

# Nutritional Socialization and its Relationship to Health in Algerian Society - A Socio-Anthropological Study

Benmaghnia, kada<sup>1\*</sup>, Boualag Kamal<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Mustapha Stambouli University – Mascara, Algeria.

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**Abstract.** Food in society's life is linked to identities and also reflects individuals' sense of belonging. For, nutrition is not merely a routine but a necessary act for survival and continuity repeated across time and space, nor simply a form of physical pleasure. Rather, it goes far beyond that, when it becomes strongly tied to the identity of a society, its cultural structure, and its socializing institutions. Moreover, we find that through the connection between what we consume in our daily lives and the identity dimension of nutrition in its broad sense. In this research, we relied on the collection of documented data and their analysis according to the comparative approach between the most important stages of change in the food system and health conditions in modern Algerian society, using the observation of daily experiences of events related to our object of study and research conducted at local and global levels in the field of nutrition and health. The health situation of a society can not be understood without reference to its food identity, which is shaped by traditions, customs, and cultural structures. This is approached through socio-anthropological research into people's perceptions. Obesity, diabetes, and cancer are no longer individual problems, but have become social issues linked. The transformation of Algeria's food identity which has led to a growing awareness of the need to move beyond mistaken practices inherited across generations, reinforced by the circumstances the society has gone through. Thus, an individual's identity is determined by what they refrain from consuming for fear of illness, rather than necessarily by their dietary pattern itself. We are therefore facing a slow-paced transformation at the level of values and consumer habits, shaped by the resistance of inherited food traditions and their persistence in the face of the risks of openness to other identities.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The pattern of nutrition in contemporary societies is increasingly linked to individuals' perceptions of health. For, the advancement of medical knowledge has reinforced the connection between nutrition and well-being, and accusations have been directed at modern modes of agricultural and industrial production as being behind the alarming rise of chronic diseases such as cancer, diabetes, and obesity which led to a growing fear of illness and the creation of defensive mechanisms, most of which take the form of following diets and avoiding unhealthy food as defined by medical knowledge, and thus seeking healthier nutritional patterns to prevent chronic disease. This, in turn, has opened wider fields of intervention for medical authority on the social level, by linking food, illness, and well-being. Today, individuals no longer pursue food merely to satisfy hunger as was the case in the past whether in our traditional societies or in Europe during the aristocratic era and later the bourgeois period, which had wide access to food. Instead, the awareness shaped by medical knowledge, the media, and social networks has pushed individuals towards stricter regulation of what they consume daily and greater caution in this process to avoid unhealthy nutrition, influenced by the information disseminated by medical knowledge. This contributes to shaping their identity, or in other words: "Tell me what you avoid eating, and I will tell you who you are." This new identity that the individual acquires is not defined solely by broad frameworks; rather, nutrition plays a more significant role than others in building a healthy, disease-free individual, capable of fulfilling their social roles. In this context, the individual's food identity intersects with religious and cultural heritage, economic conditions, and public policies within society. This leads us, in this study, to lean toward the cultural paradigm in anthropology as the theoretical model most capable of explaining the relationship between food identity and public health, away from evolutionary approaches, which cannot offer much in addressing food identity, where cultural inheritance is constantly intertwined with social reality. Thus, returning to inherited traditional food patterns has become an option adopted and recommended by health systems to curb the rise of chronic diseases. Others search for nutritional practices in different cultures as an escape from the dangerous consequences of contemporary nutrition on public health.

What concerns us in this study is the change in food patterns, along with the transformations in food identity in Algerian society, driven by the growing health concern, fear, and increasing anxiety about chronic diseases, which remain a major challenge in choosing an appropriate nutritional pattern because accusations are being directed more than ever at food as a primary cause of cancer, such as the excessive consumption of processed products, foremost among them beverages, juices, sweets, hydrogenated oils, bread, processed meats, and ready-made foods, which have strengthened their presence in people's dietary patterns due to the economic and social conditions Algeria has experienced in recent decades. This, in turn, has led to the disappearance of certain consumer values that once existed and the emergence of new values that would not have appeared without the deep impact left by the economic and living conditions of rural and urban populations. This prompts us to ask whether changes in food patterns have a direct effect on identity, how this identity is shaped by shifts in individuals' nutritional patterns, and what the nature of the identity formation resulting from these changes is alongside its relation to perceptions of health and well-being in a society that is recording alarming levels of chronic illness.

