Fall 2015

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Exploring Cape Malay Identity Through the Lens of Food

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South Africa: Cape Town
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for South Africa:
Multiculturalism and Human Rights, SIT Study Abroad

Fall 2015
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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people for helping me with my research project.

- Stewart Chirova, Tabisa Dyonase, and the rest of the SIT staff: Thank you for all of your hard work that made this semester possible.
- Ismail Farouk: Thank you so much for your unconditional support and friendship.
- Shireen Narkedien: Without your help, I wouldn’t have been able to finish this paper. Thank you!
- Jasmien & Tasneem: Thank you for teaching me to cook and providing me with lovely company.
- Kathy and Wim Ang: Without the love and encouragement of my beautiful parents, I would not have gotten through this semester. Thanks for giving birth to me.
Abstract

This study explores the construction of Cape Malay identity through the lens of food. Made up of descendants of slaves from India, Madagascar, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mozambique, and other places, “Cape Malay” is a very contentious identity. Although people who fall under the label of Cape Malay today are hundreds of years removed from their slave ancestors, there are still distinct remnants of these origins in Cape Malay culture. One of the ways in which this is most evident is Cape Malay cuisine. Cape Malay dishes such as bobotie, samosas, bredie, and beryani have become staples in South African food and all have clear slave roots. However, although many elements of Cape Malay cuisine can be traced back to India, Indonesia, and other places where slaves came from, it is more than the sum of these parts: it is evidence of the unique and particular Cape Malay identity.

In this project, I use a combination of secondary research, observations, and very informal interviews with people who identify as Cape Malay about their identities to explore the extent to which they feel connected to their slave heritage. I look at Cape Malay identity through the lens of food, as food is a universally important marker of tradition and culture. Through my research, I find that although there are many aspects of slave ancestry that can be found in Cape Malay culture, Cape Malay people today identify more with their distinct South African identity rather than with their slave heritage.
Introduction

The subject of my research is Cape Malay identity. Although this is a highly contested and socially constructed term just like any other racial or ethnic label, it is generally used to refer to the descendants of slaves who were brought to the Cape Town area primarily from South and Southeast Asia. However, many Cape Malay people also have ancestry from Europe, South Asia, Madagascar, and other places in Africa (da Costa, 1994, p. 238). Although Cape Malay identity has always had distinct slave origins, after the end of slavery in South Africa, the Cape Malay community was racially classified as “coloured” and many Cape Malay people were forcibly relocated to places such as Bo-Kaap under the Group Areas Act. Often, the term “Cape Malay” is used interchangeably with “Muslim” or “Cape Muslim” because of the strong presence of Islam within the Cape Malay community (Baderoorn, 2014). However, though Islam was an extremely important force in building a shared identity among slaves brought to Cape Town, not all Cape Malay people are Muslim and not all South African Muslims are Cape Malay. Therefore, I will be examining Cape Malay identity not through the lens of religion, but through the lens of food. Furthermore, in this paper, I will use the term “Cape Malay” unless specifically referring to Islam and its followers, in which case I will use “Muslim.”

Specifically, my research has the following objectives: 1) to determine the role of food in the construction of a Cape Malay identity, 2) to explore whether or not Cape Malay people today maintain a conscious connection to their heritage, and 3) to explore whether and how food is used to bridge the gap between present-day Cape Malay people and their ancestry.

My ISP consists of an introduction, a literature review, a methodology section, a section where I present my results and analysis thereof, recommendations for further study, and a bibliography/reference list. I use a combination of primary and secondary sources in my work. My primary sources come in the form of accounts of personal experiences and observations I have had with the preparation, consumption, and cultural significance of Cape Malay cuisine. For secondary

**Limitations**

Obviously I have a ridiculous amount of limitations in this project. Arguably the biggest limitation is time: I only had four weeks to complete this research, which is nowhere near a sufficient amount of time to be able to draw any significant conclusions. Therefore, I am only able to analyze the very limited experiences I have had in these four weeks. There are a whole host of other limitations facing me in this endeavor, including my positionality (which is both a privilege and an obstacle), geographic constrictions (I was only really able to explore the Bo-Kaap district of Cape Town, which by no means encompasses the “Cape Malay community”), money (I’m sure I would have been able to go about this research very differently if I had unlimited funding), and my mental health (some days, I couldn’t even manage to go into Cape Town because I was either too depressed or the sexual harassment I inevitably experienced made me too uncomfortable and upset). All that aside, I hope that this project can contribute and respond to the existing body of literature surrounding Cape Malay identity and food.
Literature Review

Throughout the existence of the white supremacist institution, the commodification of colonized cultures has been used as a method of exploitation and subjugation by colonizing forces. This is especially evident in terms of cuisine: simply walk in to any grocery store and venture down the “ethnic” food aisle, or observe the abundance of Thai restaurants in areas where Thai people themselves are scarce to be found. Black feminist author and activist bell hooks wrote about the commodification of culture and how it serves to reinforce white power in her 1992 essay “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance.” In this piece, hooks writes, “The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture” (hooks, 1992, p. 366). This commodification can take many different forms, including the packaging and selling of objects or accessories of cultural significance, sexual relationships between white people and people of color, and through the white fascination with “exotic” cuisines. Within the South African context, the white minority turns the Cape Malay community into the Other, and uses their cuisine as a lens through which to experience Cape Malay culture in a sanitized and (if you will pardon the pun) palatable manner. Although this may seem like a relatively benign phenomenon, as hooks writes, “The overriding fear is that cultural, ethnic, and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate – that the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten” (hooks, 1992, p. 380). Inevitably when the dominant white institution takes hold of any aspect of the culture of a marginalized group, they distort and use it for their own benefit without regard to its significance and impact. When the Other is eaten, so to speak, there is always the danger that the culture of the Other will be used and then discarded. Although Cape Malay culture is still very much alive and well despite years of oppression and marginalization, Cape Malay cuisine has undeniably been exploited by the dominant
white minority to paint a picturesque and one-dimensional portrait of the community and to erase the violent and brutal history of slavery.

