

Article

The Politics of Purity, Disgust, and Contamination: Communal Identity of Trotter (Pig) Sellers in Madina Zongo (Accra)

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Abstract: The interplay of food, people, and market in the multi-religious and multi-ethnic neighborhood of Madina Zongo, Accra, results to some extent in food exchange. In a plural setting like Madina Zongo, an important aspect of their co-existence is the sharing of food; in so doing people claim their identities and mark boundaries; consequently, food in this sense becomes a potential for conflict. My primary aim in this paper is to focus on pig feet (trotter) sellers by drawing attention to their conflicting experiences and encounters in selling trotter. Pig feet (trotter) is a commodity that comes through a global network and is considered haram and unclean by Muslims. Actions by religious practitioners, thereby, play a pivotal role in provoking these experiences and, for this reason, it is prone to triggering tensions. In this paper, I explore the embodied encounters between these traders in the market (inhabited by people of different religious traditions) and, to some extent, the buyers and how this triggers religious sensibilities and at the same time evokes strong responses among those frequenting the space (e.g., market women and customers) and those (trotter sellers) who live in predominantly Muslim neighborhoods. In my analysis on tensions and pollution, I take into consideration groundworks by authors such as Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger*, Sara Ahmed's and Deborah Durham's notion of disgust and the anthropology of imagination, and inspired works on materiality such as the Latourian Actor-Network Theory (ANT) which draws attention to the agency of the non-human. This paper studies how religiously contested and so-called "contaminated" foodstuffs such as pig feet (trotter) result in boundary-making practices among members of the market and Zongo community. I argue that ideas of purity are influenced largely by cultural and religious convictions which seems not to be compromised by religious practitioners. The paper also investigates strategies people/sellers develop to negotiate these social relations.

Keywords: religion; food; pig trotters; conflict; co-existence; disgust; contamination; pollution; encounter; tension; communal; identity

Iklmatu: Rabiatu I need you to go to Slaha market to buy food ingredients for super. Make sure to use the entrance from the vegetable sellers, do not go through the gate where pig meat is sold. I am warning you, don't use that lane ok...

Rabiatu: why mama?

Iklmatu: we are Muslims, and the pig is an abomination for us. Do not ever go close to it. The sight of it makes me nauseous, and I don't want you close to it. Remember not to use their side of the market!

1. Introduction

Food is arguably a crucial "instrument of power" (Grassi 2013, p. 194), and "a system of communication" which "serves as a sign" (Barthes 1997, p. 25). Similarly, "to know what, where, how,

when, and with whom people eat is to know the character of their society” (Farb and Armelagos 1980, p. 211). Consequently, food could potentially be a “thing of conflict,” as exemplified in the opening vignette. Rabiātu’s mother articulates her dislike for pork, justifying it with the adherence to a religious taboo, and socializes her daughter using her “acquired repulsion” for pig meat to reinforce her to also repel it.

Given this, food forges identities and relationships through communal sharing and eating and also marks boundaries due to cultural and religious convictions. Religious food taboos entangled with notions of disgust are manifested at various levels. Historically, religious food preferences create binaries, resulting in religiously acceptable and shared normative standards as well as forbidden and tabooed practice reinforced by religious norms. (Bailey 2017, p. 19; Schorsch 2018, p. 3). This research is grounded in the multi-ethnic and multi-religious neighborhood of Madina Zongo in Accra, Ghana, where I have conducted research on “food as entry point to the material study of religion in plural settings” as part of the “Madina Project” which focuses on the modalities of co-existence in everyday encounters amongst religious practitioners.

