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# Being Moroccan abroad. Objects and culinary practices in women subjectivation

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**Abstract:** The definition of the self is a complex process which unfolds in everyday life though the use of objects and the performance of practices. Among others, food and culinary objects and practices contribute to the material foundation of subjectivation. Starting from De Certeau's analysis of everyday life (1984) and adopting Warnier's praxeological approach to subjectivation, our article aims at studying how two Moroccan women living in Milan's suburbs *make* themselves through the materiality of food and related practices in a migration context. They move in peculiar ways among the constraints imposed both by the new local context and the country of origin food cultures. Through everyday food practices, women define a proper Moroccan "style" (Gell, 1998) made of diverse life stories as well as of an embodied collective memory anchored to materiality; they witness of different manners of being Moroccan, and of being it abroad.

**Keywords:** Food, migration, material culture, Morocco, Italy, subjectivation

## Introduction

Each person relates to a scattered set of material objects that witness his or her personal life history and everyday life and that contribute to shape his or her own subjectivity[1]. Starting from this theoretical assumption, the aim of this article is to analyze the culinary practices of two Moroccan women living in Sesto San Giovanni, a town located in Milan hinterland[2], as means to define their self. We will devote the central part of this work to the ethnographic data collected during doctoral research, first introducing some theoretical reflections that will be useful to a further reworking of the material presented in a comparative perspective.

A subject for Warnier (2005) – and Mauss (1936), whom he refers to in his text – not only has a body, he also *is* a body, made of embodied objects and practices. Subjectivity is fulfilled through material culture, whether it consists of objects or gestures, actions and technologies. The subject is dynamically defined through the practices of everyday life that he or she puts in place, incorporating instruments of his or her own universe of reference and action, and giving them a specific and particular meaning, whether verbalized or not.

This regime of subjectivation can be guided and governed (Foucault, 1976) by the actions of social structures (Bourdieu, 2003), which the same "culture" of a population or group can be part of (whether declared or assigned). These structures seem to leave little room for one's own agency and, even when they allow a resistance, they define ways and spaces into which it can be worked out. However, the outcome of these processes cannot always be predicted and governed. The 'practice of everyday life' (De Certeau, 1984), the 'art of making', although exerted within the constraints imposed by a dictated order, gives voice to creativity, to strategies

1 The notion of subjectivity adopted here corresponds to a dynamic process of self-definition through bodily disciplines which let the incorporation of practices and objects deploy in the construction of the individual (Rosselin and Julien, 2009).

2 The origins of this city date back to the Roman Empire. Its history has been strongly marked by the industrialization process through which the country and especially the city of Milan went. Base of important industries, Sesto San Giovanni has received over the years substantial migration from other Italian regions and later from abroad. At the time of this research (2009-2012) the foreign population in the city corresponded to the 12.5% of the total number of inhabitants – about 80,000 – among which about 400 were Moroccan citizens. In more general terms, Moroccans arrivals date back to the late '70s.

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and tactics[3], often unpredictable and silent[4], putting in place a resistance that is acted in the same daily life of individuals. The first volume of the study of De Certeau and his colleagues focuses on the modes of operation and on the action patterns of a subject who is not specifically defined, who is rather seen as a faceless common hero, hidden behind the practices that the authors intend to analyze. These practices shape a know-how which 'passes from the unconsciousness of its practitioners to the reflection of non-practitioners without involving any individual subject' (De Certeau, 1984: 71). The second volume shows how the daily history is entangled to the existence of the subject, who practices 'a modest inventiveness, in ephemeral results, but whose subtle combination silently defines a *lifestyle*, circumscribes one's *own space*' (De Certeau et al., 1998: 213).

In this contribution, we will analyse the culinary practices and the life history of two women in particular among the informants of this study, in order to highlight how they build their own style of acting through their peculiar gestures. These two stories are not meant as representatives of generalized ways of being Moroccan abroad; indeed, their exemplariness derive from the fact that they showed dynamics which could be observed – even if shaped in different forms – in the stories and everyday life of other women. This methodological approach relies on the assumption that a given situation does not need to be representative in strict terms to be anthropologically pertinent (Fainzang, 1994).