What is Cape Malay cuisine? Because the foods that were brought to South Africa by the slave population are now such an integral part of South African cuisine, it’s difficult to define the boundaries of Cape Malayan cooking. In the article “South Africa’s Rainbow Cuisine,” in Gastronomica, Lannice Snyman writes, “The Cape Malays, as they came to be known, were in great demand as cooks in early Dutch homes, and their definitive use of spices with the existing food repertoire resulted in what is now called Cape-Malay cuisine…Excellent examples of Cape-Malay dishes include bobotie, pickled fish, sumptuous curries and bredies, and syrupy-sweet koeksisters, all of which have become synonymous with South African cuisine” (Snyman, 2004, p. 91). Although many of the dishes that are most heavily associated with Cape Malayan cooking are named with Afrikaans words (rather than Malaysian or Indonesian, for example), these dishes undoubtedly come from slave origins. When one thinks of the dishes characteristic of South African cuisine, many of the dishes that one thinks of come not from the Dutch, but from Malay slaves. Even the famous Afrikaans poet C. Louis Leipoldt, whose work is often interpreted as having strong nationalist undertones, wrote extensively about the debt that South African cuisine owes to Cape Malay culture. In Riaan Oppelt’s (2012) journal article titled “C. Louis Leipoldt and the role of the ‘Cape Malay’ in South African Cookery,” Oppelt writes, “Leipoldt’s food writing also revealed that, in his view, if any culture were to be seen as having some authoritative stamp on South African cuisine, it would not be from any of the white sections but from the ‘Cape Malay’ population” (Oppelt, 2012, p. 56). However, despite the significance of Cape Malayan cuisine, it was only relatively recently that Cape Malay people have been able to take an active role in representing their own culture through the food that they prepare and consume.

The representations of Cape Malayan cooking and food preparation have historically been used by the white South African minority to mask the violence and trauma of slavery. Gabeba Baderoon’s groundbreaking study of Muslim identity in South Africa, titled Regarding Muslims: From Slavery to Postapartheid (2014),
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extensively discusses the role of cuisine in formation of a Cape Malay identity, both by Cape Malay people and their oppressors. According to Baderoon, many of the first representations of Cape Malay people by white South Africans had to do with food and food preparation, but the images that were produced during this period of slavery were deceptively idyllic and served to mask the horrific realities of slavery. She writes, “An amiable view of ‘Cape Malay’ cooking has had the effect of domesticating images of slavery in South Africa, and has allowed dominant society to gesture to the presence of enslaved people while denying the brutality of slavery” (Baderoon, 2014). Because the first representations of Cape Malay people and culture were images of food produced by white people, Cape Malay people were denied the agency and the opportunity to represent themselves.

Baderoon goes on to explain that some of the earliest literature that discussed the Cape Malay identity were cookbooks written by white people. The first of these cookbooks were A. G. Hewitt’s Cape Cookery, published in 1889, and Hilda’s ‘Where Is It?’ written by Hildagonda Duckitt in 1891 (Baderoon, 2014). Both of these cookbooks aimed to represent South African cuisine and included many Cape Malay recipes. These were some of the first pieces of literature that represented any aspect of Cape Malay identity, and therefore they were significant in creating an image of this community in the minds of South Africans. Many of these representations romanticized slavery and understated the very real violence that Malay slaves faced. Although it is a relatively recent publication, Cass Abrahams Cooks Cape Malay (1995) is a good example of this: in the foreword to this cookbook, M. Cassiem D’Arcy writes, “From birth till death the Cape Malays celebrate each and every occasion with groaning tables bedecked with the bounteous fruits of the earth and the labor of a thousand kitchen fingers, each dish suffused with wondrous spices from their far-off ancestral islands” (Abrahams, 1995, p.6). This passage is a prime example of the way that white people portray Cape Malay culture: the phrase “the labor of a thousand kitchen fingers” dehumanizes Cape Malay people and reduces them to nothing more than fingers that prepare food, and the phrase “wondrous spices from...far-off ancestral islands” exoticizes Cape Malay people and the places their ancestors came from.
Despite the lack of self-determination and the voicelessness that early enslaved Cape Malay people experienced, Baderoon argues that the significant role played by slaves in white kitchens afforded them an immense degree of power. Because Cape Malay slaves held such an intimate position within the white household through the preparation of their food, they were able to use this position to carry out subtle acts of resistance and to influence South African culture in ways that can still be seen today. Baderoon writes, “The effect of this subtle legacy of the slave kitchen can be seen today in the similar dishes with different names in the cooking traditions of the descendants of enslaved people and slave-owners, such as the drink known in “Malay” cooking as “boeber” and in the Afrikaans tradition as “melkkos” … ‘Bobotie’ is claimed as a national dish by Afrikaans-speaking people, yet is also a well-known ‘Cape Malay’ dish” (Baderoon, 2014). Many of the foods and recipes that are staples of South African cuisine today can be directly traced to South and Southeast Asia and were brought over by slaves—physical evidence of the influence that Cape Malay people had on South African culture during this formative period.

In her book *What Is Slavery to Me? Postcolonial/Slave Memory in Postapartheid South Africa* (2010), Pumla Dineo Gqola presents a similar viewpoint to Baderoon when she argues that food was an essential way for the diverse groups that make up the Cape Malay identity to create a unified sense of self during and after the period of slavery in South Africa. In Gqola’s opinion, food was especially essential during the early period of slavery when people from many different places and cultures were brought to South Africa and forced to piece together a new identity from their diverse backgrounds: “Eating is part of this inescapable bodily presence. In this respect, it is logical that food cultures can provide stability for displaced communities living under conditions that deny them control over their lives, over their specific nourishment, and can therefore provide enslaved people with the power to heal or harm” (Gqola, 2010, p. 169). Because enslaved people had so little power and control over their circumstances, food was one area in which they were able to exercise at least some self-determination and creativity. Therefore, food was essential in the formation of a Cape Malay identity. In this community specifically, food carries with it the heavy weight of slavery, colonization, and centuries of
oppression experienced by enslaved people and their descendants. Often, there was little common ground among slaves aside from their shared experience of oppression, so food became a very important marker of culture that was more about celebration and pleasure than trauma. Preparing and consuming food is a joyous act, and it therefore holds great significance to a historically marginalized group of people.