In many parts of the country, Christians and Muslims live next to each other and mingle freely in all aspects of human endeavors. Muslims buy food items from Christians and vice versa. At Madina, food as material culture marks social, cultural, and religious identities. Christians and Muslims encounter each other at different levels, with food and its sharing as an integral part of their co-existence. Particularly, they encounter one another in daily situations, festive occasions, and the market place, and food is the main item used to celebrate rites of passage. Christians and Muslims in this area have unique encounters in some socio-cultural settings that involve food and eating because some meals are perceived to be better prepared by one religious group than the other. For example, Christians would rather buy *Waakye* (a rice and beans meal) or *Tuo Zaafi* (a corn flour meal) from a Muslim (particularly common amongst Muslims who originate from north Ghana) or preferably from the Zongo. Nonetheless, certain foodstuffs and, by extension, their owners/sellers are considered contagious, hence, dangers of contamination are upheld. Thus even though there seems to be a widely held view of “peaceful co-existence” with regards to Muslim-Christian relations in relation to food matters, the often-used “co-existence” obscures the fact that food amongst other everyday matters can also be a cause of conflict. For example, there have been instances of open confrontations, occasional tensions, and misunderstandings between different Muslim and Christian groups. In the recent past, tensions in Madina arose over a spatial dispute between Muslims and Christians, the Church and Muslim youth¹. For instance, the Methodist Church in the community was taken to court in 2009 by a Muslim for making noise in the neighborhood during the night, and an injunction was placed on the church not to make noise after 10 p.m. Around the same period, the Christians who used the Zurak park (football and community park owned by a Muslim) as a prayer ground in the evenings were attacked and beaten up on one of the evenings in 2011 (Fosu-Ankra 2018, p. 3). This article, however, discusses the snubs and discriminations endured by trotter sellers by some of their Muslim neighbors in Madina Zongo in their everyday encounters. The interest of this paper is the communal tensions that arise as a result of an Islamic food taboo (pork) and the experiences that underscore the embodied connections, making boundaries which affect shared spaces and food. Focusing on the dual identity of Auntie Abigail, a Christian trotter seller at the Madina Market and a resident at Madina Zongo, I draw attention to her experiences and encounters as a trotter seller and demonstrate how food (pig trotters) became a source of conflict. The article argues that certain foodstuffs limit the experiences of shared identities and differences at the Zongo around food by means of the notions of contamination and politics of purity. I especially focus on disgust as that which has a “corporal dimension of rejection” (Durham 2011, p. 135).

¹ “Madina Youth Clash” <https://www.modernghana.com/news/329428/police-madina-youth-clash.html>. Retrieved: 28 July 2020.

In this article, I shall use the narratives obtained from interlocutors in connection with disgust elicited by pork as a “thing of conflict.” As a “thing of conflict,” pig trotter raises issues of purity, contamination, and disgust since it is potentially “the taboo problem” (Williams 2004, p. 429). This article adopts a single case study methodology, triangulating data gathered from thirty-two interviews, participant observation and group discussions. I focused on trotter sellers, market women who were in close proximity with trotter sellers, Zongo dwellers, and taxi drivers. I engaged in casual chats with women during festivities and feasting and customers of my trotter sellers. The story of Auntie Abigail serves as one of the central case studies that exemplify and support narratives from other trotter sellers with similar experiences. This ethnographic data gathered over a period of twenty-four months was conducted blending the lingua franca of Madina Zongo consisting of Twi, Hausa, and English. Consequently, the interviews were conducted predominantly in English, Twi, and Hausa (origin from northern Nigeria and predominantly spoken in Muslim communities/Zongos). Matters of disgust and contamination were discussed using these modes of communication.

However, before delving into issues of contamination and disgust, it is important to briefly look at how food exchanges at the Zongo take place in order to get a background into gastro-politics at the levels of food preparation and eating together among Muslims and Christians. I explore the role food plays, how its preparation and exchange take place, the extent to which that excludes so-called contaminated persons from food roles, and the implications for modalities of co-existence.

2. Food in Madina Zongo

Madina Zongo was created in 1959 by Alhaji Seido Karbo with the permission of the La Mantse (the Landowners)². It is one of the communities within the La Nkwantanang Municipal Assembly, a sub-urban settlement located to the north-east of Accra and shares a boundary with the University of Ghana to the north. It has a population of 111,926³ people comprising of different ethnic⁴ and religious groups⁵. Over the past sixty years, Madina Zongo has developed into one of the major residential and commercial centers in the city of Accra. Though initially created and inhabited by Muslims, Madina is now cosmopolitan as well as multi-religious and home to many Muslims and Christians who co-exist at many levels. In the heart of Madina Zongo is the Madina Market, which serves the people in Madina Zongo and other neighboring communities with food supplies and other market services. In the Madina Market, vegetables, fruits, plantains, cassavas, fish, maize, grinding mills, and the butcher shop have known locations with few instances of separation. Like most markets in Ghana, it is dominated by women with commodity leaders as queens. The butcher shop and the grinding mills are exclusively male-dominated jobs at the Madina Market. The butchers predominantly from the Dagomba ethnic group process and sell halal meat. They suggest that butchery is a traditional occupation and clan-based. Christians and Muslims are known to buy from these butcher shops, with abattoirs both private and state-managed by Muslims. Consequently, Muslims and Christians are known to share meals; they buy from each other with some Christians sensitive to their Muslim guest. Some Christians suggest that they ensure that a fowl is slaughtered the halal way during Christmas in order to serve their Muslim guest and neighbors. While some Christians make conscious effort to serve their Muslim guest and neighbors the “halal way,” some Muslims in Madina confess that they are unable to eat the meal due to issues of trust.