## 2. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

Undoubtedly, the interest in nutrition by scholars studying issues of identity and belonging in the social sciences is still relatively recent. This stems from the fact that nutrition is one of the existential foundations upon which societies are built and through which differences are shaped. This requires handling it with great caution in terms of adopting methodological choices and appropriate research tools that ultimately enable us to achieve empirical results capable of constructing an analytical model that explains the close relationship between food as a social act and social identity in its dynamic aspects (Haziza, 2019, pp. 35, 23.), on the one hand, and actors' representations of health and well-being, on the other. There is no doubt that constructing a theoretical model for an issue of such great socio-anthropological importance as food identity requires vigilance and caution, due to the overlap and interconnection of variables shaping the phenomenon. For, food is not merely an act of fulfilling a biological need such as eating but it rather goes beyond that to play a fundamental role in constructing the identity of individuals and groups, which makes research into identity a matter that requires clarifying concepts and defining approaches whether the focus is on collective identities in their various anthropological forms, such as emerging identities that allow space for other identities to arise (chosen, inherited, imposed, etc.) and this complexity makes fieldwork a challenging situation that imposes certain methodological choices over others. Responding to the demands of reality, uncovering symbolic details, and identifying their meanings will, with no doubt, fall within the scope of qualitative research that considers respondents' representations.

In anthropology, identity does not constitute a fixed concept; rather, it emerges alongside other issues related to belonging in its various forms, to people's lives, and to the rituals that mark life cycles. As for the food identity of societies, this, methodologically, requires paying attention to the actors' discourses and representations of eating, dietary habits, and their relation to life cycles and rituals. Thus, we are faced with a social act no less important anthropologically: the act of eating. It involves forms of socialization and prevailing values that guide dietary consumption patterns and their impact on individual health and the construction of representations of well-being. In doing so, we attempt to move beyond identity as a common concept, treating it instead in a broader sense, focusing on nutrition as one of the foundations of belonging elevates anthropological research on identity from the ordinary to the intricate, complex, and multidimensional, because it is worth noting that anthropological research into identity and food has gained momentum as a result of the demands of social reality, in light of capitalist expansion, the consequences of globalization, the growing presence of the food industry, and the dominance of multinational corporations over the food and health of billions of people across cultures. At the same time, diversity has become the defining feature of local cultures.

This has broadened the research concerns of anthropology, including the need to understand food and health in their social and cultural dimensions and their relation to identity formation. Thus, anthropology draws on methodological tools and theoretical models to understand a highly complex reality that requires empirical efforts to dismantle its symbolic system. Through the use of observation and daily co-experiencing of events, by documenting various situations that is relevant to the subject of food identity, and through the deconstruction of respondents' discourses and the analysis of individuals' representations, we will attempt to construct a theoretical framework that highlights the role of culture as a key element influencing prevailing dietary and health behaviors in Algerian society.

## 3. THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF NUTRITION

Throughout history, thinkers' interest in identity has been a point of contention, especially when it comes to conflicts over race, color, and religion among intellectual models since the end of the last century. Race, color, and religion remained sites of conflict. However, other variables of great importance in shaping identity such as nutrition did not have much presence in political and academic debates, despite being a highly significant socio-anthropological factor, even socially and politically, food has always been a meeting point among peoples, a medium of communication, recognition, and rapprochement. For, disputes have often been resolved at the dining table between warring tribal chiefs or even between nations, with their histories recorded around shared meals. In Algerian society, like other Arab and Islamic societies, family, commercial, and even political conflicts often ended around the "banquet" or the "feast." French statesmen even used to say, "Politics is a matter of the table," because the table itself since the age of prophecy, has symbolized a place where differences of opinion, belief, and even culture converge, and the Qur'anic story of the "Table of Mercy" revealed from heaven to Prophet Jesus at the disciples' request remains one of the historical testimonies to the sacred role of food. For, food enjoys social acceptance and represents a form of diversity across affiliations, beliefs, and ideologies that unites rather than divides. This principle appears clearly in the teachings of Islam, which carries a civilizational dimension and treats food as a means of human connection and as a way to reduce class disparities. Islam permitted Muslims to eat the meat slaughtered by "People of the Book" (Christians and Jews), who constitute the majority of the world's population, despite essential doctrinal differences. The Prophet Muhammad emphasized the importance of feeding others, considering it among the most virtuous deeds to bring believers closer to God. Furthermore, there is an entire chapter in the Qur'an (Al-Ma'idah) which legislates and regulates Muslims' dietary practices according to individual and collective interests. Furthermore, both the Qur'an and the Sunnah contain numerous prohibitions against gluttony, extravagance, and waste, given their harmful consequences on physical and mental health, character, and behavior.