Going back to De Certeau, he writes:

> [...] a North African living in Paris or Roubaix (France) insinuates into the system imposed on him by the construction of a low-income housing development or of the French language the ways of "dwelling" (in a house or a language) peculiar to his native Kabylia. He super-imposes them and, by that combination, creates for himself a space in which he can find ways of using the constraining order of the place or of the language. Without leaving the place where he has no choice but to live and which lays down its law for him, he establishes within it a degree of plurality and creativity. By an art of being in between, he draws unexpected results from his situation. (De Certeau, 1984: 30).

Among the practices of everyday life, the culinary ones are crucial for their ability to trigger the handling of raw materials, the organization of gestures, the combination of food, objects and procedures, the learning, changing and invention of dishes and preparation.

> With their high degree of ritualization and their strong affective investment, culinary activities are for many women of all ages a place of happiness, pleasure and discovery. Such life activities demand as much intelligence, imagination, and memory as those traditionally held as superior, such as music and weaving. (De Certeau et al., 1998: 151).

These practices fall within the semantic field of the concept of art, not only because they are able to define the self in an active manner, but also because they "enchant" thanks to the technology employed to perform them, fact which let them participate to a complex network of social relations (Gell, 1998): 'A food, a meal or a special dish can be thought of as an art object, a social nexus embedded within a culinary system, which is in itself a social system within a matrix of other interrellated social systems' (Adapon, 2008: 39). The selection of food products and tools made by the two women considered in this article is dictated by the desire to define and declare their cultural belonging or their social role, either within the family or in a more extended context. To do so, they rely on objects as units of style (Gell, 1998: 155), i.e. things which are classified and used according to shared style properties, defined in their turn as elements which express "culture", in a broader sense, and its values. Individual performances are thus 'constrained within strict parameters of stylistic coherence' and 'not associated with artistic identity, only with virtuosity' (Gell, 1998: 158).

The attempt to analyze the ethnographic material collected around food through considering the concept of style and its practical implementation in everyday life, stems not only from these theoretical assumptions, and from the awareness that style 'materializes a way of experiencing' (Geertz, 1983: 99), but also from the suggestions gathered from several people observed and interviewed. They confirmed that a supposed link to the Moroccan national territory was not enough to explain the character of authenticity attributed to some objects and culinary practices. This character needed to be coupled with a way of making and of make themselves following a particular style. While being aware of the action of socio-economic factors in the definition of one's

**3** De Certeau distinguishes them in these terms: the strategy is 'the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an "environment." A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as proper (propre) and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it (competitors, adversaries, "clienteles," "targets," or "objects" of research); the tactic is "a calculus which cannot count on a "proper" (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a border-line distinguishing the other as a visible totality. The place of a tactic belongs to the other.' (De Certeau, 1984: 19-20).

**4** De Certeau speaks of the 'murmurings' of the everyday practices (1984).

lifestyle (Bourdieu, 2001), we think that an analysis that approaches from a cultural point of view the dynamics in question is here more appropriate and insightful. The two life stories that follow show different ways to define and interpret the influence of a supposed "Moroccan style" on food practices, ways that lead to specific definitions of the self in everyday life.

## Bâhirah[5]

Bâhirah was born in 1979 in Oujda (Oriental region, near the border with Algeria), where she lived for about eleven years; she then moved with her family in Beni Mellal (Tadla-Azilal region, in central Morocco), where she met and married her husband who was living in Italy since 1990 and is now an Italian citizen. Bâhirah left for Italy in February 1998. Bâhirah lives today on the third floor of a social lodging house in the city center.

We contacted Bâhirah thanks to the intermediation of the Islamic center of the city. The first time we met, she received us in her house, and we could talk about her story of migration and her everyday life. Food and cooking practice appeared immediately to have a fundamental role in Bâhirah's life and that of her family (she has three children). Bâhirah cooks three times a day, for breakfast, lunch and dinner, and she does so for one of her daughter's medical needs (she suffers from diabetes mellitus type one), for the good nourishment of the whole family, and for what she calls a Moroccan habit:

> [...] for example Egyptians do not cook three times a day. Maybe today they cook, and they eat the same thing at lunch, at dinner, and the next day at lunch and dinner, you understand? They cook in huge quantities, and continue to heat up. We do not do it. I noticed this difference. Syria, too, I have a friend from Syria, she cooks in huge quantities, she heats and eats... We do not do it. Rarely, if anything is left, I heat it, maybe I'll serve it as a starter... [...]. It's important. So that... for them [the children] eating is always a good moment, because if you do the same things they get bored! [Recording, September 27, 2010]

Bâhirah chooses what to prepare responding to different factors, such as her daughters' (or her husband) requests:

> [...] she asked it to me yesterday, it's white rice... white rice without broth. I fry it in a little extra virgin oil, she likes it with a lot of salt! Although this is not good. If I use a cup of rice I add two cups of water, I make it dry, until seeds separate, and in the end I put some oil. She asked it to me yesterday, I told her "tomorrow, when you're alone, I'll do it". [Recording, September 27, 2010]

the presence of guests,

> In the evening, my nephew came suddenly, I just wanted to do something light, like pasta, but I had to make risotto with zucchini, and a cheese omelette [...]. [Recording, September 27, 2010]

the availability of time and the facility of controlling the amount of food ingested[6],

> B: [...] I often cook Italian stuff. For a matter of time! Because if I have to cook a *tajine*[7] I have to start doing it at five to eat at half past seven. [...] and also because... things like noodles, pasta... when girls eat them I'm sure they ate an appropriate portion, but when I do *tajine* ... [...] Usually when I make a *tajine* [...] I have to put a portion on each plate [...] to see what they eat. Because if we eat together into the pot[8], I don't know what they ate. So I want to know if they ate the portion that was good for them. Especially for her, because when I make some insulin I must know, since if she does not eat the right things she goes hypo[9]. [Recording, September 27, 2010]

food consumed by her daughters at school and in previous days.

> I was going to do some fish, because yesterday we ate meat, then we ate eggs, we ate cheese the other day, we haven't been eating fish from three or four days. I always try to change, always, during the week [...]. [Recording, September 27, 2010].

The care of others, especially of her children, and more specifically of the health of the child suffering from diabetes, is an important determinant of Bâhirah's culinary practices. The need to pay close attention to what

**5** Women's names employed here are aliases.

**6** Bâhirah must weigh the food that her daughter suffering from diabetes eats, so that she can control the quality and quantity of the aliments ingested and whether or not to give her insulin, following periodic measurements of blood glucose.

**7** Stew meat cooked with vegetables which can be prepared in various ways and with different ingredients, depending on the availability of food, or on the personal preferences and the regional origins of those who prepare it. The pots used to cook this dish can vary, usually they are made of earthenware, and they consists of a circular base and conical cover, but this shape can be different in some Moroccan regions. Cooking into this pot, called *tajine* itself too, needs a long time, since in order not to burn either the structure nor the content, it is necessary to use a low fire under it. Anyway, this dish can be prepared by Moroccan women in other pots, not specifically conceived for it, such as those commonly spread and made of stainless steel, or in pressure cookers.

**8** Often the main course of a Moroccan meal is placed in one big pot in the center of the table and eaten by family members who draw food using pieces of bread or by cutlery.

**9** Hypoglycemia, that is low blood sugar, a complication of diabetes mellitus type one, which, if not resolved, can cause severe effects.

her daughter consumes, causes Bâhirah always preferring to deal firsthand with meals' preparation, and even when she delegates any tasks to her husband, she gives him very precise indications of quantities and often prepares all that is possible in advance. Medical prescriptions, which are part of a knowledge that Bâhirah has acquired and has been expanding from the moment she discovered her daughter's illness, influence Bâhirah's food practices.

> [...] maybe we changed our habits a little bit, because before we ate as it happened, at one o'clock, two o'clock... maybe even at nine in the evening... but not now, now we have times to respect. At half past twelve we must have lunch, at half past seven, eight we must have dinner... because insulin should be done at the same time, you can not play... [Recording, September 27, 2010]

The same choice of the ingredients to be used is closely linked to Bâhirah's attempt to adhere to that knowledge, so that she often verifies through the Internet the properties of the ingredients she uses and whether they are appropriate for a person suffering from diabetes:

> It is good. It is called *batata ksbia* [a variety of tuber called potato Topinambur]. It's really good. I once heard that it is good for diabetics, and from that time on I started to use it, especially during cold season [...] in winter I use it a lot. [...] Apart from its shape, which is a bit uneasy to clean. It has the same shape of ginger, so you find a small one, a big one [...] you can not couple a big one with a small one, they must all be the same size, so that when you serve them in the pot they perform well. [Recording, September 27, 2010]

Ingredients are purchased in various places, it depends on what Bâhirah considers more convenient to buy in a place rather than another, and this leads travels to various supermarkets, shops or markets, as evidenced by this extract of conversation about buying vegetables:

> B: [...] maybe I do not need anything, but I go around the market, it is now part of my everyday life, to go around the market and maybe to find an offer.
> E: But you buy foodstuff or other things?
> B: Yes, vegetables, clothes if I find them, products to clean the house, that kind of stuff ...
> E: and in any stall or you have your owns?
> B: Where it is convenient, I look for convenience, now we must look for that! Maybe for vegetables I go to a Moroccan who knows me, who gives me good stuff, always at a good price, I go there, I do the shopping. [...] maybe even during the week I go in any other market, getting the groceries, I go around, I see, I have to calculate, both for the quality and for the price, [...] we are five at home, we consume a lot of vegetables. I like vegetables, not a day passes without vegetables, they must necessarily be there. And they're good for my child. [Recording, September 27, 2010]

Some basic ingredients used by Bâhirah come directly from Morocco through the intermediation of some bazaar[10] on Milan area or of Bâhirah's family members in Morocco, and they are olive oil, spices, garlic, honey, some sweets, some types of pasta, couscous, orange flower water, fresh coriander etc. As for the pots used for cooking, Bâhirah buys some of them in Italy, i.e. aluminum pans of various sizes and non-stick pans, while she purchased others in Morocco before migration or during holiday trips. Among objects bought in Morocco, we find the couscous pot, the pressure cooker, four different *tajine*, teapots and cups for tea, soup tureen and bowls for *harira*[11], two *gsa'a*[12], and a low pan called *al-miduna*[13], claimed as originally from Oujda,

> They call them "Oujda pans" everywhere in Morocco, because these are the originals. If you go to buy them somewhere else you find fake ones, you understand, those which come from Oujda are authentic, a friend of mine has a fake one, it is light and it makes things burn. This one is quite heavy. [Recording, September 27, 2010]

Bâhirah states that she cannot stand without these objects, and she remembers as very sad moments the days when some of them broke and needed to be replaced. She recognizes the possibility of cooking using other tools and methods, and she even claims that this is often the case in Morocco, where traditions are now rarely observed and often redefined. But she affirms that Moroccan people living abroad, like herself, try to 'cling' to Morocco [Fieldnotes, March 30, 2011], and therefore they do their best to respect the way to prepare food that they learned before leaving. On the contrary, in the country they left behind, changes are continuous and even the ways of cooking are now different from those practiced by Moroccans abroad. Bâhirah also says that she prefers the traditional ways of cooking than the use of kitchen appliances. She refers for example to hand kneading, practice that she learned from her mother and grandmother: 'Some movements [hand

**10** They often consist of Islamic meat shops which also sell other food or goods coming from some Arab countries or used in these countries even if produced elsewhere.

**11** Moroccan national soup, mainly consumed in the month of Ramadan. It can be prepared with a combination of various ingredients, while maintaining key elements such as – most often, though not necessarily all – mutton, chickpeas and lentils.

**12** Thick and big pots of terracotta which Bâhirah defines as "raw material" for her preparations. Inside them, as we will see, she kneads flour-based foods, but she also serves courses when they are consumed by drawing from a unique dish placed in the middle of the table.

**13** It derives from the word *medina*, which means city. It is used mainly for cooking *harsha*, a kind of bread made of large and small semolina, salt, sugar, butter, extra virgin olive oil and water.

kneading], you don't even know what they are of use for, but you do them because you saw your grandmother doing it [...].' [Recording, October 12, 2010]

Bâhirah prepares homemade Moroccan bread almost every day. It consists of a low loaf of different sizes, rather porous inside, made of flour, water, salt, sugar and yeast. Bread is an important element of the Moroccan culinary culture and of the national diet, since it accompanies many dishes, such as the *tajine*. 'When I am cooking something typically Moroccan, like the tajine or broth with meat, vegetables, you must have bread at home, otherwise you do not even make it!' [Recording, September 27, 2010]. The bread dough is kneaded into the *gsa'a*, 'there is no Moroccan house that hasn't got two or three of them...' [Recording, September 27, 2010]. Bâhirah's ones belonged to her mother, who has given them to her when she left for Italy. Flour and bran are sifted together and the mixture is placed in *gsa'a* making a fountain. The yeast is crumbled in the center hole of the fountain, and sugar is placed over it to fasten the rising. A tablespoon of salt is instead poured on a board of the fountain and Bâhirah will gradually draw it to mix in the dough, in order not to slow the rising. Dough working is quite rapid, at least in the way performed by Bâhirah, it is accompanied by the sound produced by crushing the mixture, and it continues until the latter reaches the consistency that Bâhirah considers appropriate, that is very soft, almost wet, and homogeneous. Bâhirah says that the mixture working is not finished until you 'feel with your fingers the dots' [Fieldnotes, February 8, 2011]. The rise will take place in two stages, a first time covering the whole dough for around twenty of minutes under a towel, then after having cut pieces to shape three loaves. After having worked each of the three loaves until they reach a thickness of about a centimeter and a half, Bâhirah pierce each one with a fork, making ordered holes. Each of the loaves is baked for about fifteen minutes[14], until the cooking makes surface quite dark.