² (Ntewusu 2012) “The Northern Factor in Accra: a historical study of Madina Zongo as a Sub-urban settlement 1957–2000” (Mphil Thesis 2005, Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana).

³ (Philomena 2014).

⁴ Some of the Southern ethnic groups in Madina include Ga, Asante, Akyem, Ewe, and Krobo amongst others. The Northern ethnic groups include Dagomba, Mamprusi, Gonja, Bassari, Frafra, Mossi, Fulani, Grushi, Kotokoli, Chokosi, Kokomba, and Bassari; most of the definition of northerners apply to other tribes from the neighboring West African countries (Ntewusu 2005).

⁵ Madina has a visible Muslim majority, a heavy Christian presence (Church buildings and activities), and a few who suggest they are adherents of African Traditional Religion.

Madina Zongo is a suburb of Accra, the capital city of Ghana. Zongo is a Hausa term, meaning the camping place of a carrier or a lodging place of travelers. It is also a term which referred to the section of a town where Muslim traders lived. As Muslim merchants and clerics moved to the south, which was considered Christian to a large extent; they isolated themselves and founded their own communities. Madina Zongo has often been referred to as a “settler town,” “diasporan community,” “strangers quarters,” etc. Furthermore, as part of this migration, they brought in certain food ingredients and traded in them. Some of these ingredients were peculiar to their places of origin but have been misconstrued and Islamized. To date, the Zongo communities are perceived to be a hub of meals such as *Waakye*, *Tuo Zaafi*, “*Burkina*,” *Hausa beer*, *Sobolo* etc.⁶ All this helped them to maintain their religio-cultural identity.

People in Madina Zongo often come together to celebrate, to grieve, or to perform a communal or religious rite. Such occasions call for conviviality and feasting, or some form of eating together. Thus, it is common to have members of the community gathered together to share meals on joyous occasions and in moments of communal sharing. During these feasts, it is common to find most linking streets blocked with tents, chairs, and loud music with women and children dancing in front of the houses or homes where the festivities are going on. Most people feel the need/inclination to join in the festivities, even when they have not been formally invited by the host. Some informants told me, “when you see a group of people seated or cooking, then you know there is an event.” In some instances, community taxi drivers would inform passengers of an occasion which blocked a link road, thereby creating awareness. However, many find this phenomenon/practice of creating physical barriers because of one occasion or the other very unpleasant. Participating in the food preparation at these occasions is one of the manners in which the people in Madina Zongo enforce/reinforce communal bonds. Consequently, lending a hand to help prepare food for a neighbor’s event is taken seriously by the inhabitants of the Zongo. Cooking is seen here as a practice that transects social and religious spheres. Cooking is a specific moment within the broader network of social relations connected to food ways and food politics. At Madina Zongo, just as observed by Mintz and Du Bois elsewhere, “like all culturally defined material substances used in the creation and maintenance of social relationships, food serves both to solidify group membership and to set groups apart” (Mintz and Bois 2002). In Madina’s Zongoscape, feasts for any occasion, involve a whole community eating together; to facilitate this, female relatives organize themselves with friends and family to prepare food. The social division between men and women during such festivities creates both division and solidarities. Women are primarily in charge of organizing food, hence, buying ingredients, cooking, and serving, while men provide financial support. At the Zongo, cooking places women in more intimate contact with others and demonstrates their positive character traits of reliability, solidarity, and helpfulness; it also secures long-term reciprocity within their circles. Cooking, like sharing food, can take place in various social contexts. Therefore, how, where, and with whom food is cooked plays a crucial role and may reveal social relations that shape communal identity.