Over the past fifty years or so, more and more Cape Malay people, particularly Muslim women, have been publishing their own cookbooks representing Cape Malay cuisine. This trend is far from insignificant: as Baderoon writes, “The publication of cookbooks written by Muslim women from 1961 meant that Muslim food would no longer be a realm presided over by white experts who drew from silent or apparently submissive black informants in their kitchens, and spoke on their behalf” (Baderoon, 2014). The fact that Cape Malay women are more and more frequently writing means that they are able to represent themselves, their food, and their culture with the agency that was denied to them during slavery and up until the end of apartheid. Some examples of these cookbooks are Indian Delights by the Women’s Cultural Group in Durban (1961), The Cape Malay Cookbook by Faldela Williams (1988), and Everyday Cape Malay Cooking by Zainab Lagardien (2009). These cookbooks were groundbreaking in that they gave a voice to the voiceless figure of the silent Malay servant or domestic worker in the kitchen that was once the dominant image. However, as Baderoon (2002) points out in her piece “Everybody’s Mother Was a Good Cook: Meanings of Food in Muslim Cooking,” many older Cape Malay cooks hold cookbooks, and the use of recipes in general, in low esteem, because they feel that it demonstrates a lack of true cooking ability. The younger generation of Cape Malay cooks, on the other hand, believes that cookbooks and recipes are a valuable way to preserve the tradition of Cape Malay cuisine in a time when fewer and fewer parents are teaching their children how to cook traditional foods (Baderoon, 2002, pp. 13-14). Despite the differing opinions within the Cape Malay community with regards to the role of cookbooks, it is clear that the relatively recent trend of Cape Malay women representing their own culture by publishing cookbooks is an important one.
Considering the significance of food in the construction of Cape Malay identity, the question remains: does Cape Malay cuisine today provide a way for Cape Malay people to feel connected to their slave ancestry? Of course, the answer to this is complex and it is difficult to make any generalizations about how a group of people conceptualizes their identities. In thinking about this question, it is helpful to again consider the words of Pumla Dineo Gqola (2010), who writes, “Deciphering the functions of diaspora for the articulation of Malay identities in Cape Town exists at the nexus of the aforementioned forced migrations, since Cape Malay or Cape Muslim communities, in their self-identification as such, foreground their South East Asian Muslim foreparents enslaved by the Dutch and British and transported to the Cape” (Gqola, 2010, p. 133). In other words, any articulation of a Cape Malay identity, particularly a Muslim one, is a way of recognizing the legacies of slavery and colonialism that necessitated the creation of such an identity. The very phrase “Cape Malay” is in itself an acknowledgement of both slave heritage and the distinct new identity that was born of slavery in South Africa. Gqola goes on to write, “A Malay identity, along with an embracing of Islam, is both a positive marker of identity and a celebration of pre-slave memory” (Gqola, 2010, p. 157). A Cape Malay identity is more than a marker of a shared history of trauma and violence—it is an affirmation, a way to display pride in one’s ancestry and one’s heritage.

The preparation and consumption of Cape Malay food is therefore a tangible expression of Cape Malay identity and all of the implications that follow. Food was essential in the formation of a Cape Malay identity, and it has continued to play a large role in the articulation of that identity. The establishment of a Cape Malay culture has meant that South Africa’s cuisine—and therefore, its culture—has been imbued with influences of Malaysia, Indonesia, Madagascar, Mozambique, and all other places where Cape Malay people can trace their ancestry. Even if it is not a conscious act, the preparation and consumption of Cape Malay food is a way for Cape Malay people to reaffirm their unique identity, to connect with their ancestry, and to bridge the gap between their slave past and their South African present.
Methodology

It is my opinion that the traditional methodologies that are used in sociological qualitative research are very problematic, especially when carried out by an American student (me) with class and education privilege in South Africa. Conducting formal interviews (which is one of the main methodologies we were encouraged to employ, along with participant-observation) struck me as varying degrees of exploitative and voyeuristic. Even when I was drafting my consent forms and taking care to not leave my potential participants with any false conceptions about the scope and effects of my research, I still could not escape the ethical dilemmas inherent in this kind of research. I understand the need for thorough consent forms, but presenting participants with a lengthy formal document couched in academic language just serves to reinforce the power dynamic between the people I’m interviewing and me. Furthermore, since I was advised not to monetarily compensate my participants, the only benefit of participating in my research that I could foresee was that my participants might possibly find it cathartic to speak about their family histories, but even this was not a guaranteed benefit. In fact, it might be emotionally draining or painful for some people to relive the trauma inherent in being a person of color and a descendant of slaves in South Africa. What this came down to in my mind was me, a privileged American student only in South Africa for fourteen weeks, using the life experiences of South Africans for my own personal gain without giving anything in return.

Unfortunately, there is no way for me to escape my positionality and the problems that it presents when I try to do research in this contentious context. In her 1988 essay titled “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” Chandra Talpade Mohanty writes, “Western feminist writing on women in the third world must be considered in the context of the global hegemony of western scholarship - i.e., the production, publication, distribution and consumption of information and ideas. Marginal or not, this writing has political effects and implications beyond the immediate feminist or disciplinary audience. One such significant effect of the dominant 'representations' of western feminism is its
conflation with imperialism in the eyes of particular third-world women” (p. 64). Even though I occupy several marginalized identities as a queer woman of color, I am still observing and representing South African women through a Western colonial lens, and thus I am unintentionally contributing to the same types of dominant representations of “third world” women that have dominated the world of academia for centuries. More specifically, I could very easily end up inadvertently reproducing images of Cape Malay women produced by British and Dutch colonizers.

Faced with these ethical dilemmas, I felt very daunted by the task at hand. However, after reading *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* by Patricia Hill Collins (2000), I thought about research a little differently. In her chapter titled “Black Feminist Epistemology,” Collins (2000) defines black feminist epistemology as 1) using lived experience as a criterion of meaning, 2) the use of dialogue (i.e., an exchange between equals as opposed to between subject and object) in assessing knowledge claims, 3) the “ethics of caring,” and 4) the ethic of personal accountability (Collins, 2000, pp. 257-66). The two tenets of black feminist epistemology that I am employing most heavily in my ISP are the use of dialogue and the ethics of caring.

The idea of dialogue that Collins presents is fairly self-explanatory. Collins defines it as such: “For Black women new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from other individuals and are usually developed through dialogues with other members of a community. A primary epistemological assumption underlying the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims is that connectedness rather than separation is an essential component of the knowledge validation process” (Collins, 2000, p. 260). Rather than framing the collection of knowledge in terms of a subject (the researcher) and an object (the researched), black feminist epistemology emphasizes the importance of collaborative dialogue in the production of new knowledge claims.

