

Foodways, Iranianness, and National Identity Habitus: The Iranian diaspora in Aotearoa New Zealand

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In this article we ethnographically investigate how diasporic Iranians in Aotearoa/New Zealand deployed a variety of foodways in imbricatively emphasizing varied identity constructs in different contexts and to different audiences. We argue that Iranian migrants experienced a cleft habitus (Bourdieu 2004) that prompted hyper-reflexivity and associated strategic identity discourses and performances. Moreover, we analyze their diasporic reflexivity and practices through Fox and Miller-Idriss' (2008) theory of 'bottom-up' national identity constructions and performances and its four modalities of talking, choosing, consuming, and performing the nation.

Diasporic Iranians frequently highlighted what they considered to be ideally Iranian-as-Persian in attempts to position themselves as secular Iranians/Muslims and in contradiction to the host society's prevalent prejudices concerning 'fundamentalist Arabs', 'Middle Easterners' and 'Muslims'. In doing this, they strategically consumed foods (most notably pork and red wine) considered to be 'taboo' under Islamic religious beliefs and did so especially in contexts dominated by their Pākehā (New Zealand European) hosts; they also invented new food symbolisms and rituals in collective celebrations (such as *Yalda*) to draw attention to a glorious imagined past – Persian and Iranian – which was often not recognized by their host society and which positioned the diasporic Iranians as secular and cultural. As such we address a marked lacuna in research investigating the food-identity-nationalism nexus among diasporic Iranians in general and in Aotearoa/New Zealand specifically.

Keywords: anthropology of food; food and migration; Iranian diaspora; national habitus; Aotearoa/New Zealand

Introduction

In this article we investigate how diasporic Iranians in Aotearoa/New Zealand deployed a variety of foodways (namely food discourses, choices, consumptions, and performances) in emphasizing varied identity constructs across a range of social settings and audiences.

Specifically, our interlocutors sought to express a general mode of diasporic, socio-cultural *Iranianness*.¹ This mode of Iranianness highlighted what our interlocutors considered Iranian (or at times Persian), which foregrounded idealized secular and cultural aspects and by comparison emphasized what being Iranian *was not* (especially ‘Arab’ and ‘Muslim’). It also foregrounded a national identity habitus of being Iranian, which consisted of an imbricate entanglement of both historical and contemporary socio-cultural identities, dispositions, and associated senses of belonging and commitment to an imagined nation of Iran. As such, we address a marked lacuna in research investigating food-identity-nationalism nexus among diasporic Iranians in general and in Aotearoa/New Zealand specifically. We do so through engaging with an analytical lens focused on Bourdieu’s notion of ‘habitus clive’ or ‘habitus cleft’ (2004, 111), in combination with Fox and Miller-Idriss’ (2008) theory of ‘bottom-up’ national identity constructions and performances, explored. through the four modalities of talking, choosing, consuming, and performing the nation.

More particularly, we critically discuss several distinct identity expressions or emphases that our interlocutors generated through food and foodways. These identity expressions were often underpinned by tropes of a distant, Golden Age of Iran-as-Persia and its enduring cultural and societal influences, often expressed in terms of culinary provenance and authenticity. Furthermore, they borrowed heavily from conceptions of a particularly modern notion of Iranian nationalism that was built on a highly romanticised view of historic and recent pre-Islamic pasts, a distaste for the 7th century Muslim-Arab conquest of Iran (and by association for Muslim-Arabs since and in general), and an obsession with the myth of

shared Indo-European roots (Tavakoli-Targhi 2001; Aghaie and Marashi 2014; Fazeli 2005; Motadel 2014). These were either re-imagined and re-idealized through drawing attention to supposedly historical and enduring similarities between Iranian/Persian and European cuisines and food items, or through performative engagement with visibly ‘non-Islamic’ food practices such as the consumption of pork and alcohol. The enactments of such forms of *diasporic Iranianness* were heavily context-dependent and audience-sensitive, with Pākehā (white European) audiences provoking ‘non-Islamic’ aspects of Iranian foodways, while diasporic Iranian audiences invoked markedly more historical, romanticized, Persian-centric culinary performances. These orientations have been embedded in Iranian sensibilities over time to the point of having become “the basis of Persian identity and the Iranian nation-statism in the twentieth century” (Asgharzadeh 2007, 76) both in Iran and throughout global diasporic communities. Effectively this reproduces a more specific form of Iranianness which we have termed *Iranian national identity habitus* to highlight both its foundational (in Iran) and ongoing (diasporic) generative processes.

Diasporic Iranianness, national identity habitus, and everyday nationhood

Diasporic Iranianness refers to the generation of migrant identity construction from below or via lay migrant Iranian’s everyday practices and values. It manifests along a continuum from the comparatively unconscious reproduction of banal discourses and practices, through to hyperconscious reflexive modes of generating contemporary Iranian identity constructs. Although we frequently observed both in our ethnographic research, in this paper we mostly highlight the latter.

Moreover, diasporic Iranianness foregrounds a sense of connectedness to a romanticized, nostalgically re-imagined Iran as the origin-homeland or nation (Spellman 2004; Gholami 2015; Sadeghi 2018; Maghbouleh 2017); and it is generated in response to existing

prejudices, discrimination, constant feelings of foreignness, and marginality among Iranian migrants. Indeed a significant aspiration of interlocutors was to avoid potential prejudices and negative stereotypes toward “Arabs” or “Muslims”² that diasporic Iranians routinely experienced and/or witnessed, with the hope to ‘fit into’ the host society and be recognized as a distinct (that is Iranian) and ‘deserving migrants’ who are also a ‘legitimate member’ of the ‘host’ society – a multi-dimensional affiliation that validates a sense of self through inclusion within the varied social relations of a given society (Bourdieu 1993).