3. Trotter: A Thing of Conflict

The Madina Market, a key hub for the trotter retail trade in Accra, is a sprawling space of stalls, shops, and street vendors. Like most markets in the city of Accra, it is managed by the local government and regarded as a secular space in which market players bargain their religious identities. State laws govern the market and by extension the meat market which includes the butcher shop, which is a space managed and controlled by Muslims with patronage from Muslims and Christians. Madina is an important food supply rendezvous, which comes with bustling crowds and people advertising

⁶ For further readings, see Samuel A. Ntewusu “The Northern Factor in Accra: a historical study of Madina Zongo as a Sub-urban settlement 1957–2000” (Mphil Thesis 2005, Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana) and Issifu Abdul-Razak “The Role of Muslims in the socio-economic development of Ghana: a case study of Madina Zongo” (Mphil Thesis, Department for the Study of Religion, 2010, University of Ghana).

their wares in various exciting ways. The twist about this market is that unlike markets situated in other Zongos in the city of Accra, such as *Nima*, *Mamobi*, *Sabon Zongo*, and *Sukura*, the Madina Market, situated at a predominantly Muslim community, presents a fascinating perspective on co-existence, by accommodating the presence of pig feet in the heart of the market. Pig feet and pork are generally considered prohibited (*Haram*) per Islamic teachings as in the Quran, and they are an element of disgust among Muslims.

Qur'an 5:3 "Forbidden for you (for food) are: dead meat, the flesh of swine, and that on which hath been invoked the name of other than Allah."

Qur'an 2:173, Qur'an 6:145, and Qur'an 16:115 all address the prohibition of swine.

Muslims are expected to adhere to these restrictions to the latter. For this reason, making room for this "thing of conflict" in the Zongo, and permitting it to co-exist with the "others," is a reflection of the type of co-existence that has often been said to be characteristic of Madina Zongo. At the individual level, however, this overall discourse of harmonious co-existence proves to be more complex; neighbors and market players create physical and invisible boundaries in respect of their religious taboos and for personal reasons that enable them to navigate this setting of co-existence. At times, these practices of boundary-making infringe on and challenge the narrative of co-existence. Indeed, it creates conflict.

Pig trotter or simply trotter is the culinary term used to refer to the feet of pigs. Pig feet (trotter) come to Madina through a global network of multinational meat processors and merchants, mainly from Europe. Denmark, Germany, Holland, and Sweden are among several European countries that export this product, with known brands such as Orange Top (formerly Miss Piggy), Rosita, and Jonny's (*Obaa Pa*)⁷. Pig feet are packaged in a barrel with a concentrate of brine as a preservative; they are highly valued and described as tasty among trotter favorites. Trotters are used for the preparation of stews and soups. The gelatin in the trotter bones is said to have a special quality of thickening soups such as the palm nut soup, groundnut soup, light soup, etc. They are fried at pubs/drinking spots and said to be very tasty when eaten with alcohol. It is an occupation for women, and for some, it has been a generational occupation. Muslim traders and patrons avoid places where trotters are displayed. Interlocutors also suggest that Muslims do not rent their stalls to people who intend to sell trotter.

It is against this background that I first present the narration of Auntie Abigail my main interlocutor. I met Auntie Abigail during my ethnographic work at the Madina Market in 2018 when I attempted to buy pig trotters from her and another trotter seller. It turned out that my dress code largely influenced my failed attempt to buy the trotters since Auntie Abigail and others refused to sell to me. By refusing to sell to me, the sellers may have wanted to prevent the trotter from becoming a "thing of conflict."

The period leading up to this day, I had worked to overcome my fear of contamination, smells of brine, and discomfiting bodily movements of my trotter interlocutors and displayed as seen in Figures 1 and 2. These fears stemmed from my lived experiences of interactions and observations as well as my socialization as a Muslim. In my attempt to overcome my anxiety, I focused on the positive possibilities of ethnographical work among trotter traders, partly because I found it worth pursuing. As I gradually overcame my fears and began to build relationships of trust with the trotter sellers, it was a gracious moment to ask personal questions. For instance, I could ask where they lived, how sales went, and possibly invite them to join in snacks that I took along at the market. The sheer novelty of my willingness to eat with my trotter interlocutors opened up discussions of rejections meted out to them by Muslims. However, my near-comfortable integration in the market and especially with the trotter seller seemed worrying, not only among other Muslim traders in the market who noticed my veil in most instances but also among the trotter sellers themselves. They found my close association with them troubling. Initially, they articulated not taking me seriously. Consequently, my visit with a guard from the La Nkwantanang Municipal Assembly reinforced my seriousness. I presented the Illuster

⁷ Means "good lady" in Twi, a Ghanaian local language. This brand has been indigenized to appeal to the local Ghanaian consumer.