The ethic of caring is a concept that resonates with me in particular. Collins describes this by saying, “The ethic of caring suggests that personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are central to the knowledge validation process” (Collins,
2000, p. 263). Altogether, she outlines the ethic of caring as consisting of “the value placed on individual expressiveness, the appropriateness of emotions, and the capacity for empathy” (Collins, 2000, p. 264). This emphasis on the validity of emotion in scholarly work is something that is usually discouraged within the white and patriarchal world of academia. On the contrary, in most academic work, expression of emotion serves to invalidate the author’s argument for being “irrational” and “not objective;” this is exacerbated tenfold when the author is a woman or a person of color writing about their experiences with sexism and/or racism. I reject the glorification of logic and so-called objectivity when writing about such personal and inherently emotional topics as race, gender, culture, trauma, etc. As Donna Haraway (1988) writes in “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” “So, with many other feminists, I want to argue for a doctrine and practice of objectivity that privileges contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, webbed connections, and hope for transformation of systems of knowledge and ways of seeing” (Haraway, 1988, pp. 584-5). In this type of sociological work, the only way that the concept of objectivity is useful and not oppressive is when one looks at it through a feminist lens.

Rather than viewing my ISP as a research project in the traditional sense, I want to use the framework of black feminist epistemology as outlined in Collins’ *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and Empowerment* (2000) to present a more holistic view of Cape Malay cuisine that does not place me as an “objective” observer, because there is really no such thing. Rather, I want to incorporate my own history and experiences into my analysis of Cape Malay cuisine and identity. Instead of doing formal interviews, I will be engaging in dialogue with people who cook and eat Cape Malay food to try to gain insight into how they conceptualize their identities and the role of food therein. I will also cook and eat Cape Malay food as a way to further understand the food and its history.

**Ethical Reflexivity**

As a disclaimer, I don’t know if there is anything ethical about me (an able-bodied, educated, class privileged American student) conducting this kind of
sociological research in South Africa, especially when it is dealing with an already marginalized group of people. No matter how I may try to frame it, there is really nothing directly beneficial about my research to the people it’s centered on. That in itself means that this endeavor is necessarily exploitative and unethical. However, I tried to conduct my research while causing as little harm as possible to the people of Cape Town. I became quite close with the three individuals I did have in-depth conversations with (I hesitate to use the word “interviews” because that implies a hierarchical relationship that I’m not entirely comfortable with), and for the rest of my research, I relied mostly on observation. Still, I feel that it is wrong for me to present myself as any sort of authority on the subject of identities that I cannot claim.

I know that some researchers and academics would argue that it is foolish to say that only those who can claim marginalized identities have the authority to speak on them, but I think it is true. I am not going to present any of the information I’ve learned as though it is some kind of groundbreaking revelation that I’ve discovered. I can only write from my perspective, and that is what I will do when I present my findings (hence why I call them “observations”). I think it would be facetious to say that I am a researcher; rather, I am just a listener who hopes to amplify the voices that really matter—which, sadly, are usually voices that are not often heard in the white supremacist and elitist world of academia.
Observations

On the first weekend of my Bo-Kaap homestay, my host family tells me that we are going to go on what they describe as a walk around Bo-Kaap with the entire Muslim community. Evidently, this is an annual tradition among Bo-Kaap Muslims intended to teach children about the history of the area. When Sunday morning rolls around, we awaken at around 8 AM with the hopes of leaving the house at nine. Although my host family is normally pretty lax when it comes to following the dress and rules of Islam, today they are all covered from head to toe and dressed in white. Even the little girls, both under the age of ten, have their heads covered. By the time everyone is dressed and ready to go, it is almost 10 AM.

We walk down the hill to near the school, and I see literally hundreds of people all dressed in white just like my family. Every child receives a drawstring bag, an umbrella, and a nametag. A voice over a loudspeaker tells us that we are about to commence the walk, and together the giant crowd of people begins their ascent up the streets of Bo-Kaap.
Over the next couple of hours, we traverse the entirety of Bo-Kaap, stopping every one in a while at stations where people hand out treats such as popcorn, candy, or soda to each of the children. Rather than just an aimless walk around the district, this trek stops at several important heritage sites in Bo-Kaap, including Tana Baru (a Muslim cemetery that holds some of the most important Muslim settlers in South Africa) and the Kramat (holy burial site) of Tuan Guru, a prominent early Cape Muslim Imam. Although the children are most excited for the snacks they receive, it is a meaningful way to experience the rich history of Bo-Kaap.

Finally, after we are fatigued from walking up and down the hills of Bo-Kaap, we finish the walk where we started. Now, there are immense pots of chicken beryani lined up in a crowded and chaotic tent and volunteers are portions into Styrofoam containers, handing each of the hundreds of attendees a generous helping of steaming hot food.

By this time, we are all quite hungry, and we hurry back home so we can feast. While the children eagerly unwrap their sweets and popcorn, I dig into the beryani. Although I am not exactly sure of the ingredients in the chicken beryani I was served that day, *Cass Abrahams Cooks Cape Malay* (1995) includes a recipe for chicken beryani that is very similar, found in the “Ramadan” chapter of the cookbook. A short description of the recipe reads, “Originally a Mogul-Indian dish, beryani will be served at just about any festive occasion” (Abrahams, 1995, p. 56). It
includes many spices typically found in Cape Malay cooking, such as cardamom, cassia, saffron, cinnamon, cloves, cumin, coriander, turmeric, ginger, and masala. The food is flavorful and nourishing. Even though the organizers of this event had to make enough food for hundreds of people, each person was still able to receive a massive portion. It takes me two meals to finish eating the beryani, and even then I have some left over.

This day demonstrates to me exactly how important and intertwined food, history, and religion are for the residents of Bo-Kaap. None of these elements exist separately from one another: they all have immense cultural significance. This is evident in the function of food during religious ceremonies such as weddings, funerals, Ramadan, and Eid al-Fitr, as well as in the history of these ceremonies and rituals. Food is essential to the formation of culture and identity.

Shireen Narkedien is a tour guide, mother, baker, and lifelong resident of Bo-Kaap. She is a very active member the Cape Town Muslim community and she coordinated the book Bo-Kaap Kitchen, which is a compilation of stories, recipes,
historical images, and photos of Bo-Kaap and its residents. She agrees to meet me on a Friday morning at the Bo-Kaap museum where she works. I sit out in the courtyard waiting for her for almost twenty minutes until she finally shows up, beaming, a bag of food in hand. She greets me and immediately hands me three samosas and a small packet of candy. Throughout our conversation, she pauses several times to hand out sweets and desserts to the other people working at the museum, who accept them gleefully.