National identity habitus – which diasporic Iranians both generated and drew from – focuses on how lay migrants constructed their vernacular experiences of belonging to and supporting a nation from the ‘bottom up.’ The notion draws upon what Elias called a “national habitus” (1939[1969], 29) and what Fox and Miller-Idriss have more recently termed “everyday nationhood” (2008, 543). All these notions similarly focus on how nation-orientated identities are enacted along a continuum ranging from the unreflexive, banal, habitual social and cultural practices of everyday life (Elias 1939 [1969]; Billig 1995, Edensor 2006) – including everyday food and food practices (Sobral 2019; Jeong 2019) – through to highly reflexive, performative participation in the monumental events and celebrations of nationalism (Connerton 1989; Eriksen 1993) that may include intensely symbolic, ritualized, and collective food practices (Newton 2016; Poulain 2017). National identity habitus also manifests along a continuum: from comparatively benign and dispositional modes of national differentiation, positive affective, and senses of belonging, through to beliefs and actions that assert the superiority of one’s national identity and thus seeks to exclude others with different national identities. Furthermore, we also draw a distinction with the generation of, or compliant engagement with, ‘top down’ identity initiatives (for example ideological discourses or collective rituals) of governments and nation-state institutions (Hobsbawm 1990; Smith 2013). Of course, habitus from below and

habitus from above are not mutually exclusive; in many instances, they are compatibly adjacent, if not mutually constitutive. As Hobsbawm notes, nations are a “dual phenomenon” constructed “essentially from above” by state entities and also “from below” (1990, 10). Indeed, our interlocutors routinely blurred the lines between the tacitly socio-cultural-historical contexts of Iranianness and the more overtly national Iranian identity constructs in their foodways, both everyday and periodically ritualized.

In national identity habitus, we foreground our analytical alignment with Bourdieu’s theories of habitus and in particular emphasize the ongoing generative and ‘doing’ of national identity constructs by lay migrants either consciously and agentially, or via unconscious dispositions and habitual intuitions. Indeed, both were evident in the practices of Iranianness among our interlocutors, though our paper focuses mostly on their reflexive constructions of national identity. In particular, we demonstrate how previously taken-for-granted Iranianness and doxic national identities (Bourdieu 1977, 168) in the origin homeland come to be purposefully reflected upon as a result of diasporic Iranians in Aotearoa/New Zealand encountering significantly different cultural, social, and racially orientated schemas and stereotypes. This gives rise to what Bourdieu calls a “habitus clivé” or “cleft habitus” that is “a product of conciliation of contradiction” (Bourdieu, 2004, 111), which is effectively a split between two distinct, often contrary, habitus. In our study, diasporic Iranians experienced and generated habitus clivé through encountering discrepancies between their fields of primary, foundational socialization in Iran and latter diasporic fields of migration in Aotearoa/New Zealand. This experience prompted heightened degrees of reflexive consciousness and intentional strategizing among our interlocutors, who both re-emphasized old foodway practices and generated practices anew. As Elias notes, a transformation that causes the disturbance of people’s national image always results in “a reassessment of a person’s values and beliefs and a reorganization of their perception of self and others” (1939 [1996], 356).

Moreover, people often preserve memories of an idealized historical and mythical past to which they resort in order to deal with disruptive contemporary events. Indeed, our Iranian interlocutors intentionally deployed imagined pasts alongside newly minted presents with the ultimate aim of fitting in and being recognized as ‘deserving migrants.’

Our interlocutors often commented on how commonplace discourses and actions previously considered appropriate in Iran were, in diaspora, either not sufficiently foregrounded or indeed were considered to be inappropriate. Accordingly, they sought to modify their Iranianness and national identity habitus through continual self-monitoring and “mundane everyday reflexivity” (Reay 2004, 435). This was observed most notably in food practices performed among the Pākehā *Other* – where our interlocutors acted quite self-consciously. Moreover, they also often purposefully re-imagined and re-enacted their entangled identity forms in romanticized and/or highly nostalgic tropes.

We argue, however, that a significant influence in migrant Iranians deploying high degrees of reflexivity, was prompted by the ways in which they were (mis)identified, (mis)understood, and negatively stereotyped as ‘Arabs’ or as undesirable fundamentalist ‘Muslims’ who should ‘go back home.’ This situation created an intense discrepancy between the Iranians’ normative national identity habitus as *secular Persians* and their diasporic experiences where they were frequently regarded instead as *fundamentalist Arabs/Muslims*. Such mismatches between habitus and field often occurs in moments of crisis or radical change (such as migration). This can create what Bourdieu (1990) called hysteresis, which prompts individual reflexivity aimed at finding and/or inventing “new ways of fulfilling the old functions” (Bourdieu 1990, 55) and attempts to re-establish the “ontological complicity” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 20) between habitus and social field.

In our analysis we also deploy Fox and Miller-Idriss's approach to highlight how ordinary people "become national" (2008, 543). Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) note that ordinary people are not merely passive receivers of nationally oriented beliefs, values, practices, and identities, but are actively producing these (sometimes unconsciously) through their seemingly banal practices of their everyday lives. Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) maintain that these quotidian modes of reproduction of belonging to, and fidelity toward, a particular nation and its collectivized praxes manifest through four modalities. These are: "Talking the nation" (537) – the ways in which particular nationhood and national identity orientations are talked about in the routine everyday discourse of ordinary people, manifested in our case in the food discourses of Iranians; "choosing the nation" (537) – that is how nationalism is implicated in choices that ordinary individuals routinely make, manifested in our case in migrant Iranians' choice of food stores; "consuming the nation" (538) – that is the production of national identity and nationhood expressions of belonging through everyday acts of consumption, manifested dynamically in our case in part by diasporic Iranians' pork and alcohol consumption patterns; and finally "performing the nation" (538) – that is the ritualized enactment of nationalism through relating to national symbols, seen for example in our case in migrant Iranians' food-related performances in ritual contexts, namely their celebration of *Yalda* (see below).

While everyday national identity orientations manifested in various aspects of our interlocutors' quotidian lives, their everyday food and food practices were especially illustrative of such manifestations. As Palmer notes, food and foodways are "often used to define and maintain boundaries of identity; boundaries that serve to define the identity of a minority community from the dominant core identity of the nation within which it resides" (1998, 189). Similarly, for our interlocutors, food and food practices proved to be extremely handy tools to define their identity and assert their Iranianness in their new diasporic homes,

as well as in reaffirming their ongoing connections to their origin homeland, both in actual and imagined registers.