(Utrecht University Alumni Magazine) and a present to my trotter interlocutors, and it symbolically changed our line of conversation. For once, they confessed that they had been taken seriously by a so-called researcher who comes and interacts with them.



Figure 1. Trotters on display at the Madina Market. (Picture taken by the author.)



Figure 2. This picture shows a customer buying pig trotter and the author in a white hijab speaking to a trotter seller. (Picture taken by Nabeel Adum-Atta).

Auntie Abigail is a middle-aged woman, a Christian by faith, and has been a resident of the Madina Zongo for 28 years. She has been known for her good culinary skills and her tasty meals, which she used to share during Christmas and Easter festivities as a show of reciprocating the gesture of her predominantly Muslim neighbors who share meat and other food-related gifts with her, during their religious and social occasions. As a consequence of her renown culinary skills, she was very often called upon by her Muslim neighbors, to join in the cooking of meals to serve their guests at events and occasions. It is a common trend that food plays a central role at events such as weddings, funerals, naming ceremonies, and religious festivals in the Zongo. Several ethnic groups in the Zongo unanimously regard food as a necessary and essential part of celebrations; hence, its preparation and sharing are taken very seriously.

Having lived in the predominantly Muslim community for more than two decades, she had developed relationships and friendships with her Muslim neighbors that had seen her participating

in the preparation of food and its sharing at many Muslim occasions at the request of her Muslim neighbors. Speaking to Auntie Abigail about how she had co-existed with her neighbors in the past, she said, "I feel a part of them, I respect their way of life, and I join them when there is a get-together. The Hajia's, the Alhaji's and the Amaeriya's are nice when they do not know what I sell at the market, I have always attempted to keep a good relationship with them by way of greetings. Occasionally they would tell me: Auntie we have a wedding oo, or some other event so please come along and help us prepare what we will serve to our guests. At times when I am not personally invited, because of my relationship with them, I feel obliged to go and assist them." She explained that offering her assistance to her neighbors in their festive food preparations was seen as a sign of solidarity and helped her maintain some social relations.

She was in fact very sought after when there was food to be cooked until the knowledge of her economic livelihood became known to some members of the community. This knowledge profoundly affected her relationships and social acceptance. This then led to the segregation of the so-called contaminated body of my primary informant Auntie Abigail. According to her, these social challenges started when she was identified as a trotter seller.

Upon realizing that Auntie Abigail was a trotter seller however, her neighbors stopped extending invitations to her to come and to assist with food preparations. When she attended an event without an official invitation, she observed some non-verbal gestures were made by those that found her as an element of contamination to others, and she was quickly dispatched with a take-away pack of food or some other food ingredients and politely led out, somehow. In addition, she began to experience her neighbors now hesitating in accepting her gifts of food during the Christmas and Easter celebration. This was however not the case in the past when her identity as a trotter seller was not known. As Mary Douglas writes, "it would seem that whenever a people are aware of encroachment and danger, dietary rules controlling what goes into the body would serve as a vivid analogy of the corpus of their cultural categories at risk" (Douglas 2001, p. 79). This is an indication that the discovery and association of a "thing of conflict" with Auntie Abigail gradually became problematic as she was conceived as contaminated.

Auntie Abigail stated that she is very convinced that it is out of politeness and the show of good neighborliness that her neighbors accepted her gifts of food when she offered them. She, however, said that she was aware that although they accepted the food, they did not consume it. On recognizing this, she stopped sharing food, so that no one would feel troubled and worried over how to dispose of her gifts bought from the sale of "things of conflict." Again, Auntie Abigail practices what Deborah Durham describes as "distantiation" when she attends occasions of her Muslim neighbors in order to save anyone who perceives her as a contaminant the trouble of wondering if she was involved in the food preparation or not. She would rather visit the neighbor who organized the event later and render her apologies for not attending. As a result, she has developed a series of excuses to decline invitations to cooking and food preparation by her Muslim neighbors who do not know she trades in trotters at the market. Undoubtedly Auntie Abigail's status as a trader of an item of disgust has contaminated her relationships and blocked paths she used to navigate her predominantly Muslim neighborhood in the past. This "thing of conflict" has reduced a once very outgoing and sociable person into one who will make excuses to shun social events to keep to her home in order to not offend others.