Shireen shares with me the importance of food in Cape Malay culture, explaining that since alcohol is forbidden in Islam, food takes its place in a social and cultural role. She describes the food traditions of the Bo-Kaap community, telling me, “Food is served at every occasion. Everything revolves around food. During Ramadan we make sweetmeats, at funerals we have peas and carrots…there are specific foods for every occasion.”

More than just a celebratory and ceremonial endeavor, Shireen explains that food plays a significant role in one of the central tenets of Islam: charity. “There’s a soup kitchen in Bo-Kaap during Ramadan where we make giant pots of soup and bread,” she says. “It’s not really about Malay identity—it’s more of a religious and cultural practice to give charity.” Charity is one of the central tenets of Islam. According to the Quran, every Muslim who is able must set aside a portion of their income (2.5%) every new year to give to the less fortunate. This is the third pillar of Islam, known as zakat (BBC, 2009). Although zakat is usually explained as though it refers only to monetary donations to the poor, Shireen told me that in Bo-Kaap, Muslims practice charity in the form of giving food parcels. It is a very organized endeavor: according to Shireen, different households, organizations, and businesses in Bo-Kaap will sign up to either cook, pick up, or distribute food to poor people. And it is not just people in Bo-Kaap or Muslims who comprise the recipients of this charity: the residents of Bo-Kaap distribute food to any people in need in Cape Town. This food is made and served in large quantities, just like the beryani that was served on the day of the walk about Bo-Kaap.

Eventually, I ask Shireen about how she personally learned to cook. “My dad was a baker. He made cakes for weddings and sold cookies to farm stalls. He also
had a poultry and pig farm until he converted to Islam, married my mother, and moved to the city. Even then, he had chickens, ducks, turkeys, and rabbits—but he couldn’t make Malay or Muslim food.

“My mom didn’t let anyone touch her pots in the kitchen, so even after I got married I still didn’t learn to cook. My mom eventually had to get her leg amputated because of diabetes so she couldn’t do anything around the house anymore. I started cooking and my mom told me how to do things, but she hovered over me. I was upset because I didn’t have the freedom to do my own thing. My mom was hard to please.

“Today people enjoy my cooking. I cook traditionally, in the old style. We are taught that when we cook, it’s never enough. There are always leftovers. I always have food ready for my family.”

I ask Shireen what is characteristic of the “old style” and she replies, “Today, people don’t follow older food traditions. For weddings, we used to have tea tables, but not anymore. Today, they serve a variety of food, and it’s a lunch table instead of a tea table.”

Still, she tells me that she does do a little bit of modern cooking because the traditional ways of cooking were so strict: “The old way was a rigid form of cooking. There was a specific dish for each day of the week. I don’t follow that anymore.” Although Shireen seems to at least partially disapprove of the newer ways of cooking (“My daughter goes more for modern cooking,” she tells me. “She knows how to make curries, but she will also serve pizza for a meal, which I would never do”), she also has adapted and updated some of the traditional cooking methods and customs to suit her lifestyle.

As we are about to leave, I ask Shireen if there is anything else that she would like to tell me about the role of food in Cape Malay and/or Muslim culture. Without any hesitation, she tells me, “Cape Malay food is not Malaysian. ‘Cape Malay’ is an apartheid term. Cape Malay food is very different from Malaysian. Cape Malays can’t eat as spicy as Malaysians. The slaves had to make their food blander for the Dutch and the British, and they also didn’t have the same spices available that they did where they came from. So the Cape Malays added subtle
spices.” This distinction between “Cape Malay” and “Malaysian” is one that may be unclear for those who are not familiar with the history of slavery in Cape Town, but the ambiguity of these terms is part of the reason why discussion of a Cape Malay identity can be so problematic and why people who are descended from Cape slaves don’t often claim that term for themselves. However, despite the problematic nature of the term “Cape Malay,” it is an important way to acknowledge and conceptualize the history of slavery in Cape Town and how it persists in many forms today.

A couple of weeks later, Shireen introduces me to 57-year-old caterer and homemaker Jasmien and her 30-year-old daughter Tasneem. In their lovely little house in Bo-Kaap, we sit down and have an informal chat about food, family, and culture.

One of 16 children, Jasmien is well known throughout Bo-Kaap for the Cape Malay cooking demonstrations she puts on for tourists and for the catering she does for residents of Bo-Kaap. She has four grown children and six grandchildren, four of whom live in the house with her and are running around as we sit down to have our conversation. As soon as Jasmien hears that I’m interested in learning more about Cape Malay food, she adamantly tells me the only thing I need to know: “The old way of cooking is the best way. It is the only way.”

I ask her what the main differences are between the “old way” and the “new way,” expecting her answer to be similar to Shireen’s, but instead she says, “With the old way, we don’t use lots of oil like you do today. Sometimes we use olive oil, but only a minimum amount.”

Jasmien also mentions the traditional custom of cooking a particular dish for each day of the week, which she says has largely fallen out of practice; although, according to Jasmien, many residents of Bo-Kaap still follow the old tradition of cooking a large fancy lunch on Sundays, often involving roast leg of lamb as the main course.

Although she clearly has very strong opinions about certain topics (such as the fact that traditional cooking methods are superior to modern ones), Jasmien isn’t one to mince words. Even though she is clearly passionate about cooking (she caters
huge events such as weddings for hundreds of people), she gives fairly short answers to my inquiries—not out of rudeness, but ostensibly because she hasn’t warmed up to me yet. However, by the time we have been chatting for about ten minutes, Jasmien is a little more animated and talkative.

Curious as to how she became such an expert cook, wonder where Jasmien learned Cape Malay cooking. “Did your mom or dad teach you?” I ask.

“No, I taught myself,” she replies proudly. “I made my first pot of food when I was nine. My mom was in the hospital and my sisters were at work, and my dad asked who was going to cook dinner. So I had to learn to cook. I made tomato food—meat, tomato, and potato. My mother told me what to do, but I made it all by myself. These days I do all the cooking and baking for my family.”

“Did you teach your children how to cook?” I ask.

“Not really,” Jasmien answers. “They just kind of learned. I have three daughters and one son, and only my oldest daughter cooks a lot. The others don’t have an interest in it. I cook for my grandchildren all the time and they eat everything I make.”

Since Islam is so important to the residents of Bo-Kaap, I ask Jasmien about the relationship between food and religion for her.