Besides this traditional preparation, Bâhirah combines her cooking methods with new ingredients to prepare other recipes – read in books, magazines or websites or seen in television programs, both Moroccan and Italian, as shown in this excerpt:

> [...] Usually we eat little meat, for the girls it's hard to chew. So I make meatballs, in the Italian or in the Moroccan way, the Italian is with the cheese, breadcrumbs...
> E: and then you fry them?
> B: I put a little extra virgin olive oil, just a little, and I cook them... [...]. Sometimes I dip them in the sauce [...]. While in the Moroccan way, I chop the onion, I put some parsley, cilantro, and spices, pepper, *tahmira*, do you know it? The red one. Basically it is sun-dried pepper [...]. [Recording, September 27, 2010]

These culinary habits, practices and choices and the objects associated to them let Bâhirah define herself as adhering to a particular way of being Moroccan abroad, respecting a style that she finds authentic and that she aims to keep in spite of some constraints to its performance imposed by contextual factors. The next section of this article will focus on a second story of food habits which, together with this first, would let us make, afterwards, some analytic considerations in comparative terms.

## Luce

Luce is a woman of about forty-five years old, coming from the city of Rabat, the administrative capital of Morocco. Luce's first trip to Italy dates back to 1988, when she visited the city of Rome, Milan and Florence as a tourist. Her migration occurred in 2003, determined by her desire to build 'a new life' [Fieldnotes, September 15, 2010] far from her ex-husband, whom she divorced from. In Italy Luce met her current partner, with whom she was living at the time of our research.

We met Luce by chance, because she was working in the bakery located in a building next to the one where I lived. Luce undertook her work in the bakery at the opening of the same shop, in 2006, along with another woman. During the period when we first met, Luce was running the shop by herself, just partially helped by another girl. Luce describes her work at the bakery listing the many negative aspects that she finds there. First, the pace of work is exhausting and poorly paid, and equipment are not suitable: two entries in the oven allow only two baking trays entered simultaneously – the number of cooked products may increase with a bigger oven and the preparation would then result easier and faster –, there is no dough cutter machine, and this obliges her to do it by hand. Luce finds even other small accessories lacking, instruments that would make her work lighter, which therefore she provided by herself: this is the case of the plastic container in which she stores the tomato sauce, or of the two plastic tablespoons she uses with it – the first one is a ladle needed to pour sauce on pizza dough rolled out, the other one to spread

**14** Before putting them in the oven Bâhirah pronounces the expression *bismillah*, in the name of Allah, which is part of *basmala* ("in the name of Allah the Compassionate the Merciful"), the sentence which introduces each *sura* of the Quran and which is delivered in a variety of contexts by Muslims to express the awareness that any human action is performed in the name of the entity who created human beings. The *basmala* is also pronounces before each meal.

it on it –, or of some knives, or of the basket that she uses to put pastries at the counter:

> Many things are mine since we came here... they were missing! Even these are mine. You have to look for your comfort, even if others don't make you find it, because you work here, you want to work well, you look for your comfort, a minimum comfort. [Fieldnotes, October 22, 2010]

Luce has also brought from home a cup whose size she deems appropriate to cut out of rolled-up dough some small focaccias[15].