4. Spaces and Mediation

As much as food forges relations and marks boundaries, spaces reinforce the notion of boundaries (unclear). As Lawson observes, "space is both that which brings us together and simultaneously that which separates us from each other" (Lawson 2001, p. 6). Spaces such as the kitchen and streets where Zongo women get together in preparing meals for occasions send a powerful signal to the individuals in control of preparing the meal. In their attempt to negotiate contaminated bodies, space is used to mediate food sensibilities (in this case, the food sensibilities extend to the seller of that particular food item, such as pig trotters). This manner of social interaction results in symbolic boundaries of inclusion; if someone is

not wanted at a specific space, members would send coded (non-linguistic) signs understood within, to exclude a person, either physically or socially. As argued by Lamont and Molnár, space “allows us to capture the dynamic dimensions of social relations” (Lamont and Molnár 2002, p. 168). Sara Ahmed writes: “disgust does something, certainly: through disgust, bodies ‘recoil’ from their proximity, as a proximity that is felt as nakedness or as an exposure on the skin surface” (Ahmed 2004, p. 83). Equally, disgust seems to function as a drive for boundary-making to the extent of barring people from particular spaces; people who feel disgusted, in this case, Muslim neighbors, recoil from close proximity with the object of disgust.

Zongo women manifest coded language to be “captured” by the so-called “other” in space negotiations during encounters that involve food preparations and eating together. This space negotiation and emotional experiences are accompanied by uneasiness and friction amongst the parties involved for one is seen as an object of disgust as they share a social space because one (trotter seller) is continually in physical contact with a religiously tabooed ingredient. Consequently, not eating with a contaminated body or eating in close proximity with a so-called contaminated body raises issues of distantiation and avoidance, as articulated by Douglas: “rules of avoidance make a visible public recognition of its boundaries” (Douglas 2001, p. 160).

The politics of purity through the avoidance of close contact with Auntie Abigail is said to be necessary to uphold the cleanliness of body and clothes for prayers. Arguably, not only are products of pigs haram, but the seller of pork and its derivatives are also contaminated together with his/her personal affects, no matter whether the person has bathed or donned new or clean clothing. The purity of one is believed to be compromised when one gets in close interaction with the seller of pig or its derivatives. Therefore, the Muslim women dispatch Auntie Abigail with a take-away food in a plastic bag to negotiate/avoid contamination. As Lamont and Molnár (2002, p. 181) observed, “boundaries are conditions not only for separation and exclusion, but also for communication, exchange, bridging, and inclusion.” In this regard, her work as a trotter seller produces two types of distantiation: avoidance of contact by her neighbors and distantiation by restricting contact through physical attendance or food exchanges. While the physical boundary is created to negotiate a religious taboo, food essentially plays a vital role by being a uniting and converging agent. For most people, food is the common element of identity in one group while it simultaneously becomes a cause for members of one religious group to diverge and assert their distinct religious identity vis-à-vis members of the other tabooed group, such as Auntie Abigail. As noted before, it is important to mention the role of disgust in creating boundaries where one group separates itself from the other. This is expressed clearly by Miller: “disgust has other powerful communalizing capacities, it performs this function obviously by helping define and locate the boundary separating our group from their group, purity from pollution, the violable from the inviolable” (Miller 1997, p. 194). This conveniently affirms the notion that food forges unity as well as marks boundaries.

Similarly, this resonates with the difficulty Jews have of eating together with others, Jordan Rosenblum notes that “despite the fact that the food is clearly kosher, the banquet at which it is consumed is not. The concern here is commensal in nature, and not culinary. It is about with whom you eat, and not what you eat” (Rosenblum 2010, p. 92). The observation seems extended in the case of the Zongo where it is not only an issue of what you eat but who takes part in the preparation of the communal meals.

5. Boundaries: Negotiated or Static

Exclusion or boundary-making are extreme/practices that eliminate the participation of so-called contaminated participants within a community. Although they (so-called contaminated persons) have limited access to partake in the preparation, eating, and intermingling, they may observe from a practice of distantiation. Auntie Abigail affirms that her actions of distantiation are reactions to how women/neighbors welcome her presence. She said, “they look at me with scorn and in some instances, they ignore me even when I greet them.” She is able to understand and decode some of

the signs the women make to one another. Words sometimes follow the gestures to clarify further. The corporeal aesthetics these gestures and signs evoke present worry and rejection, in her opinion. Her narrative explores what she describes as “troubling,” the relational (Latour 2005) manner disgust can be embodied. It arises in one person in response to the corporeal aesthetics of another. As Miller suggests, “disgust has a vice; it is a moral sentiment of extraordinary inclusiveness and does more than register a simple aversion towards the objects of its focus. It degrades them in a moral way” (Miller 1997, p. 197). Miller seems to suggest that it is not merely a social practice, meaning that people who consider Auntie Abigail contaminated consider themselves to be religiously and morally superior to Auntie Abigail. This assertion deconstructs the social and political implications of co-existence. This explains the embodied experience of parties involved and evidence of one group attempting to observe a religious taboo, a manifestation of a figment of imagination.

