores that sold Halal meat and Bengali spices and vegetables. After moving to a small town, however, Raima would have to travel 2 hours to purchase culturally appropriate food. Since she did not want her food needs to be the only reason for travelling, she would often commute to the city during Islamic holidays (such as Eid) to visit friends or for day trips. Her family journeyed to the city every 2 to 3 months to buy ingredients in bulk (such as Halal meat). Raima works as a full-time mother and spends most of her day looking after her children: she oversees housework, drives her children to and from school, teaches her family about Islam, purchases culturally appropriate food (if available), and cooks curries, *bhajis* (fried vegetables), and other meals for her family. Raima mentioned that she does not particularly enjoy cooking but chooses to dedicate a significant amount of time to preparing nutritious meals for her family.

Stories Shared by Mariam and Raima

This study's findings are organized into four sections connected to the four prevalent themes that emerged from the participants' responses. These themes focus on how the participants navigate time and overlapping responsibilities, their perceptions of cultural food availability, the relationship between cultural food and cultural identity, and the relationship between cultural food practices and social connection to the past, present, and future.

Navigating Time

Women who are responsible for food preparation spend significant amounts of time navigating multiple commitments so that they can engage in cultural food practices. Women must negotiate their time to incorporate traditional food-making practices into their daily lives, especially when also accommodating familial and workplace demands (Beoku-Betts, 1995, p. 548). For instance, Mariam's responsibilities as a sonographer and as a parent often made it difficult for her to "prepare any meals in regular ways. Usually, I prefer to prepare [food] in my weekends; otherwise, I have to go to the fast food as much as I can, whenever it's in the middle of the week." Since Mariam is both a full-time employee and the primary caretaker of her children, she tries to ask her children for help with household chores and with cooking, sometimes relying on "one of them at least every time to help me, but not in a constant way." Further, since Egyptian food often takes "a lot of kind of preparation," Mariam dedicates her days off to making food that she can share with her children, negotiating her many commitments to prioritize her relationships and maintain her culture.

In keeping with Mariam's dedication to her children's well-being, Raima expressed how she spends a lot of time raising and caring for her children because, to her, that is her most important role: "*Whatever housework I have, taking care of my children is the most important, regardless of how old they are, and then I do other housework.*" Raima prioritizes tasks related to ensuring her children's well-being, such as food preparation and getting her children ready for the day, before committing her time to performing other household duties, such as cleaning the house. Although Raima spends time inside doing housework, she also drives her children to and from school, and shops for groceries and other necessities. She manages these tasks alongside her food preparation responsibilities and recounted how meal preparation can be laborious:

Food preparation happens in the morning: you have breakfast, you'll have lunch, you'll have dinner, and everyone is a different age. My husband finishes work at a certain time, my children finish their classes at a certain time, school starts at a certain time, but everyone will have breakfast and leave before 8 a.m. It takes about 15 to 20 minutes, or half an hour, to make breakfast. For the kind of breakfasts that we eat, we do have the ingredients that we will need, and I can quickly make it before everyone has to leave the house. And when I have time later in the day [I'll cook again], maybe around noon, because everyone will come home around 3 or 4 p.m., but my husband will come home later, and he takes a lunch—I have to prepare that. Like today, I'll make two different kinds of curry, one fish or meat curry, and one vegetable curry, and I do manage [the time]. Because it takes 2 hours to prepare and cook, but if I don't need to prepare ingredients, it can take 1 hour only.

These responsibilities require Raima to make strategic decisions concerning the well-being of her children and husband. Like Mariam, Raima expresses her love by preparing food for her family. Despite the repetitive and time-consuming nature of this task (alongside her many other responsibilities), Raima is able to share her cultural practices while meeting her children’s dietary needs. Raima tries to feed her family fresh meals every day; however, due to her daily commitments, she does not “*cook every day because [our family] doesn’t eat it all in one day.*” Moreover, she identifies how “*the weather is cold [in Canada] compared to Bangladesh; that’s why we don’t have to cook every day, no other reason,*” which suggests that cooking in Bangladesh might have been laborious but, because Raima can store food for longer in Canada’s colder climate, she does not have to spend too much time cooking. Raima often preserves perishable ingredients (such as meat) in a deep freezer and stores large meals in the fridge, so that she can engage in other activities. For Raima and Mariam, having access to ingredients commonly used in their cultural food makes it easier for them to prepare meals. While new cultural practices and unfamiliar food have the potential to either enhance or diminish extant cultural practices, for Raima and Mariam, incorporating new cultural practices allow them to learn new recipes and adopt different eating habits to manage their time more efficiently. Ultimately, Raima’s and Mariam’s perception of their cultural identity did not change significantly because they had less time to prepare meals or because they had to rely on other sources of food to take care of their families.