She nods emphatically. “Food, especially meat, is very important in Islam. The only real difference between Malay and Christian food is the way that the meat is slaughtered. We only eat meat that is slaughtered in a certain way. We can’t eat pig because it doesn’t look up at the sun and it isn’t killed in the right way. We also make specific food for specific religious occasions, such as weddings and Eids. For weddings, people will buy hundred-liter pots of food to serve to their guests!”

Impressed, I mention that I don’t really know how to cook anything besides the most basic meals. Jasmien tells me, “It’s very easy to learn. Once you have the hang of the basic steps, you can cook anything. There are many different types of food: curry food, tomato food, cabbage food—but it all starts with the same base: you have your onion, garlic, and curry leaves, and then you take it from there.

“Yes, it’s very easy to learn,” Jasmien reiterates. “When I cook, I don’t even use a spoon to measure out the spices, I just pour them into the food. I just know how
much each dish needs. Spices are what make Malay food different from other South African food. We use cumin, turmeric, different types of masalas, and crushed garlic the most. But I still experiment with food even today. I’m still learning.”

At this point, Jasmien calls her oldest daughter Tasneem out to join us so she can offer her perspective. “Tasneem, you can tell Ally about the junk food you like to eat,” she teases.

Tasneem, a woman in her early thirties with two small children, is much more subdued than her vivacious mother. Contrary to her mother’s joking assertion, one of the first things that Tasneem tells me is that she likes home-cooked food, not junk food. “Sometimes I will eat at KFC or other places, but my mom can cook everything they have better,” she explains. “There’s no point in eating junk food at restaurants when I can just eat better food at home.”

Although Jasmien told me that her oldest daughter cooks a lot, Tasneem’s words contradict this. “I don’t like cooking all the time,” she tells me. “I can cook everything my mom does, but I always go the easy way out. The way my mom cooks is with all her might, but I just do it because I have children who need to eat.”

Just like with Jasmien, I ask Tasneem how she learned to cook. “My mom taught me how to cook,” Tasneem replies. “One time, when I was thirteen, she was very sick, so I had to cook. I made tomato food under my mom’s instruction. It came out good!”

“My 11-year-old daughter likes to watch me cook. I don’t know about my son. I might teach them to cook if they express interest. They both like Malay food a lot.”

I also ask Tasneem about what makes Cape Malay food different from other types of food commonly eaten in South Africa.

“My Christian friends all like Malay food,” she says. “You know what the difference is? Christians make their food bland; even when they try to make Malay food and use the same spices, it doesn’t taste the same. And you people will just make whatever you have around the house and eat at different times. Muslims sit around the table and eat a nice meal together every night. Christians only do that for special occasions.”
“My advice to you is to just try making it and see,” she tells me with a smile. “You’ll be good at it, I promise.”

After chatting with Jasmien and Tasneem a little more, I thank them and bid them farewell before heading back down the hill into town.

The next time I see Jasmien is a little less than a week later, when she offers to give me a cooking demonstration. It is a sweltering hot day as I trudge up Wale Street to Jasmien’s house in Bo-Kaap, and by the time I arrive, I’ve nearly melted.

Jasmien and Tasneem greet me warmly and immediately hand me a cold glass of water. “We’re going to make roti and chicken curry,” Jasmien tells me excitedly. “I already did some of the preparation because Tasneem told me to. I wanted you to make everything from scratch, but Tasneem said I should help you. Plus, now you’ll be able to spend less time in the hot kitchen. It’s so hot today.”

She sits me down at the dining table and hands me some freshly made chili bites and samosas. I have one of each. They are steaming hot and delicious. “Okay, you can come into the kitchen now!” Jasmien calls out to me.

I join her in the kitchen, where there are already several pots on the stove. “I’ve already started the curry base,” Jasmien tells me, “just to speed things along. In your curry base, you want to put tomatoes, onions, garlic, one teaspoon of oil, curry leaves, and then fill it with water until it just covers the onions. Then you put it on the stove, cover it, and let it heat up for a while.”
She covers up the pot and shows me two bowls sitting on the counter: one filled with raw chicken and one filled with peeled potatoes. “I already cleaned the chicken and boiled the potatoes so it takes less time to cook altogether. Now we will make the samosas.”

Jasmien opens up a plastic container and shows me its contents. “This is the samosa filling,” she explains. “In this, you put beef mince, chopped onion, chili, coriander, ½ teaspoon of turmeric, ½ teaspoon of cumin, and ¼ teaspoon of salt. First, you boil the beef mince, and then you mix all the ingredients together. In another bowl, you combine cake flour and water to make a sort of paste to hold the samosa together. Then you take phyllo dough and fold it.” She tells how to fold it, by draping it over my hand and then folding it into triangles. The triangles form a sort of pocket, into which I put the filling, and then fold the dough the rest of the way up, sealing it with the flour and water paste. Once I’ve gotten the hang of it, I fold a couple more samosas.

“Now all you have to do is deep fry them in hot oil,” Jasmien tells me, looking pleased.

“Next, I’ll show you the roti,” she says. “I already have a batch made so that it won’t take as long, but I’ll teach you how to make the dough.” Jasmien takes out the ingredients and begins to instruct me. “You need three cups of cake flour, ¼ teaspoon of salt, and one dessert spoon of canola oil. You mix it together with lukewarm water and then roll it out into a circle. Then you smear some butter over the dough, fold it over, cut it, and put it in the freezer. Then, whenever you want to make it, you can just take it out of the freezer, fry it in a pan with a teaspoon of oil on both sides, and it’ll be ready to eat!”
By this time, the curry has been on the stove long enough for us to continue with its preparation. Under Jasmien’s watchful eye, I put the chicken into the curry base, and then the most important part: the spices. I add turmeric, cumin, and masala, and then let it cook some more on high heat until the next step. The mixture in the pot immediately begins to change color to a deep orange color and the room fills with the fragrant scents of the spices I just added. After a few minutes, I also add in the potatoes, a heap of salt, and some fresh chopped coriander. I lower the heat and let it cook for just a little bit longer. It is almost finished.