In this regime of embodiment, disgust works to remind Auntie Abigail of the social vulnerability of her body as contaminated, socially excluded in communal activities, which threatens less intimate relationships, especially in public spaces. During social encounters, Auntie Abigail would instead negotiate social ridicule by practicing avoidance during food sharing and preparations. The practice of avoidance is mainly situational, varying from self-awareness while in the Zongo to a sense of belonging to an association of trotter sellers at the market place. As Freud (Freud 1950, p. 174) observed, “to eat and drink with someone was at the same time a symbol and a confirmation of social community and the assumption of mutual obligations.”

Who takes part in communal food preparation is highly significant, as this is based on trust, and forges shared identities. Auntie Abigail narrates that she sees her neighbors squeezing their noses together with the upper part of their lips, avoiding the use of their fingers, maybe not to make her feel bad, and turning their heads away from her in times of close contact, for instance, when they meet at the entrance of the house. She also said that her neighbors take extreme care not to use her tools and utensils. Likewise, she maintains utmost care in making sure she does not contaminate her neighbors’ utensils or items. For instance, she narrates how she offered her neighbor a sealed bottled of Fanta that was rejected with a show of contentment. However, she says she has become accustomed to such rejections now. Sister Akua, a younger trotter seller, corroborates Auntie Abigail’s experiences but adds that she tries to keep relations with her Muslim friends and neighbors at a distance.

Bilal’s encounter with his Christian friend in the Zongo highlights another embodied perspective. Bilal told me that his childhood friend invited him to have a fufu and light soup meal with him. He narrated that, as they enjoyed the meal he (Bilal) lamented on the fatty nature of the meat his friend suggested that perhaps it was a fatty cow. After they finished their meal, his friend asked about his impression, and he told him how he enjoyed it. Then the friend said: to his surprise, that that was pig meat, and pork tastes good, does it not? Infuriated by his knowledge that the meat was pork, Bilal said he immediately felt contaminated and disgusted at his friend’s action and felt nauseous. According to him, he had eaten the food on the basis of trust. Consequently, the thought of possible pollution of his body he said keeps him away from sharing food in most circumstances. Following this situation, he still feels that his body has been defiled and contaminated. William Miller explains that “disgust differs from other emotions by having a unique aversive style. The idiom of disgust consistently evokes the sensory experience of what it feels like to be put in danger by the disgusting, of what it feels like to be too close to it, to have to smell it, see it, or touch it” (Miller 1997, p. 9). Indeed, in Madina, disgust is translated as “*kazanta*,” “*dawuda*,” “*ganni alade na kawo ameyi*”, literally causing one’s stomach to stir up to the point of throwing up or causing one to lose appetite.

The experience of this informant may also bring up reflections on the power of memory and for how long the memory of sensation produces or reproduces embodiments of disgust. Disgust involves history as it forces one to deal with what seems to be generally rejected (Ahmed 2004). Nausea, sense of contamination, disgust, and the other psychological reactions that Bilal felt after he ingested food that is purported to be contaminated or haram makes him cautious because of an experience mediated by knowledge. The mediation of disgust, contamination, or purity invariably leads to “acquired

repulsion” that people socially acquire through their upbringing, as illustrated in the opening vignette. The informant seems to have undergone inherited memory of disgust mediated by knowledge and socialization; knowledge of pork being a religious taboo and the sensations of pollution that is elicited.