Thinkers concerned with identity have differed on the true role of food in defining belonging alongside race, religion, and color. Biology, agricultural sciences, economics, and commerce have been among the disciplines that granted food a central place in human life. For anthropology, sociology, and psychology, however, food has always represented a highly complex and intertwined subject of knowledge. In addition to that, Arab and Muslim scholars devoted attention to this matter, leaving behind a rich intellectual legacy, and among them was the renowned Ibn Khaldun, who in his comprehensive Muqaddimah on human civilization emphasized differences in livelihood conditions between abundance and hunger and their effects on human bodies and morals, Ibn Khaldun also argued that regional differences lie in fertility, greenery, agricultural output, and food availability, and that such differences shape people's habits, destinies, health, and moral character, even impacting politics and ruler-ship, he may thus be considered the first to highlight the role of dietary patterns in socialization. In his fifth part of the Muqaddimah he discusses how prosperity or famine can lead to bodily corruption, i.e., illnesses resulting from poor dietary habits, by these means he followed earlier Arab sages who believed that "the human stomach is the source of every ailment." Ibn Khaldun also differentiated between nomadic and sedentary lifestyles regarding food habits, stating: "You will find that those lacking grains and condiments in the desert are in better condition in their bodies and morals than those immersed in abundance among settled peoples. Their complexion is clearer, their bodies healthier, their features more complete and beautiful, their morals less prone to deviation, and their intellect sharper in knowledge and understanding." (Khaldoun, 732/808 AH). For Ibn Khaldun, food transcends the physical

body becoming a marker of identity with moral and behavioral implications, even shaping the prevailing ethical system of society and from this perspective food is closely tied to moral corruption, deviance, and straying from social norms. Talcott Parsons expands this line of thought by asserting that deviance can only be understood in relation to the normative system. Illness itself for him, is a form of deviance since the sick person is seen as “deviant” when failing to perform their social role, he also places deviance at the core of social action and systems framing it as culturally patterned behavior outside shared norms. Hence, deviation from dietary norms can be understood as social deviance (Parsons, 2005). This shows a striking intellectual proximity between Parsons and Ibn Khaldun: food becomes a key criterion for understanding variables governing deviance, especially in the realm of health.

Structuralist anthropologists agree that human beings are inseparable from nature and can only be separated artificially, and cultural diversity they argue is the foundation of civilizations, and nutrition was originally meant to meet humanity’s primary need. Thus, there is a constant interplay between nature and culture. In this context, Claude Lévi-Strauss, in *Myth and Meaning*, assigned great importance to the roots of cooking and food preparation among primitive South American societies, as Marcel Mauss similarly mentioned that food is embedded in both personal and collective history from birth celebrations to funeral feasts (GARINE, 1988). Humanity cannot exist without internal diversity, for people are part of nature, governed by biological laws that dictate the course of life from birth to death. According to Lévi-Strauss, cultural diversity is as essential as the natural environment; culture is not merely the accumulation of random conditions but a balanced system reflecting the relationship between human thought and the surrounding environment. This relative stability explains the historical shift from nomadism to settlement, from gathering and hunting to the domestication of animals and plants, and the rise of agriculture. Cooking techniques played a role in this evolutionary transition.