Despite the increasing attention to national identity aspects of food and culinary aspects of nationhood across various disciplines (see for example Bak 1995; Caldwell 2002, DeSoucey 2010; Pilcher 2018; Avieli 2005), the topic within Iranian contexts is under-researched both within Iranian and Middle Eastern studies in general, and within Food Studies in particular. This is surprising considering that much of social life in Iran and within Iranian diaspora, revolves around food and eating activities. Furthermore, any cultural, national, seasonal, life-ritual, religious, and mourning ceremony almost always involves the preparation and shared consumption of specialty dishes and symbolic foods (Zandpour and Sadri 1996; Yarbakhsh 2021). All diasporic Iranian cookbooks, and many memoirs, novels, and autobiographies written by migrant Iranians, routinely foreground and celebrate the defining role of food within Iranian culture, together with its central importance in Iranians' collective memory and historical imaginations (see for example Dumas 2004; Satrapi 2000, 2009; Goldin 2012; Bundy 2012). Yet, with the exception of Lynn Harbottle's *Food for Health, Food for Wealth* (2000), which to date is the only detailed work dedicated to the topic of food within the Iranian diaspora (with a focus on ethnic and gender identity), scholarly discussion about foodways within the Iranian diaspora are noticeably scarce, or at best treated as marginal with no independent significance (Sadeghi 2018, 65; Gholami 2015, 199). There is, however, a comparatively larger body of work on various sociocultural (Shahidi 2015; Chehabi 2003; Bromberger 2001), religious (Shirazi 2015; Hultgård 2004; Hassibi and Sayadabdi 2019; Mousapour 2012; Mahdavi 2002), historical (Ghanoonparvar 1998; Matthee 2016; Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1995), and sociopolitical (Chehabi 2007; Wellman 2020, 2021) aspects of food within Iran itself.

Furthermore, there are very few anthropological studies on the foodways of minorities and migrant communities in Aotearoa/New Zealand (see for example, Longhurst, Johnston and Ho 2009; Philipp and Ho 2010), and particularly of Muslims and/or Middle Easterners whose communities have, until relatively recently, been small in Aotearoa/New Zealand. We seek to narrow these gaps and contribute to the anthropological studies of food in an effort to enhance “understanding of the ways in which the globalized movement of people, objects, narratives and ideas is experienced and negotiated” (Abbots 2016, 115).

This paper is extracted from a larger research project that focused exclusively on food and identity among diasporic Iranians of Aotearoa/New Zealand. The project drew on extensive fieldwork including participant observation at migrant Iranians’ public as well as private settings, in everyday as well as ritual contexts over the course of 18 months (2016-2017) in Te Waipounamu (the South Island of Aotearoa/New Zealand), particularly in Ōtautahi (Christchurch). It also included in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a focus on food and food practices with 40 (F = 25; M = 15) and conversational interviews with 78 Iranians (F = 47; M = 31)³ who mainly resided at the time in Ōtautahi, but also in the Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland) and Poneke (Wellington). While in-depth, semi-structured interviews were voice-recorded, the relevant material from conversational interviews and participant observation were recorded in situ in a fieldwork notebook and were, within the next 24 hours, completed in more detail and filed under the relevant coded section. There were also situations in which food was highly anticipated to become a subject of possibly extensive conversations at some point (for example, at the food fair and the cultural events discussed below). In these situations, upon obtaining permission from participants, conversations were recorded, relevant food-related bits were then transcribed, and the associated file was then deleted permanently. This allowed for better concentration rather than having to worry about missing conversations or forgetting them after leaving the field. All participants in the study

have been given pseudonyms, with their identifying information ambiguated to make sure that their profile remains sketchy and thus difficult to identify in the relatively small community of migrant Iranians of Aotearoa/New Zealand.⁴ All direct quotes have been translated from Persian to English (unless stated otherwise) by the first author.

Contextualizing the Iranian diaspora

Iranians' migration to the West is often identified in distinct waves, each corresponding to a different cohort of migrants (Gholami 2015; Mostafavi Mobasher 2018; Hakimzadeh 2006). The first wave between 1950 and 1977 comprised of middle-/upper-class families who often sent their children abroad (mainly to the UK and USA) for higher education. The second wave took place in the midst, and immediately following, the Iranian revolution of 1979, when an estimated one million people left Iran. This wave was mostly comprised of military personnel, religious minorities, and families closely associated with the monarchy who fled Iran to avoid persecution by the newly-established Islamic regime. This was followed by the migration of socialist and liberal elements, political dissidents, intellectuals, and skilled workers, as well as those concerned with their safety in the deteriorating situation caused by Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). The final wave, which began roughly around the mid-90s and continues until present day, is comprised of two separate waves with distinctive populations: one cohort was a continuation of a previous trend consisting of highly-skilled and educated individuals who left Iran to obtain higher education in Western universities; the other consisted of less-educated and less-skilled economic refugees and working-class labour migrants whose migration was mainly caused by "economic crisis, deteriorating human rights record, diminishing opportunities, and the enduring tension between reformist and conservative factions" (Hakimzadeh 2006, para. 23) in post-revolutionary Iran. These multiple waves of migration in the last forty years have created an Iranian diaspora estimated to be between four to five million (Axworthy 2013). Of this, and according to the latest

census in 2018, Aotearoa/New Zealand is home to 4425 Iranians (F = 2064; M = 2358; median age: 35.2), with the majority residing in the Auckland region (72%), Wellington region (8.1%) and Canterbury region (8.1%), having arrived between 10 to 19 years ago, thus mostly belonging to the final wave of Iranian migrants.