Luce told us several times about the difficulties she meets working in this laboratory and about the means by which she addressed them, which we personally witnessed by doing participant observation in the bakery before the morning opening, thus recording the preparation of the food sold. Luce arrives in the shop around five-thirty in the morning, and she organizes her work in a well-defined way: while the bakery does not produce bread – it sells some which is bought every morning from a wholesale supplier – some food items are prepared and cooked in the laboratory. The first task which Luce deals with in the shop kitchen is the kneading of the dough for savory food, made by kneading machine. She sets firstly six kilograms of pasta, then eventually another two and a half, according to the needs met during the morning or the day. Luce then makes croissants, immediately remarking a difference, which she judges negative, with the preparation of this food in Morocco: in Italy dough is never kneaded just before its use, it is rather bought frozen, unlike in the bakeries of her country of origin. When the dough is ready, Luce begins the preparation of salty foods: she stretches the dough, she lets it rest, she dresses or stuffs it, she puts foods in the oven set at the right temperature, she inverts the position of the trays inside the oven after part of the cooking, all this establishing a set of very specifically planned tasks, without excluding, however, the response to the needs that emerge progressively.

First, Luce deals with what she calls the 'tongs', i.e. small pizzas shaped in an elongated form. Tongs are dressed with different ingredients, according to what available at the time of preparation, in a way that Luce calls "improvised". No one taught Luce this preparation, which in her opinion is not even possible to learn, because it does not corresponds to a precise technique. In general, 'things come to your mind as you create them yourself, if you wish to, you invent them yourself' [Fieldnotes, October 22, 2010]. Luce's creativity is linked, as she affirms, to her conception of beauty: for example she cooks pizza – and focaccia – to be sold into portions, that is usually squared, in a round baking pan, rolling it up on the aluminum kitchen worktop until it reaches this shape. 'It's just as making a dress, you have to know how to take measurements' [fieldnotes, October 22, 2010]. She prefers this shape as she finds it more beautiful, 'you just do it as you want to see it, if you feel to make it beautiful, you make it beautiful!' [Fieldnotes, October 22, 2010]. For these reasons, Luce even carves with a knife three parallel oblique lines on another product made with bread dough rolled around a sausage, in order to improve its beauty.

Luce also prepares stuffed *calzoni*[16] to be sold at the counter of the bakery, and while doing it, she says that the quantity of ingredients that she puts inside is much greater than her employer wishes:

> I do make people eat! And my chief knows it, he laughs, and says: "Luce, diminish a bit!" But you know, these things... you have to say that it's the fate which wanted me to do these things, because I was doing them at home [in Morocco]! You learn how to make them from colleagues, and you have the time to do them there. I made them with *pâte feuilletée* [puff pastry], even mignon with *crevettes* [shrimps], béchamel... [Fieldnotes, October 22, 2010]

Even for Luce, the care of people – in this case not belonging to her family but known through her job – is implemented through food and through the way of preparing it appropriately. Luce says, for example, that she makes small pizzas especially for some workers working on the construction of a building just across the street where the bakery is, 'they maybe do not have enough time, they want these ones, immediately ready' [Fieldnotes, October 22, 2010]. Moreover, discourse about fate is recurrent within our conversations, a discourse which often describes and legitimates the life choices that Luce made as dictated by *al-maktub*, that which, for Muslims, is written and thus preordained for all creatures by Allah. Luce's considerations on fate are used to make sense of what is happening in her life, even of the sufferings she experienced. It is in the framework of this logic that Luce reads her employment in a bakery in Italy, one which is quite different from the role of teacher that she had in Morocco, but close to what she did at home when preparing every day flour-based food, also in that case, very often for other people:

**15** A flat Italian bread typically seasoned with herbs and olive oil, and eventually various vegetables and cheese. It differs from pizza basically as it is not spread with tomato sauce.

**16** A baked or fried Italian turnover of pizza dough filled with vegetables, meat, or cheese.

> You know why, because in Morocco a lot of people come without [warning]... [...] maybe a friend's passing by your house, she stops and knock without informing you, unlike here, where I have to call you... do you understand? These things are available in any home, even those who do not have enough to make these things, they have others, they have *rghifa*, *msemmen*[17], they make them with oil, as the focaccia... [Fieldnotes, October 22, 2010]

These discourses also witness of Luce's emotional attachment to Morocco. She often states that she misses the very same 'air' of her country of origin [fieldnotes, November 21, 2010] and that she plans to return there. In one of our meetings in her house, she showed me some pictures of her family that she keeps in a shoebox, in particular those taken in her country of origin, and she described the images we looked at with much nostalgia[18].

## Some considerations

The stories of Luce and Bâhirah and the narration of their daily culinary practices show how these women perform the cultural belonging to which they associate themselves in personal ways. What they share is that

> [...] the preparation of a meal furnishes that rare joy of producing something oneself, of fashioning a fragment of reality, of knowing the joys of a demiurgic miniaturization, all the while securing the gratitude of those who will consume it by way of pleasant and innocent seductions. (De Certeau et al., 1998: 158).