Margaret Mead argued that dietary habits are choices made by individuals or groups in response to social and cultural pressures, involving the selection, consumption, and use of available resources. This creates a gap between cultural valuation and physiological need a uniquely human trait shaping existence (GARINE, 1988). Moreover, contemporary writings on food identity remain tied to processes of socialization such as religion and value systems. Dietary patterns are thus considered essential identity markers, alongside homeland, geography, religion, and race. Nevertheless, scholarly attention to food identity only emerged recently, led by anthropologists and sociologists in Europe and the U.S. as a response to social transformations. Since the 1960s, American society has witnessed intensified social conflicts over identity, especially the African-American question, which reshaped social fabrics and continues to this day. Issues of race and color, linked to identity, moved from academic debate in social sciences to shaping critical scholarship that addressed identity conflicts in the U.S. Since the 1990s, immigration-related issues in Europe have fueled sociological studies on identity and belonging. Catherine Halpern notes that identity in European societies, particularly in France, became a necessary concept in research on immigration, nationalism, religion, gender, and race. This produced a wide body of literature since the late 1960s, though with a “significant gap between Anglophone and Francophone bibliographies” (Haziza, 2019)

#### 4. THE FAMILY BETWEEN FOOD CONSUMPTION AND THE PRODUCTION OF HEALTH

Undoubtedly, the issue at stake in this context is not merely related to the nature of the agricultural products consumed by the family regardless of their sources or composition, but rather from a socio-anthropological perspective, to the ways in which family members share food and the patterns of socialization it produces. For, mealtimes are primarily moments of gathering around the same table, not necessarily about what the table contains, this determines the prevailing dietary pattern, how it is socially constructed, and its relationship with both illness and wellness. Therefore, the multiple differences within social systems cannot be ignored, since dietary patterns are but the product of social change and of a continuously evolving dynamic. Hence, the construction and formation of dietary patterns are closely linked to the nature of these systems, their role, and their position in the nutritional and health socialization of the individual. From an anthropological standpoint, the family plays a crucial role as a producer of health medicinally, therapeutically, and preventively by imposing certain foods and forbidding others, the family contributes to shaping food identity which occurs through everyday practices of preventing and treating illness. In this regard, the woman plays a central role in protecting family members from disease by avoiding harmful foods and adapting daily cooking practices to health conditions in case of illness. She draws up therapeutic plans by preparing suitable meals and respecting medication schedules. These practices, embedded in household labor, reflect the intersection of healthcare and nutrition. The family’s role even extends beyond the domestic sphere into hospitals, where families accompany patients by preparing suitable meals and ensuring proper nutrition during recovery. This is a distinct feature of Algerian society an extension of the family’s therapeutic and preventive role into the institutional sphere. Anthropological observation reveals a strong link between individuals’ perceptions of bodily health, on the one hand, and the dietary system produced by the family, on the other. Hence woman is no longer simply the one who transforms harvested fruit and hunted prey into consumable food; she also bears responsibility for the health of her children and husband. Through dietary choices, she contributes to the prevention of chronic diseases and helps overcome seasonal illnesses, since health and illness events themselves shape family relationships (Genevieve & Mebtoul, 2010) (Family and Health, 2010), the adopted dietary pattern can play a key role in determining the very nature of these relationships. When nutrition intersects with family healthcare, a unique cultural dynamic specific to Algerian society becomes clear. Choosing food when a family member is ill becomes a subject of negotiation and compromise, with careful control of quantities and proportions to ensure meals are compatible with the medical treatment plan prescribed by the physician. In such contexts, the family becomes open to multiple opinions in order to achieve tangible results. Thus, the acceptance of a dietary pattern depends on several factors, including family type. In extended families, women often adapt to pre-existing and imposed dietary patterns, as husbands are accustomed to them. Newly married men, for instance, say they find it difficult to part with their mothers’ dishes, which they consider an extension of nutritional care and preventive health, especially regarding the food habits of elderly family members suffering from chronic illnesses. By contrast, in nuclear families, the wife often seeks to introduce the dishes she inherited from her own mother, sometimes facing resistance from her husband, where newly married women often stress their strong opposition to their husbands’ food habits due to the practices they grew up with, some prefer heavy use of spices, while others avoid them; similar differences appear in the use of oils, fats, meats, and vegetables. Typically, the wife tries to convince her husband of her mother’s dishes by framing them as healthier for instance, promoting white soup instead of red soup thus using health arguments to justify her position.