In examining the experience of diasporic Iranians, what should be constantly kept in view is the significant influence of global political forces as well as the diplomatic tensions between Iran and Western nations as ‘host’ countries (Mostafavi Mobasher 2018). Since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, such tensions have only intensified, resulting in negative media and public discourses around diasporic Iranians who are often perceived of as a threat to the national security and cultural harmony of the West.⁵ This has coupled with the persistent racism, prejudice, discrimination, and social injustice against Muslims in an increasingly Islamophobic West (Shakhsari 2020), as evident, for example, in the 2019 Christchurch mosque shootings which left 51 killed and 40 injured. As result many diasporic Iranians commonly dis-identify as Muslims and as Iranians, identifying instead with their historio-cultural heritage as *Persians* rather than their national background as *Iranians*, evident for example in many restaurant and take-away businesses owned by Iranians that strictly avoid using *Iran* or *Iranian* in their names or on their menus, and instead emphasize *Persian* and ‘ancient’ idioms.

Talking the nation through food

As Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) note, discursive and recursive expressions and practices of nationalism by ordinary people – both overt or socio-culturally adjacent (such or interlocutors’ general constructs of Iranianness) – can be best observed during events such as national holidays, catastrophes, wars, sporting events, and so on. During such occasions, the discourse of membership and belonging, which often works implicitly through habitual and

unreflective discourse, becomes explicit and hyper-conscious. In these situations, national identity orientations do not only *inform* the talk, but becomes an *object* of discourse, as well.

For instance, during the opening speech to a private *Nowruz* (the Persian New Year) party, while introducing the menu for the night, one organizer (F, early 30s, postgrad student) stressed that the menu consisted of “only authentic Iranian dishes” (*faghat ghazaha-ye asil-e irani*) due to the gathering being “an Iranian national occasion.” She elaborated further on the “Iranianness” of the dishes: for instance, *chelo kabab* (minced lamb kebab with plain rice) was said to be included due to being “our national dish,” or *sabzi-polo ba mahi* (herb rice with fish) and *ash-e reshte* (Persian vegetable and noodle thick soup) for being “rooted deeply in our traditions,” adding “no matter where we are, we should cherish our national traditions.” Toward the end of her speech, she added that despite some earlier thoughts to include falafel for vegetarians, the organizers of the gathering had decided against it, because falafel was “not originally Iranian” and its presence would have reduced the harmony of “our national occasion.” Instead of falafel, “some of our own traditional Iranian foods” (namely *mirza ghasemi* - barbecued eggplant, mashed and cooked with garlic and tomato) had been included.

After presenting the menu to Iranian guests, the co-organizer presented it again in English for the non-Iranian guests (who were all Pākehā and invited by their Iranian friends), though this time with some alterations. She said that *chelo kebab*, apart from being the “Persian national dish,” was also “a source of inspiration for the cuisine of Turks and Greeks,” and that *sabzi polo ba mahi* had “roots in 2500 years of ancient traditions of us Persians.” She also provided “fun facts” with regard to *ash-e reshte* (which is made of noodles), saying that “Persians, not Chinese, were the first nation to invent noodles and pasta.” A more striking discourse was provided when she explained, just as she had previously to the Iranian guests, the reason why falafel was excluded from the menu:

We don't have falafel tonight, because, you know, this is an ancient Persian night so we want you to have, you know, ancient Persian food, and, you know, falafel is not Persian; it's Arabic food. . . . Some people think we are Arabs, but we are not. Our language is different, our culture is very different from them, also our food is very different, and also better and more delicious I think (laughs) . . . I'm sure you'll like it because, you know, Persian food is not hot or spicy or with strong odor like many people think . . . it's more like European foods, for example Greek foods, Italian foods, French foods, so it's not very strange for you.

Later, each non-Iranian guest was gifted, as a token of appreciation for their participation in the ceremony, a copy of *The New Persian Kitchen* (Shafia 2013), a cookbook filled with romanticized representation of Persian culture that repeatedly accords superiority to “Persian way of life” (5) and undermines certain cultures – especially those who had played a role in the decline of the Persian empire, namely Greeks, Arabs, Turks, Mongols, and Uzbeks. The book also lay claims to much of the world's culinary repertoire, cooking styles, and ingredients being of Persian origin – for example:

When Alexander and his army headed home to Greece, they took care to stuff their sacks with Iran's most iconic native ingredients, including pistachios, saffron, and, of course, pomegranates. . . . After the Muslim conquest of Iran in the mid-700s, the Arabs imported Persian tastes and techniques to the countries they conquered: thus, *khores*h stew became tagine in Morocco; saffron *polo*, rice cooked with meat, became paella in Spain; and preserved quinces and bitter oranges reached England . . . to become marmalade . . . *Polo*, *nan* (bread), and *tanur* . . . would become the pilaf, naan, and tandoori . Farther east, . . . Persian staples like eggplant, sesame seeds, and even Garlic [were taken] to China. The *kebab*, Iran's greatest contribution to the world catalog of handheld foods, would become a perennial American barbecue favorite starting in the late twentieth century. (4–6, emphasis in original)

Gifting the cookbook was the idea of Shamim (F, early 30s, teacher), one of the organizers. In an earlier encounter with Shamim in her house, we had observed a few cookbooks on her

coffee table including the same one gifted to guests. This led to a rather lengthy conversation regarding cookbooks. Flipping through one, Shamim commented:

I've never used it . . . [because] it's impossible. It has made recipes too complicated. It has exaggerated the recipes for no reason. . . . Some [of the recipes] are not even correct. I know no Iranian that would cook *tahchin* (baked rice cake), for example, like the way described in this cookbook. Even my grandmother who used to cook the most traditional and extravagant *tahchins* wouldn't do it like this.

The acknowledged inauthenticity and impracticality of the recipes had not, however, prevented Shamim from displaying the cookbooks on her coffee table. She elaborated:

It's just for display, you know? It's beautiful. . . . We sometimes have foreign guests coming over for dinner . . . and especially if it's their first time, food is obviously one of the topics that is discussed at some point. They usually have no idea what Iranian food is like. . . . Sometimes I feel that I can't do the justice. So I show them these [cook]books. . . . Amazing photos of Iranian dishes and excellent description of *true* Persian culture.