This pleasure leans to the memory of learned or witnessed practices, to a creative ingeniousness and to a programming mind. Bâhirah and Luce define themselves by means of the culinary practices they execute: they "take care of themselves" through the attention and commitment devoted to others and implemented in their daily food preparations. We can thus state that these practices become part of those 'technologies of the self' which Foucault describes as instruments that

> [...] permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality [Martin et al., 1988: 18].

The performativity of food practices on the definition of the self and of its intentionality toward others become manifest throughout the narrated stories. Joy Adapon writes:

> If we think in terms of food, confronting a meal can also be thought of as confronting a person. The meal presents a subset of the cook's culinary knowledge, and the food itself is the outcome of the cook's intentions to provide nourishment, flavour, hospitality, family warmth and, potentially, history, empowerment, and other kinds of intentionalities, depending on her relationship to the people she cooks for. (Adapon, 2008: 38)

Looking deeper in the stories of the two women, we observe that in the case of Bâhirah, the definition of the self through making takes the form of reflexivity focused on nutrition issues (Crenn, 2006) and on consequent exercise to improve and learn new culinary techniques. This know-how, also made of theoretical and practical skills concerning her daughter's disease and still related to food, is built through different sources: the practices learned within the household prior to departure or upon arrival in Italy, but also the new friends in Sesto San Giovanni, coming from different backgrounds, or books, television, radio and websites. The objects involved in this process, both as tools used and food products have a precise connotation, as they define Bâhirah as an "expert" Moroccan cook, proficient in the knowledge and practice related to the food culture of her country of origin. It thus appears that Bâhirah embodies the virtuosity theorized by Gell which manifests within an art, that in this context is the Moroccan cuisine and its creative variations, which enchant through acted technologies and social efficiency to which every successful dish – both in terms of taste and performative meanings – is functional. This virtuosity reproduces a style that allows a work or a practice to be referred to one or several wholes, or to larger works and practices sets.

Instead, Luce seems to embody the individual turn which Gell acknowledges in the definition of style, where 'collective' styles [...] correspond to the 'backgroud' against which 'style' (individual style that is) creates its individuating effect' (Gell, 1998: 159). For this woman, Moroccan style cannot be reproduced in Italy; indeed, she deems that its location is Morocco, a country where she longs to return to. The migration context imposes Luce some cultural constraints with which she has to deal by exerting her creativity. Whether she considers that her life story complies with the fulfillment of her destiny, Luce manages the difficulties she encounters through mobilizing diverse resources – material and moral ones – that she disposes of and/or gradually acquires. Building oneself, therefore, means to Luce to face constraints by surrounding herself with those objects which '[...] associated with particular

**17** Bread preparations.

**18** Please refer to David Parkin (1999) for a study on the role of objects brought with oneself during a migration dictated by violence and suffering conditions.

persons, extend that personhood beyond the individual's biological body' (Parkin, 1999: 303), thus making such task easier.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the analysis of these two life stories and in particular of the culinary daily practices that inhabit them and play and essential role in the very same definition of the self of the two women considered, results in a broader consideration on the dynamics of mutual influence between ordinary individual practices and the cultural, social and economic context in which they are exerted. In fact, the stories of these two women and the account of the food practices that they perform, show how the memory of their own personal life history, also made of embodied food habits, has to cope with some contextual complications which are of different order. Bâhirah needs to face the medical needs of her daughter as well as the general food requests of the members of her family while performing her food practices daily. Luce deals with the difficulties of her work environment and the sufferings deriving from her past experiences through adapting her food preparations to her needs and those of her customers. Moroccan culinary culture – meant in terms of personal memories and collective narrations – constitutes for them the starting background to which they draw essential items of their own *savoir-faire*, combined with new practices acquired through different channels in the new lived context and creatively implemented. The constraints that these two women face do not prevent them from shaping and expressing their self, i.e. the way they want to be and act, through the implementation of Moroccan styled food practices. These practices are linked to their personal stories but they also refer to a shared and dynamic cultural whole that they both define in spite of the variety which characterizes it. The creativity of these two women deploys in the performance of everyday food practices within given contexts and cultural backgrounds, and it permits them to affirm in own material terms a cultural belonging as well as a proper positioning in the cultural environment where they live.

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