Perceptions of Cultural Food Availability

Lack of access to culturally appropriate food often impacts the ability of immigrants to engage with traditional food practices. Participation in food preparation, sharing, and consumption is restricted when access to cultural food is limited, which may negatively affect well-being (Wright et al., 2021a, p. 710). In describing their practice of eating Halal food, Raima and Mariam similarly recounted how they strategize their food purchases around this dietary choice. When Raima first moved to Toronto, she noted that “*there were already Bengali grocery stores, two or three, that had Halal meat, our vegetables, our fruits, whether frozen or fresh, we had it, so we didn’t struggle.*” I had presumed that Raima’s access to culturally appropriate food in Canada would be limited compared to its availability in Bangladesh, but Raima described her family’s good fortune:

We are really lucky, because we came to Canada after other Muslims already came here, after other Bengali people came here—even if none of our relatives, even if our brothers, sisters, siblings, not from my side or my husband’s side [came].

The presence of Bengali immigrants who had already moved to Canada made accessing culturally appropriate Halal food relatively easy, which eased Raima’s discomfort about being the only family member to move so far away from Bangladesh.

Mariam expressed a similar sentiment when she described how she usually went “to the Arabic shops specifically for the meat, or chicken, or any kind of Halal food, and, also, for the spices.” Often, she found spices “much easier in the Arabic stores, and you will suffer a lot to find them in the Superstores or markets or whatever.” Furthermore, Mariam described how the presence of Arab people in London, Ontario, made Canada seem “mostly welcoming for the immigrants,” which made her feel like she was back in Egypt: “Arabic culture was available there, a lot of mosques available there, a lot of Arabic shops providing Halal food and providing almost the

whole culture—as if you are in the Middle East in your country.” Both Raima and Mariam expressed how their perceptions about food were less concerned with availability and food security because they were able to adapt to their location and find food in the cities in which they lived. Finding ingredients from culturally specific businesses helped to sustain their cultural identity.

However, Raima and Mariam went on to share their experiences of not having access to culturally appropriate food when they lived in rural Canadian communities. After moving to a rural town, Mariam felt that she was “roaming around to find any Halal food—it was not available.” Her sense of community diminished as she struggled to find anyone from her culture and religion, describing how “there is no mosque [in this town], there is no [pauses] any possibility to find out your culture or to interact with anyone of your community.” This statement captured the distress that Mariam felt after moving to the small town, which was only remedied after moving to a larger city a few years later and finding Egyptian and Muslim communities with which to interact.

In these instances, the shared realization that they could not find nor eat the same food as back home was a source of sadness for both participants. However, Raima articulated how she considered this circumstance to be a part of Allah’s plan:

Now if I think about Bangladesh instead of here, then my life becomes difficult, right? I can’t think things like that because my family is here, so I have to think about here; otherwise, I will be sad. And my habit, wherever I live, wherever Allah puts me, because we believe in Allah, because we believe in fate then wherever Allah puts me, I will try to adjust. I always try to live this way, then people can always be happy, right?

This religious sentiment is significant because, according to Raima, Allah would not have chosen this life path for her with malicious intent. This outlook is reflected in Coates et al.’s (2006) study, in which Muslim women’s trust in “Allah’s will” was found to alleviate anxieties about food accessibility (p. 1446S). In Islam, relying on Allah’s guidance provides strength and hope to immigrant Muslim women who might not otherwise have any community to turn to for support. Despite Mariam’s struggle with living in a rural town with no mosque, she still found comfort in her knowledge that eventually Allah would connect her with people from her culture and religion. Similarly, Raima chose to focus on how Allah chose this path for her, how her children and her husband were here, and how she was responsible for taking care of them. Any anxiety, fear, or sadness they might feel, either when they first immigrated or now, is soothed by their belief that Allah will protect them.

Perceptions of Cultural Identity

Both Raima and Mariam described how, ultimately, their lack of access to certain cultural food did not have an adverse impact on their cultural identity. Mariam and Raima both found many methods to mitigate potential feelings of alienation from their culture, such as driving to the nearest neighbouring city, purchasing ingredients that were not specifically from their culture, relying on their immediate family for support, and often praying to Allah. Mariam described how she and other Egyptian immigrants adapted to their new circumstances, revealing a deep resilience that is not always articulated out loud:

In my opinion, it doesn't matter too much, especially for the Egyptian people, we can accommodate any culture, we can find our needs through any available groceries or available vegetables or whatever. I don't feel that, specifically, the Egyptians, they are not suffering too much to find their needs in any other community.