In the food-related discourses of diasporic Iranians, and especially those in front of a Pākehā audience, several themes emerged – all generated post-migration but historically (and romantically) informed by the narratives of Iranian nationalism. Firstly, Iranians' food-related discourses foreground selective elements of an imagined Iranian distant past and magnify the achievements of that particular era, as evident in associating Iranian food with antiquity, highlighting Persian cuisine's original contributions to world cuisine, or preferring the use of the terms Persia and Persian, especially in front of a Pākehā audience. Secondly, this distant past (which was representative of the 'true' Iran) focuses on pre-Islamic history and myths and therefore any potential intersectionality of Islamic and Iranian origins and identities was consciously ignored. And third, there were often subtle, yet frequent, references to similar

‘roots’ between Iranians/Persians and Europeans while simultaneously emphasizing the originating influence of Iranian food culture on other Middle Easterners.

Choosing the nation through food

Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008, 537) maintain that “choosing the nation” is an unreflective and automatic process that operates as an unconscious disposition in which people enact self- and socially-evident choices, or in Bourdieu’s terms making a choice that “goes without saying” (1977, 166). For many of our interlocutors, their foundational, primary socialization in Iran undoubtedly included much unreflective generation of habitus (Bourdieu 1977), including choosing the nation. However, in diasporic circumstances, faced with different fields, capital formations and configurations, and a habitus clivé (as outlined before) – indeed faced with an overt choice of several ‘national’ identifications (such as Iranian, Persian, Arab, Middle-Easterner, Muslim and New Zealander or Kiwi⁶) – the more reflexive and conscious aspects of choosing the nation were clearly prompted.

For example, there were two Middle Eastern grocery stores in our main research location (Ōtautahi) that interlocutors mentioned most: one was *Kabuli*, a store owned and operated by local Afghans, and the other *Al-Beirut*, a store owned and operated by Palestinian residents. These were the primary locations for migrant Iranians to shop for food items that were more or less fundamental to Persian cuisine (such as lime, barberries, rosewater, pomegranate paste, saffron, cardamom, coriander, nutmeg, or various kinds of legumes and nuts).

However, as our fieldwork and interviews progressed, it gradually became apparent that *Kabuli* was, more often than not, preferred to *Al-Beirut*. Although this seemed to be for practical reasons at first (namely a larger, more varied inventory), the choice to shop at *Kabuli* turned out to have other justifications. One aspect was that the store was owned and

operated by Afghans, who were perceived and treated by Iranians as “one of our own” (*khodi*), in that they spoke Dari Persian and were culturally proximate. As one interlocutor (M, mid-50s, transport service) put it, Afghanistan was once “part of the great Persian Empire.” This was contrasted by some interlocutors, like Sami (M, mid-30s, engineer), to *Al-Beirut*, which was disapproved of because it apparently targeted an Arab clientele and offered “too little Iranian, and too much Arab food,” thus was mistrusted and regarded as inferior:

Kabuli’s foodstuff is much closer to how I and the wife and the children like it. . . . They have, for example, Iranian rice, Iranian dates, Iranian dairy products. . . . I mean, *Al-Beirut* has these too, but it’s Arab dates for example, which is a knock off of Iranian dates, of course. . . . Just a look at them and I’d know they’re not the real deal.

Where conversations about *Kabuli* often led to an emphasis on the cultural similarities and linguistic unity of Iranians with Afghans, conversations about *Al-Beirut* categorically distinguished and differentiated Iranians from the Arab *Other*. In a similar vein, Arab cuisine was stated to be “hugely different” (F, late 30s, homemaker) with, or “not even close” (F, late 40s, teacher) to, the cuisine of Iranians. Such distinctions were part of a broader trope of accentuating the differences between the two cultures. As Sami went on to say, Iranians and Arabs “don’t really understand each other’s language. . . . They don’t get our things surely . . . and we don’t get theirs.”

This was firmly pronounced in certain situations such as when Iranians encountered a Pākehā in *Al-Beirut*. As Sami put it:

I was shopping at *Al-Beirut* once, and I was waiting in the line with this very friendly Kiwi lady, and all of a sudden she said ‘happy New Year’ to me, because she had seen this Happy-New-Year sticker on the cashier’s counter, and she had assumed that I was Arab or something. . . . I told her I had no idea myself that it was their New Year, because I am not an Arab and we

Persians have our own New Year and our own calendar which is completely different from their Islamic calendar.

Such encounters with Pākehā were a crucial factor in determining which shop Iranians would frequent. *Al-Beirut*'s supposedly greater Arab clientele, "Arab" food items and "Arab" ownership determined it an Arab space, in which diasporic Iranians did not feel or experience familiarity, and in which their identity could more likely be mistaken. This was not the case with *Kabuli* which was considered to have taken a "more inclusive" approach by offering "an inventory that served a wider range of clientele" which, in the view of Iranians, had made it "more favorable among Kiwis" (M, mid-40s, shopkeeper). Indeed, the supposedly more visible presence of Pākehā in *Kabuli* become a justification of its own over *Al-Beirut*:

Haydeh (F, late 40s, teacher) – there's often at least one Kiwi [Pākehā] in *Kabuli* whenever I'm shopping there, but seldom any in *Al-Beirut* . . . which is mostly frequented by Arabs. . . . I like it when I see Kiwi people there (at *Kabuli*). . . . I usually start a conversation with them, because I'm curious as to how familiar they're with our Iran and what Iranian foods they're aware of. . . . Some of them have travelled to Iran, even. . . . Those of them who've travelled to Iran before revolution know how European [some of our cities like] Tehran or Abadan once were.

Nazgol (F, late 20s, student) – It's good to see Kiwis [Pākehā] there (at *Kabuli*). . . They are open-minded Kiwis who like our culture, our people, our foods. . . . I don't even have to tell them we're not Arabs . . . or that we're okay with pork and wine just like them.

Such accounts suggest that encountering Pākehā served a socio-psychological desire to connect with "open-minded Kiwis," who would presumably be already genuinely interested in Iranian food and culture. That Pākehā frequenters of *Kabuli*, especially those who had visited Iran and viewed Iranians in a positive light as non-religious, non-Arab, secular individuals was hugely reassuring. This provisioned our interlocutors with a sense of

cognizant recognition from “the desired other” (Rahimieh 2015, 87), coupled with temporary assurances and contextual belongingness not always experienced in their diasporic condition. Indeed, in spaces such as *Al-Beirut*, our interlocutors often felt that they were perceived by the host society as fundamentalists, Arabs, and devout Muslims and thus triply misidentified.