Acquired repulsion informs religious taboos, public perceptions, and practices and is culturally formed. I argue that disgust goes beyond “merely distaste and dislike” (Durham 2011, p. 135). Durham argues that disgust operates on a level of “senses” and “feeling” and is “more associated with nature” (Durham 2011, p. 136), overlooking the ability to be socially nurtured and influenced to respond repulsively to non-human objects (Latour 2005). I attempt to present disgust as a religious category which provides a domain to interrogate the relationship between religious taboo and acquired repulsion, which is socially imbued. The prohibition against pork observed by Muslims is taught to younger ones at an early age and supported by religious references to the pig as haram, reinforced by myths to deter them from close association with it, and often point to the dirty nature of domesticated pigs. Children are trained to acquire a repulsion against pigs and adhere strictly to a religious prescription. Some parents confess that some of the narrations given to their children about pigs are conjured and invented lies and hatred for it. This may corroborate Douglas’ assertion that “if the Israelites did not keep a pig, they would not be familiar with its habits” (Douglas 2001, p. 56). The religious practitioners derive their power/authority from guarding these traditions. This is perhaps that which gives religion meaning and power and is articulated by Douglas: “The danger which is risked by boundary transgression is power” (Douglas 2001, p. 163).

Sara Ahmed interrogates the relationship between food and power relations, asking, “why is disgust so crucial to power? Does disgust work to maintain power relations through how it maintains bodily boundaries? The relationship between disgust and power is evident when we consider the spatiality of disgust reactions, and their role in the hierarchizing of spaces as well as bodies” (Ahmed 2004, p. 88). Douglas shows how the symbolism of the body’s boundaries is used to express danger to community boundaries (Douglas 2003, p. 124), suggesting that “rituals mediate experiences, including social experience” (Douglas 2001, p. 70).

Deborah Durham points out that “if we think of disgust as an act of an embodied imagination, and combine that insight with the idea that disgust is both about intimacy/proximity and distantiating disgust is a form of action, not a reaction” (Durham 2011, p. 151). If disgust is a form of action, as suggested by Durham, then I suggest reflections on disgust as a culturally “acquired repulsion” in social life. An acquired aversion. Distantiation in this context is a particular boundary from the other. A sensibility that allows one to maintain a distance from the disgusting object and that which is linked to it.

6. Conclusions

Food is a useful instrument for forging solidarity and alliance, identity, and power, as well as demarcating lines and boundaries. Food provides a lens to understand cultures and embodied experiences of social relations, the establishment, and maintenance of social networks.

Religion and religious practices shape communal sharing; religion influences the food served, who one eats with, what one eats—but as I have argued earlier, the ideas of purity are influenced largely by “acquired repulsions” from cultural and religious convictions which seem not to be compromised by the religious practitioner. The article has focused on people living together in quite narrow spaces, where they cannot easily avoid each other and have, therefore, reaffirmed the religious adherence of Muslims through material culture through boundary-making. As pointed out earlier, Christians and Muslims are to a large extent willing to eat each other’s food, meaning that Muslims are not disgusted by the bodies or the religious beliefs of Christians per se. It is about pork, but not only the pork itself: impurity “travels” from the trotters to a wider network of people and objects who have been in contact with it. The risk of “contagion” awakens and exposes latent negative feelings towards Christians in general that may otherwise have remained dormant. So much as Muslims attempt to co-exist peacefully with their neighbors, people such as Auntie Abigail have developed strategies of

avoidance so that the things of conflict do not explode and mar their relationship. In this article I have pointed to two interrelated issues: disgust as a boundary marker, based on religious taboos, inherited memory, and socialization; and food taboos/haram foodstuff/contagious foodstuffs featured as a “thing of conflict” in Zongo co-existence that produce patterns of avoidance and distancing (both on the part of the person contaminated and on the part of those fearing the contamination). As part of the latter, I highlighted in the story of Auntie Abigail various levels of “contamination”: the trotters themselves, the seller as a person as well as her affects, her practices, and the food she prepares, and gifts bought from the proceeds of the sale of the trotter.

However, as Durham suggests, because disgust “requires an act of imagination” acquired through social interaction and culturally influenced by others’ sensations and sentiment, pig trotters provoke disgust, which in turn creates boundaries because it is “a recognition of danger to purity” (Miller 1997, p. 204), which is protected by physical bordering. Again, it is also impossible to comprehend disgust without the thought of pollution, purity, or contamination (Miller 1997, p. 17). Likewise, Sara Ahmed highlights, “disgust pulls us always from the object, a pulling that feels almost involuntarily, as if our bodies were thinking for us, on behalf of us” (Ahmed 2014, p. 84). I argued in this article that disgust, contamination, and pollution are not mostly limited to the object of disgust, which is not only the pig trotter but extends to the actors such as the eater, seller, and the buyer. No wonder then that Auntie Abigail, my main informant, attempts to practice avoidance and distanciation in her quest to negotiate social relations in her predominantly Muslim community.

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