A lack of access to cultural food was found to negatively impact the children of immigrants, who reported feeling alienated from the cultural traditions of their ancestors (Wright et al., 2021b, p. 708). The participants in this study, however, described how they chose to adapt to, rather than dwell on, their emigration. Despite having limited access to the ingredients required to prepare their cultural food, their ability to make use of available ingredients, combined with their existing cultural food knowledge, enabled Raima and Mariam to continue practising and engaging in their cultural foodways. This finding suggests that strong cultural foundations forged while living in their home country likely contributed to a stable sense of cultural identity. For example, taking pride in their cultural and religious background, or developing a fundamental connection to their home country and culture while growing up, may have offset potential concerns about their lack of community or access to cultural food resources. Indeed, Raima underscored the inextricability of cultural identity to food practice when she described how food preparation reaffirmed her cultural identity:

Because I am Bangladeshi, no matter if I cook food like an Indian, the taste, the smell, the flavour, it will never taste like an Indian person's food because I am Bengali, my cooking style, perhaps because Allah made me this way.

Raima's statement suggests that even if she uses Indian spices or cooks a meal using an Indian recipe, the food she makes will always taste as if made by her: a Bengali woman. Her comment reveals how her culture is expressed through the food she prepares; when she cooks, she will not erase the history of that food's culture, but the food is ultimately going to be Bengali as well.

Transmission of Traditional Cultural Food Knowledge

Sharing cultural food knowledge is paramount to cultural foodways. Cultural food sharing cultivates positive emotions and, among second-generation American university students, the act of sharing and receiving food was found to help maintain a sense of cultural connection and communion with others (Wright et al, 2021a, p. 708). The transmission of traditional food knowledge is also pertinent to sustaining the strong cultural relationships and practices that Muslim immigrant women living in Canada often learn through community networks (Beoku-Betts, 1995, p. 550). For instance, Raima shared a story about learning to cook by watching her mother (see Figure 1):

Figure 1

Homemade roti—a flatbread made from flour, oil, and water.



Note: Nawar Rodyna, S. (2023). [Photograph of rotis]. Photo by Raima.

One time I was making roti and then she said, “Tumi banaite paro?” (“Are you able to make this?”) [with a teasing lilt]. Then “Tumi fry korba?” (“Are you going to fry it?”) [in a teasing tone] “Then I would.”

This story illustrates the close relationship Raima had with her mother, which emphasizes the significance of having a sense of connection with family members who share the same cultural background. Raima described how traditional food knowledge transfer occurred through her mother’s cooking, the interactions Raima had with others, and her continued engagement with the practice of preparing traditional cultural food:

If I liked a food from someone else, I would ask them. Some people taught me well, some people taught me easily, some people were difficult to learn from. I experimented and practised over and over again. I didn’t learn from any school or cooking institute, because cooking isn’t even one of my favourite things to do, but I have to eat, so if it tastes good then I’ll feel good. That’s it, just like that!

Raima’s reflection on her cooking practices reveals how she embraces innovative methods despite her lack of training and adopts a casual and pragmatic approach to cooking. Rather than dwelling on how cooking is laborious, especially since she does not typically enjoy cooking, Raima learned to prepare delicious meals so that she could enjoy her hard work.

In contrast to Raima, who attributed the continuance of cultural foodways to both familial and communal knowledge transmission, Mariam enriched her cultural food practices through forging connections with local and virtual community networks. Mariam described how, after moving to the city in which she currently lives, she found an Egyptian community with whom she could connect and tasted the “kind of Egyptian foods that I never even taste them in Egypt, and I learned these kinds of foods from them.” Mariam went on to note how many of the cultural food practices she learned while living in Cairo differed from how people “used to do them in the villages”—even the appliances, like “special kind of ovens, the ovens for the farmers,” differed from the appliances she had access to when making Egyptian food. Cultural spaces (such as the local mosque) and online communication platforms (such as WhatsApp and Facebook) gave Mariam and members of her community “an opportunity to know each other much better and much easier than any way.” She recounted learning specific Egyptian recipes like *roz mamar* (baked rice with beef and cream), *raahdob* (Egyptian sweetbread made from wheat flour), and *koshary* (see Figure 2). Mariam also

Figure 2

Homemade koshary—a dish made with rice, macaroni, and lentils accompanied by a garlic sauce as well as a spicy tomato sauce.



Note: Nawar Rodyna, S. (2023).
[Photograph of koshary]. Photo by Mariam.

described how she is “usually depending on one of my friends who is doing these kind of food” to provide her with the ingredients, such as a specific “paste for *ta’ameya* (Egyptian falafel).” For Mariam, community relationships are crucial when navigating a full-time job and other household responsibilities—a finding that corroborates Beoku-Betts’s (1995) assertion that women who want to uphold their cultural food practices will find ways to “manipulate time constraints” to do so (p. 549).