Kabuli, apart from being a sociocultural space in which our interlocutors encountered the familiar and nostalgic, was also an enchanted oasis in a foreign land where downplaying Iranianness in front of Pākehā was no longer seen as necessary. In fact, many took this opportunity to *advertise* their Iranianness (a very rare occurrence in diaspora) by introducing themselves as Iranian and starting conversations with the Pākehā customers about Iran. *Kabuli* thus had what Foucault (1966 [1970]) called a heterotopian quality that provided Iranians with a physical approximation to a parallel utopian space where prevalent negative discourses and assumptions about them were suspended, neutralized, contested, and inverted.

Consuming the nation through food

Fox and Miler-Idriss (2008, 538) note that “consuming the nation” through everyday acts of consumption, such as routine food practices, occur not only through consuming national products, but also in the ways in which non-national products are “consumed nationally” (552). We have discussed sections how our interlocutors asserted and claimed their Iranianness by consuming foods and ingredients perceived as *authentically* Iranian or of Iranian origin. In this section, however, we pay attention to how some non-Iranian products, namely pork and alcohol, are consumed (and avoided) in distinct ways in diaspora, and how these modes of consumption also reproduce core narratives of Iranian nationalism.

The majority of our Iranian interlocutors leaned toward avoiding pork. This may immediately be interpreted as a religious avoidance (*all* Muslims avoid pork; *all* Iranians are Muslim; therefore, *all* Iranians avoid pork). However, our interlocutors rarely based their

avoidance on religious grounds and seldom talked about religious prohibitory laws such as haram or halal food. Moreover, in situations when they *did* talk about halal/haram, they almost immediately followed this with some sort of justification that explicitly undermined the religious aspects and highlighted instead other features such as taste (“we always buy halal meat, but only because we’ve got used to its taste. Nothing else!” F, early 30s, postgrad student), texture (“non-halal meats here [in New Zealand] are full of blood, otherwise I couldn’t care less about their being halal or not!” F, mid-30s, homemaker), or healthiness (“not that I care much about it being halal, but it’s much healthier and cleaner that way!” M, early 40s, service industry). The following comments by Mojtaba (M, early 40s, architect) represents most of these views:

Sometimes they (Pākehā) think I don’t eat pork because of being Muslim. . . . They mistake us with Arab Muslims, you know, which is a whole different kind of Muslim. . . . So just to make them understand, I eat pork whenever we have an office outing. . . . I’ve tried to explain to them before that the reason we Iranians don’t eat pork is not mainly Islam, but because we always had a better choice like lamb and mutton which we’ve been eating since 2500 years ago.

Such comments were made both by those who identified as non-religious as well as those who held relatively firm religious beliefs. For example, Mojtaba (quoted above) was often described by others as *momen* (pious) and took part in arranging religious events for the Iranian community. Yet he, and other pious interlocutors, based their avoidance of pork/ham on being Iranian rather than on being Muslims, justifying this on cultural rather than religious grounds. The emphasis was on being “cultural Muslims,” as well as on the differences between an “Iranian Islam,” which was viewed as more relaxed than “Arab Islam,” which was often described as rigid or inflexible. Such attitudes were accentuated when a Pākehā audience was present, and at times became rather hostile and even Islamophobic. On one occasion, when at a food fair with a couple of friends (including a Pākehā friend), Mousa (M,

late 20s, medical staff), who self-identified as *motaghed* (a believer), drew our attention to a group of visibly-Muslim women who were waiting in line in front of a Chinese food stall:

What do *they* want from a Chinese stall? As if they *can* eat anything from there. Don't they know it's all pork? They probably don't, otherwise they would have freaked out, these people. They're afraid even of the sight of it. . . . And what bugs me even more is that as soon as they (non-Iranian Muslims) realize I'm from Iran, they want to stop me from eating it too, as if it's their God-given duty. I've seen them trying to impose their dietary beliefs on poor Westerners too. If you're so upset about it, why are you *here*, right?

What appeared to be Mousa's main concern was being erroneously perceived as Muslim and/or Arab, especially in the eye of the Pākehā. Despite both Mousa's and Mojtaba's self-identification as devoted Muslims, and despite avoiding pork products ordinarily, they consumed these products when there was a known Pākehā audience present. Through breaking one of the most 'famous' Islamic taboos known to Westerners, Iranians in such instances clearly undermined, even jettisoned, this Islamic aspect of their identity in order to 'fit' better in their Western society and to performatively reassert a distinctive, non-Arabic/Muslim, Iranian identity. Such practices are the outcome of a collective national history and a racist discourse generated by pioneers of Iranian nationalism, carried forward from the previous generations, and then re-invented and re-enacted in diaspora – albeit ironically as a convenient remedy to the racism Iranians experience in diaspora.

Alcohol was also avoided (though not as strictly as pork) by close to half of our interlocutors. Similarly, the justifications for this were rarely on religious grounds, but rather on alcohol's "unpleasant taste" (F, mid-20s, student) or because "it doesn't go well with Persian food" (F, early 30s, artist). Also similar to pork, alcohol was consumed mostly (if not *only*) in certain *public* spaces such as office outings or staff parties when a Pākehā audience was present. Likewise, such acts were, in most cases, attempts to stop the Pākehā other

making undesired assumptions about our interlocutors' identities. For instance, Khalil (M, late 20s, teacher), who "fundamentally avoided alcohol," said the only occasions that he *would* drink were when he was hanging out with his work colleagues (who were predominantly Pākehā), when he and his wife were invited to a colleague's place, or when they were hosting a dinner party in return, because he felt that drinking would put him in a more favorable social position:

They (his Pākehā colleagues) always get puzzled when they see me drinking wine, because they see me as this Muslim fellow who shouldn't drink, because those other Muslims always make a big fuss about not drinking alcohol, right? . . . Sometimes they joke with me when they see me drinking wine and tell me 'what kind of Muslim are you, Khalil?' and I tell them 'an Iranian one' which is of course very different with what they see in the news and the media especially in this last couple of decades, so they like me.