Jasmien shows me how to tell by the texture of the curry when it’s finished, and we take it off the stove and sit down to eat. She garnishes the curry with some freshly cut coriander, puts some onion sambal on the side, and serves the food in front of me.
When I try to compliment Jasmien’s cooking, she insists that I did most of the cooking and that she just helped me along. Before eating, Jasmien explains to me that it’s traditional to eat with one’s hands, and that is why there is no cutlery on the table. We both spoon the curry and a little bit of the onion sambal onto the roti and fold it, almost like a wrap. Then, we rip off pieces of the roti wrap and eat it with our hands. It is delicious and satisfying.
Finally, before I leave, Jasmien tells me how to make the famous Cape Malay desserts known as *koeksisters*. After she explains the recipe, we dip them in boiling sugar water, sprinkle coconut shavings over them, and eat them while they’re still hot. After the meal is finally over, Jasmien beams and says, “Now you can cook for your mom and dad back home!”

Again, I thank Jasmien and Tasneem for their help and for teaching me some of the basics of Cape Malay cooking before I leave Bo-Kaap once more.

I begin my next journey at the top of Signal Hill where Longmarket Street ends, on a hot summer’s day. I am weary from the steep uphill climb it took to get here. Although I can see all of Cape Town from where I sit, I do not feel powerful. Rather, I am humbled by my own smallness against the expansive view before me, and how easily this place has both literally and figuratively taken by breath away.

I wonder what the first colonizers felt as they stood in my place. Imagine having the audacity to behold this vast, powerful landscape as something to conquer. Despite the centuries of colonization that have befallen this land, there is still something wild about it, a spirit that continues to exist and resist. I can feel it in my bones. I, too, am a body whose resistance transcends generations.

The slight sea breeze rustles through my hair as I embark on the walk back down Signal Hill.

At the bottom of the hill and the beginning of the Bo-Kaap district, dozens of white tourists mill about taking photos. Their bodies are in stark contrast with the brightly colored walls of the houses and the brown skin of the people who live in Bo-
Kaap. Although I am not white, I am just as much of a tourist as any of the white people standing in the middle of the road with their cameras out.

I enter Biesmillah Restaurant, a place I passed by every day when I lived in Bo-Kaap but never went into. It is very bright with modern, colorful décor. The only other customers in the restaurant are a table full of white English-speaking people.

I order the “Biesmillah berry cooler” to quench my thirst after the long walk, and the vegetable curry with roti, the only vegetarian dish on the menu besides dhal. The waitress, a softspoken young black woman, tells me that the restaurant has been in business for 70 years. She is not one for small talk, so I don’t try to ask her any more questions about the restaurant. Soon, she brings out an assortment of small dishes: a salad, chopped beet root, mixed vegetables with sweet and spicy chili sauce, and tomato and onion sambal. The sambal more closely resembles salsa than it does the Indonesian sambal I am familiar with. Unlike Indonesian sambal, which burns my mouth with its intense heat, this sambal is refreshing and cleansing on the palate.
I overhear a white woman at the other table telling her friends about Cape Malay cuisine, its origins, and its characteristic spices. She talks as though she is an expert on the subject.

Moments later, the food arrives. The curry is a sumptuous dish including carrots, baby marrow, aubergine, cauliflower, green beans, onion, and a variety of spices. I asked my waitress which spices were used in the dish, but she was unable to tell me. It is nowhere near as spicy as Indonesian cooking. It is very mild, but there is still a kick of spiciness that lingers on my tongue after I’ve taken a bite.
Although the amount of food doesn’t look like that much at first glance, it is more than I can eat alone and I am stuffed by the end of the meal. Both my host mom and Shireen told me that it is custom to feed guests more than they could possibly eat. It is a symbol of hospitality.

The flavors are slightly different, but I am reminded of my grandmother’s cooking. I think back to the times I stood next to her in her sweltering hot kitchen in Surabaya as she cooked generous portions of Chinese-Indonesian food. She would always make *pisang goreng* (fried bananas) for me because she knew they were my favorite. As I silently watched her work in the kitchen, I would feel like these moments bridged the language barrier that loomed between us. “Food is a universal language.”

In the restaurant, I look down at my curry-stained fingers and marvel at how food has the unique ability to transcend oceans and generations.

**Analysis**
As I’ve mentioned in earlier sections, the limitations inherent to my four-week study make it almost impossible to make any generalizations or to draw any significant conclusions about the topic of Cape Malay identity. Additionally, I feel very uncomfortable with the idea of “analyzing” another culture at all. In my opinion, trying to analyze and draw conclusions from things I’ve observed about another group seems incredibly otherizing and imperialistic. For these reasons, I hesitate to even present my thoughts about what I’ve observed, because I fear that there is no way to do so without looking at Cape Malay people through the Western colonial gaze and reproducing dominant orientalist narratives.¹

However, the purpose of this project is to do exactly that, and now I find that I’ve kind of dug myself into a hole. Therefore, with full acknowledgement of how problematic this is, I’m going to go ahead and write about some common themes and patterns I noticed throughout my observations; namely, the strong relationship between Islam and Cape Malay cuisine, the role of food in the family structure, and the traditions behind the preparation and consumption of Cape Malay cuisine.

**Religion**

In every place I looked to learn more about Cape Malay food, Islam was a powerful and pervasive presence. I quickly learned that although it is inaccurate to conflate the two, it is almost impossible to separate Islam from a Cape Malay identity. It is not coincidence that most of the Cape Malay population is Muslim, given the high proportion of Muslims in South and Southeast Asia, where many of the early Cape slaves came from. Therefore, many of the practices and traditions around food in Cape Malay culture are also very closely related to Muslim traditions.

I found Shireen’s comment about food taking the place of alcohol in social settings due to the prohibition of alcohol in Islam to be very interesting. In many cultures (including my own), alcohol certainly holds an important social significance and many functions either revolve around or involve the consumption of alcohol. Because alcohol is strictly forbidden in Islam, food maintains an increased

¹ See Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) for further reading.
importance to fill that role. Therefore, food takes center stage at celebrations and special events, regardless of what the occasion is for.

In addition, many Muslim religious ceremonies have specific food traditions that go along with them. Many Cape Malay cookbooks, including *Cass Abrahams Cooks Cape Malay* (1995), separate sections of the book by specific religious occasions—for example, the book has a “Ramadan” section with recipes traditionally eaten during Ramadan, an “engagement” section with recipes made to celebrate engagements, and so on. My conversations with women in Bo-Kaap reflected that as well: both Shireen and Jasmien spoke about the specific foods that were prepared for specific religious occasions such as Eid or weddings.