Their experiences serve as the basis for Raima’s and Mariam’s own desire to share their culture with others, particularly with their children. Raima shared that her children often preferred chocolate and cake to Bengali desserts, since the latter had a “*different type of taste, and even if my one daughter likes it, my son and my other daughter won’t even touch it.*” In keeping with Raima, Mariam sorrowfully expressed her regret that her children “are not connected to [pauses] either for food, either for community. They don’t know Egypt; they don’t have any idea about Egypt. This is my only regret in all of this journey.” Mariam then went on to disclose that she continues to find ways to share her culture with her children by preparing Egyptian food in the hope that they will “feel the same feelings that I got when I am eating these kinds of foods.” Her remark reflects the pride she feels about being Egyptian, and her desire to share her love of cultural food with the people who mean the most to her.

Further, Mariam mentioned her unwavering efforts to share her cultural foodways with her Muslim community: “We are trying, for example, in *Eid*, or any gathering, we are trying to make our food ... we are still very proud, and very tempted, and determined to make this food.” When asked about how she felt when sharing traditional cultural food with individuals from different cultures, Raima described feeling joy:

[W]hen people eat, then I am really happy, and I’ve fed every kind of family ... I always want to honour them when I feed them, for them to be happy, for them to eat with happiness, and I want them to eat!

All of these cultural food practices embed Raima and Mariam in their social networks and cultural identity. Their reflections on how they transmit and receive knowledge of cultural food highlight the importance of their cultural identity and sharing food with others, especially their children, which enabled both participants to transfer cultural norms to ensure a continuation of their history (Wright et al., 2021, p. 706). Additionally, the information shared by participants in this study revealed how sharing food with others produces genuine feelings of happiness—a practice that Raima and Mariam are determined to continue.

Reflections

This study sought to understand the relationship between cultural foodways, identity, and well-being among Muslim immigrant women living in Canada. Using a transnational feminist framework to understand how gender, religion, and culture create complex experiences for immigrant Muslim women, this study documented important themes related to how these women perceive their cultural identity, how foodways and food security impacted their lives, how they navigated these challenges despite limited time and resources, and how they gave and received mutual support to sustain their identity and engage in the transfer of food knowledge. Raima’s and Mariam’s interactions with others, both within and outside of their cultural communities, illuminate how cultural food sharing is a significant source of well-being, and how their continued

efforts to share their cultural foodways with their family and community affirms their cultural identities as Bengali and Egyptian women, respectively. Furthermore, Islamic religious practices enabled both participants to foster and sustain relationships with members of the religion and to access cultural food that might otherwise have been unavailable. Lastly, their engagement in cultural foodways situated their identities in the present while connecting them to their cultural histories, which contributed to a shared sense of social belonging. These stories may not reflect the experiences of others, but they shed greater light on how we navigate our cultural identity and meaningfully engage in foodways.

This research was particularly important to me because of my own experiences accessing cultural or Halal food, and my limited interactions with members of my community. I approached this topic from a place of frustration and centred many of my questions around my perception of an absence. I do not have a close relationship with many members of my family who live in Bangladesh, since I struggle with the language and do not have strong memories of the culture into which I was born. Similarly, I rarely interact with other Muslims and therefore feel disconnected from what I consider to be among the most significant parts of my identity. When I conducted this research, I wanted to illustrate the experiences of women whom I presumed would share the same perspective. My experiences made me cautious, as I worried deeply that my questions might cause Raima and Mariam to relive what I assumed would be distressing recollections of immigrating to Canada. As I began my interviews, both participants showed enthusiasm towards helping me, answering my questions thoroughly, and teaching me more than they could ever know. I learned about their sacrifices in uprooting themselves from their families, and I imagined they must have felt a deeper sense of grief than I had for losing their communities and having to assimilate to the dominant culture in Canada. By speaking to them, however, I became cognizant of their perseverance and resilience. These qualities are rooted in their approach to life in Canada, and they use them to find gratitude in their new lives.

I felt that I was able to capture the many nuances of our perspectives and experiences as immigrant Muslim women despite the limitations of my course assignment and ethics approval. The experiences of Mariam and Raima have taught me three lessons: first, there is pride to be felt in the culture and religion that I do know, and that the cultural ingredients and Bengali food knowledge that I have access to are worth celebrating. Second, our interpersonal relationships can transcend the physical boundaries that separate us, as these women have demonstrated that engaging in foodways helps them to maintain and even build new connections with their friends, family, and community networks. Third, Mariam and Raima have shared the profundity of gratitude and determination, both of which inspire them to continue searching for, making, and sharing their wonderful food.

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