Such practices were more pronounced when focused on wine (especially red wine), which was often framed as a strong marker of Iranian identity. Indeed, wine was even considered by some as an Iranian invention or an integral part of Iranian culture due to the long-standing tradition of wine-poetry in Persian classic literature, which praised drinking and intoxication both literally and metaphorically:

Akbar (M, early 30s, engineer): When I drink, I only drink red wine, because it's not just a drink that you get drunk with. For us [Iranians] it also has some sort of connection, perhaps because of many great Iranian poets such as Khayyam who they call 'poet of wine' or Ferdowsi whose Shahnameh has pretty important mentions of wine, and many others... I'm a descendant of those Iranians, after all. They were Muslims, too, but saw wine as a gift from God and have praised it left and right in their poems.

Unlike other instances when Iranians reported frustration or discomfort when asked brash questions about their religious beliefs, most did not seem to mind when the questions

involved references to alcohol consumption. Such questions were even embraced as they provided opportunities to communicate to their ‘desired’ audience clear-cut (even if imagined) distinctions between themselves and other Muslims, thus further distancing themselves from the stigmatizing attributes they (as Iranians and Muslims) frequently bear in a western context. Diasporic foodways thus created spaces, markedly distanced from contemporary political realities, where the enactment of a lost golden era of Iran, enduring Persian cultural sensibilities and undiluted Iranianness could be generated and enacted. Foods characterized as such were rendered familiar and their consumption could foster “armchair nostalgia” for both real and imagined pasts (Appadurai 1996, 78).

Performing the nation through food

As Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) note, although everyday contexts often provide platforms for the nation (or national identity habitus) to be “performed mindlessly and dispassionately” (549), it is most explicitly and consciously performed during extraordinary contexts such as national events and social rituals. In such contexts a heightened, cohesive awareness is crystalized and intersects with celebratory aspects of Iranianness. This was manifested, for instance, in many of our interlocutors Yalda celebrations.

Yalda, which is one of the most important celebrations for Iranians, marks the winter solstice or the longest night of the year (falling on 20, 21, or 22 December) and is particularly associated with ritualized food and collective eating traditions that carry great symbolic significance. In contemporary Iran Yalda remains a night of celebration and gathering, during which family members stay up to welcome the morning sun, doing activities such as fortune-telling (by the poem of *Hafez*) and storytelling. While Yalda marks the longest night of the year in the Northern Hemisphere, in Aotearoa/New Zealand it falls on the shortest night of the year. Nevertheless, it was still celebrated by diasporic Iranians according to the Northern

Hemisphere's calendar so that they could be "united with [their] compatriots all over the world" (M, early 40s, Technician). However, Yalda celebrations were observed quite differently, with a significant changes, omissions and inventions in diaspora from the core narratives, rituals and symbols of Yalda in Iran, mostly to emphasize a certain degree of Iranian national identity.

For instance, most Yalda celebrations in Aotearoa/New Zealand featured an Iranian flag, though not the current Iranian flag, but either a pre-Revolution flag decorated with the Lion-and-Sun emblem, or a simple tricolor without the current Islamic crescent in the middle. Both pointedly celebrated the Iranian aspects of the nation while either muting or denying the Islamic. Similar to this was the collective singing of the song *Ey Iran* (Oh Iran!) at some Yalda parties – a highly patriotic song recognized by participants as the 'real' or 'true' national anthem of Iran (as opposed to the current official anthem which was spurned). *Ey Iran* was said to elicit the love of homeland and evoke strong feelings of national pride. In addition, reading from the *Book of Hafez* (a collection of amatory poems by the 14th-century poet Hafez), which is a customary Yalda ritual in Iran, was sometimes replaced by reading out selective parts of *Shahnameh* (*The Book of Kings*, the national epic of Iran composed by the 10th-century poet *Ferdowsi*), in particular those parts devoted to the courage of Iranian heroes and of the Iranians' defeat by Arabs, prophesying the 'misfortune' brought into the country for hundreds of years by this conquest.

Such innovations were even more visible when it came to foods and food rituals. Pomegranate was seen by diasporic Iranians to represent Iranianness, because:

Akram (F, early 50s, homemaker) – pomegranates originated in ancient Iran . . . were cultivated there since ancient times. . . . For example, if you read *Shahnameh*, you see that *Esfandiyar* (a legendary hero of Iranians) ate pomegranates and became invincible. . . . It's almost a national symbol that you could put on our flag (laughs).

Being frequently mentioned by participants as a distinction-making ingredient in Iranian cuisine – including some ‘ancient’ dishes – added to pomegranate’s symbolic national significance. Fruits such as kiwifruits, oranges, bananas, pears, and cucumbers, which are nowadays typically seen in every fruit bowl during Yalda in Iran, were however absent in most Yalda gatherings in Aotearoa/New Zealand, being replaced by muskmelons, quinces, apricots, grapes, and figs that were all considered to have originated in Iran. As Akram put it they “been introduced to the world by Iranians” and especially culturally representative of Iranianness and Iranian national identity. Similar origin-based arguments were used to justify the presence of walnuts, almonds, and pistachio. Even watermelon, the other indispensable Yalda fruit, was linked to the concept of nation, though in a playful, joking manner:

Mehrdad (M, mid-40s, architect) – Why do we Iranians have watermelons at Yalda? Because 1) just like Iranian flag, it’s green, white, and red; 2) just like an Iranian person, it’s such a bleeding-heart, but doesn’t show it because it’s quite thick-skinned (*‘mese irani delesh khooneh, vali neshoon nemideh chon poostesh koloftteh’*); and 3) just like our politics, it’s ‘nuclear’ (*‘mese siasathamoon haste-ee-ye!’* – an intended pun on the word *‘hasteh-ee’* which can mean *‘nuclear’* but also *‘full of seeds.’*).