## 5. BREAD AND IDENTITY

Bread in the consumption pattern of Algerian society constitutes a social and cultural marker; The word “khobza” (bread) also means livelihood, wage, work, stability, anthropologists consider bread to be linked to the construction of identity from childhood; as well as to memory; to beliefs and representations; to beauty, goodness, and systems of values; and to the physical body. In this regard, cereals have remained the main dietary pattern in the traditional tribal society that prevailed in North Africa since the early centuries that witnessed the settlement of human groups since the Mesolithic era, as well as with population density at the end of the nomadic stage, which was characterized by diversity in food sources after the flourishing of animal husbandry and cereal cultivation. The relationship of Algerians with cereals is deeply rooted in history, and historical references based on Roman historians and those who came after them indicate that the wheat that Algeria’s lands produced in ancient history was an important economic resource for Rome and was considered among the most important grains in the world and was used to produce semolina, and people of ancient Maghreb knew wheat and practiced cereal cultivation before Rome and Carthage. Herodotus says: “The remarkable thing is that there were three seasons for wheat harvesting in North Africa.” Numidian coins were adorned with wheat spikes above the heads of their kings as a symbol (Moumen, 2010, p. 39). Durum wheat and barley remained among the most important nutritional pillars and a key element in the economy and trade movement in the Mediterranean basin, and one of the basic components of identity in general, but this situation did not last for several reasons, among them the drought phenomenon that struck North Africa in recent decades, which affected the position of durum wheat and barley in the dietary pattern. Production of these quality crops declined, and with it the presence of barley bread and semolina in daily food declined .

## 6. AWARENESS OF SAFE CONSUMPTION

Awareness in Algerian society of the dangers of unhealthy food is increasing under the influence of bio-medical authority, which is leading, through the media, a fierce battle against processed foods, fast food, and sugars due to their direct link with serious diseases such as cancer, diabetes, and kidney failure. Social media also contributes to this, aiming to influence individuals’ relationship with food. Considering that cautious consumption has begun to take a wider place than it did in past years at the family and school levels, and signs of collective fear of unhealthy nutrition have emerged, especially as scientific reports constantly published in the media confirm the strong connection between diet and cancer in its various forms, particularly colon, rectal, and stomach cancer among men, and breast and uterine cancer among women, these informations has begun to significantly affect individuals’ representations of nutrition, and there is no doubt that obesity in Algeria is no longer an individual problem but a societal one, with fingers pointed at gluten, proteins, and carbohydrates, beside food identity has begun to be defined by what one avoids eating, as colon patients avoid certain foods. One interviewee confirmed that he decided to give up soft drinks and reduce bread consumption in daily meals as much as possible, fearing diabetic attacks. Meanwhile, societies in the northern hemisphere with high human development indicators are engaged in a race to achieve nutritional and health well-being through promotional programs focusing on reducing carbohydrates, while hot regions with low human development indicators suffer from high consumption of carbohydrates contained in the diet of a wide segment of the population. Women in Algerian society play a fundamental role in transmitting the nutritional identity to their children. As is well known, brides-to-be adopt their nutritional identity within the primary institution, the extended traditional family in Algeria and transfer it to their new families, which take from it and are influenced by it. We are therefore in front of a continuous process of reproducing a nutritional identity that has endured in Algerian society despite the requirements of social change. However, in recent years under the impact of the products of globalization that erased some boundaries and reshaped others, there has been a reconfiguration of dietary patterns across generations, thus increasing the intensity of influence. In this regard, other socializing institutions intervene in building the consumer and the prevailing dietary patterns in society, including the blue space, where social media contributes significantly to pushing housewives or even househusbands towards discovering everything new in the world of cooking. This is influenced by several factors among them we mention the noticeable increase in the cost of traditional dishes in recent years, which has led families to search for less costly meals. In this context, one of our interviewees, a working housewife, confirmed: “I turn to the internet in search of economic recipes, because traditional ones like couscous and others are no longer the food of the poor as they used to be. I look for what is easier, less costly, and accepted by the family members.” Social media and television channels have come to play an influential role in the circulation of health information about the dangers of processed foods, shaping new food values and a culture that rejects anything carrying risks to individual health. On the other hand, cultural entities have begun to emerge in industrial societies that promote what is known today as organic or natural food, free of fertilizers, chemical additives, and food enhancers such as color and taste. They call for avoiding fast food and limiting the dominance of sugar and salt in diets, as they are considered a main source of disease. These socializing values have started to find a place in Algerian society, albeit slowly. However, organic food free of fertilizers has not yet attracted much attention from individuals, for several reasons, among them the economic difficulties that families face due to seasonal scarcity and rising prices. Thus, it is not possible to talk today about organic food at a time when the state is still striving to provide food by solving farmers’ problems and reducing the chaos of markets.

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