Some food items, such as watermelon with no ‘historical’ origin in Iran, were nevertheless associated with a contemporary collective memory: from the tricolor flag of Iran which became official only in the 19th century, to the “thick skin” that Iranians have allegedly grown during the post-revolutionary years, to Iran’s nuclear programs, all are relatively recent, yet critical, events in the nation’s contemporary history. Foods, and especially those believed to have originated in ancient Iran, often evoked powerful historical memories and emotions, generating feelings of nostalgia for an imagined past that either never existed or was not experienced (Appadurai 1996).

Conclusion

In this article we analyzed the relationship between diasporic Iranians' foodways, their socio-cultural Iranianness and their Iranian national identity habitus in Aotearoa/New Zealand. We argued that Iranian migrants experienced a cleft habitus (Bourdieu 2004) that prompted hyper-reflexivity and associated intentional identity discourses and performances. These praxes imbractively foregrounded varied aspects of idealized Iranian socio-cultural and national identities in different contexts and to different audiences (mostly notably diasporic Iranians and Pākehā New Zealanders). Aside from celebrating romanticized aspects of imagined Iranian pasts and modern Iranian nationalism (effectively a nexus of ancient Persian and Indo-European origins, linkages, and enduring influences), these discourses and performances were typically framed to position diasporic Iranians in contradiction to the host society's prevalent stereotypes and prejudices concerning fundamentalist Arabs, Middle Easterners, and Muslims.

In part, we explored Iranian migrants' foodways and national identity habitus through the lens of Fox and Miller-Idriss's (2008) four modalities of national identity construction, namely talking the nation, choosing the nation, consuming the nation, and performing the nation. In doing so, we showed that in their diasporic lives migrant Iranians discursively distinguished between Iranian food and non-Iranian food (talking the nation), clearly opted for certain grocery stores that could connect them to their sense of home and sense of Iranianness (choosing the nation), insisted on eating and drinking certain food items especially those that were Islamically-prohibited (consuming the nation), and invented new national meanings through the medium of ritualized food (performing the nation).

Although migrant Iranians' talking, consuming, and choosing the nation manifested itself in everyday food practices, performing the nation mostly presented itself within collective, monumental rituals such as Yalda, where a sense of a perennial Iranian nation and

feelings of solidarity were reproduced in situ. During such events, a heightened national identity awareness and cohesion was crystalized in the “choreographed exhibition and collective performance of national symbols” (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008, 545). Moreover, various foods (like muskmelons and figs) were given newly-invented national identity symbolism. These meanings, more often than not, corresponded to Iranians’ diasporic experiences, drawing attention to a glorious imagined past – Persian and Iranian – which was often not recognized or identified by their host society.

Moreover, the migrants’ national identity and Iranianness were regarded as distinct from, and superior to, (largely imposed) Islamic and Arab influences, while also being akin to, at times originating of, and generally compatible with, European culture. This was apparent in the superiority accorded to Persian cuisine (especially as a historical inspiration to the world cuisine); in the intensity of our interlocutors’ investment in distancing Persian food from “Arab foods;” in the treatment of diasporic cookbooks as a means to introduce the ‘true’ Iranian nation to Pākehā; in choosing an Afghan grocery store over the Arab one; and finally in the public, highly performative consumption of Islamically-prohibited food items such as pork and alcohol (especially wine) in front of the Pākehā audiences. Iranians thus underplayed or even denied the Islamic aspects of their identities in attempts to *correct* their hosts’ perception about Iranians as Muslims or Arabs, as such their alcohol-drinking and pork-eating episodes rarely occurred in private spheres (where no such *corrections* were required).

Our research and analysis have resonances for anthropology of food studies and especially the reproduction of everyday and monumental or collective foodways and their role in both dispositional and reflexive identity generation and expression, ritual and symbolic innovations, group, or community formations. More specifically our research contributes to our ethnographic understandings of the ‘bottom up’ or lay reproduction of both

socio-cultural or ethnic and national identities, especially so in contexts where interlocutors' foundational habitus, identities, and performance have been disrupted through changes in fields of action, valued capital forms and configurations, and position and status ascriptions, as characteristically occurs in international migration.

In particular, our research importantly contributes to ethnographic understandings of how Iranian migrants in Aotearoa/New Zealand reflexively, and often strategically, deploy specific foodways – especially choice of foods, and modes of preparation and consumption – to foreground different identity tropes to different audiences with ultimate aim of reproducing an idealized Iranianness (socio-cultural and national) for both their migrant, diasporic community and for their hosts. Moreover, given the central role of food and eating in Iranian culture –homeland, but also importantly diasporic – our research points to both the lacuna and the need for similar ethnographic, comparative research elsewhere.

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Notes

1. We have refrained from terming this 'ethnic Iranian' to avoid any confusion with the different and highly delineated regional ethnicities existent in Iran. However, in mainstream Aotearoa/New Zealand – where such identity distinctions are effectively absent – identifying oneself as Iranian and/or performing Iranianness is routinely categorized (informally and formally) as an ethnic identity, although this is also characteristically linked with Iranian national identity by both Iranian migrants and their hosts, resulting in a hybrid, mutually constitutive, ethno-national identification (Smith 2013).

2. In this context, “Arabs” refers to the generic term deployed by some Aotearoa/New Zealand born individuals to refer to ‘Middle Eastern-looking’ (or sounding) individuals (often assumed to be “Muslims” too). Iranians, however, often use the term “Arab” to specifically refer to Arab-speaking individuals and/or coming from Arab states in the Middle East.
3. There is an overlap between these individuals, meaning that some people may have been interviewed in-depth as well as conversationally.
4. As per ethical approval of the research by the Human Ethics Committee of the University of Canterbury (Ref: HEC 2015/43/LR-PS).
5. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center titled “Global Views of Iran Overwhelmingly Negative” (2013) showed that Iran is viewed unfavorably by at least eight-in-ten in Western Europe, and seven-in-ten in the US.
6. Kiwi is a colloquial term for New Zealanders to describe themselves. It is derived from the native kiwi bird which is unique to the country. In this paper, however, Iranians’ use of the term Kiwi is reserved for Pākehā /white New Zealanders.

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