Ramadan, the most important Muslim holiday, is very heavily centered on food. During the month of Ramadan, which starts with the sighting of the new moon on the ninth month of the Muslim calendar, every Muslim past the age of puberty whose health permits them to fast is required to do so as part of the five pillars of Islam (Abrahams, 1995, p. 45). Muslims are not allowed to eat, drink, have sex, or smoke between sunrise and sunset during Ramadan. However, Muslims partake in a daily pre-dawn and a sunset meal to break their fast. During these meals, traditional Cape Malay foods are often served among the practicing Muslims of South Africa, such as *boeber* (milk pudding), soup, *beryani*, *pampoenkoekies* (pumpkin fritters), and beef curry (Abrahams, 1995, pp. 45-56). The goal of the fast is to encourage introspection, prayer, and commitment to the Muslim faith. However, it is also a celebration of family, friends, and community. Among the many ways that family and community are affirmed during Ramadan, the preparation and consumption of food is one of the most significant.

Food also plays an important role in virtually every other Muslim holiday as well. For the Cape Malay community, which is predominantly Muslim, food and religion are both inextricably linked and central to a “Cape Malay” identity.
Closely tied to religion, family was another important theme I noticed when exploring the role of food in the Cape Malay identity. Food is definitely a family-centered endeavor: when I talked with Tasneem, she pointed out that one of the biggest difference between “you people” (meaning non-Muslims, and specifically Christians, although I am not one) and Cape Malay/Muslim people is that the latter group places great importance in eating dinner together as a family every night. Indeed, family meals are very significant, especially when there are visitors to the home.

On the day Jasmien taught me how to cook, after we finished eating, she mentioned that she always cooks too much food. I replied, “Better to have too much than too little, right?” In response, Jasmien nodded solemnly. “Yes. You must always remember that. We always cook enough so that if guests come to the house, we can feed them. If a guest comes and you have no food for them, that is very bad.”

Traditionally, the evening meal is the most important and the one for which all family members must be present. Sunday lunches are also a very important family affair, and often, the household will receive visitors for this meal. Cass Abrahams writes, “Any person who is in the house at meal time will be invited to eat from the table of the host as it is believed that every person who eats from his table bestows a barakat, or blessing, on his home, ensuring that his home will never be without food” (Abrahams, 1995, p. 8). As a result, many family meals also involve guests, and food is made in excess to prepare for any unexpected visitors. Abrahams goes on to say: “Food is never counted or weighed off into exact portions for the family as one must always cater for the unexpected guest. It is a great shame when there is not enough food to serve everyone at the table. When unexpected visitors arrive and the hostess realizes that she does not have enough food for everyone, she will go out of her way to prepare extra food in no time” (Abrahams, 1995, p. 8).

Food is a very important way through which families come together and make time for each other even in today’s busy world. The importance of food in Cape Malay culture is closely linked to the importance of family.

**Tradition**
Another theme I noticed throughout my discussions and observations was how heavily tradition featured in Cape Malay food culture. From ingredients to methods of cooking to the practice of consuming food to the occasions and ceremonies that accompany cooking, tradition is present everywhere.

Food in itself is an important tradition. Cape Malay recipes are passed down through generations, and much importance is placed on the fact that food traditions remain intact and exclusive. As Cass Abrahams (1995) writes in the introduction to her cookbook, “Recipes are handed down from generation to generation and are highly prized. The Cape Malays cook most of their dishes the same way their forefathers did almost 300 years ago. Their recipes are jealously guarded…When an outsider requests a recipe it is often given with an essential ingredient or step missing” (Abrahams, 1995, p. 9). In this way, Cape Malay food maintains a kind of cultural purity and the history of Cape Malay food and people remains intact throughout generations. Although there have still been many changes to Cape Malay cooking over the years (Bo-Kaap Kitchen even includes a recipe for gluten-free rotis), tradition is still highly valued, especially among the older generations. This is why both Shireen and Jasmien spoke adamantly about cooking in the “old style,” and looked upon the “modern cooking” that their children’s generation does with disdain. Still, despite the concerns that Shireen and Jasmien have about the traditions that have been lost due to the presence of modern cooking trends, traditional Cape Malay cuisine continues to flourish. Cape Malay food is an essential part of South African cuisine and culture, and it has continued to withstand the test of time.

To answer my original research question of how food relates to the construction of Cape Malay identity, I believe that food provides a bridge that connects present-day descendants of slaves to their ancestors. Even if people aren’t consciously thinking about their slave ancestors as they prepare and consume Cape Malay food, the history of the food bears great significance even today. Therefore, the act of preparing and consuming Cape Malay food carries with it the weight of that history while simultaneously being an important part of a new and uniquely South African cultural identity. Cape Malay food is heavily steeped in tradition and
is closely linked to both family and religion, all of which constitute a complex and multi-faceted identity born out of a legacy of both oppression and resistance.

Conclusion
As I have mentioned several times, the limitations of this research project proved to be a great obstacle in attempting to perform any sort of conclusive analysis. However, from what I have observed, it seems as though the consumption and preparation of Cape Malay food does indeed provide a link between the first slaves brought to the Cape and their present-day descendants. Whether this link is conscious or not remains questionable. From what I have seen, observed, and read, it appears that while many so-called Cape Malay people are aware of their ancestry and how the food that they eat has roots therein, food is viewed more consciously through the context of Islam or family tradition rather than slave ancestry. Either way, food remains a very significant part of Cape Malay culture, and of the culture of South Africa as a whole.

However, the more I learned about this subject, the more firmly I began to believe that the entire concept of a cohesive “Cape Malay” identity is in itself problematic and should not be accepted. I touched on this in my introduction and literature review, but I would like to expand upon it here.

The diversity of people and histories that make up the group known as Cape Malay is so expansive that it hardly makes sense to group them all together. The very name “Cape Malay” carries with it painful remnants of oppression under slavery and apartheid. Unsurprisingly, the food that has come to be associated with Cape Malay identity is also a hodgepodge of foods, ingredients, and spices from many different cultures. While samosas are commonly found in Indian cuisine, bredie is Malaysian in origin, Cape Malay curries combine elements of many different cuisines, and certain dishes such as bobotie are distinctly Cape Malay in origin. Like the Cape Malay identity, Cape Malay cuisine is incredibly complex and defies categorization and simplification. Maggie Mouton, author of Bo-Kaap Kitchen, problematizes Cape Malay identity when she writes, “Despite being called ‘Cape Malays,’ these people came from places as wide-ranging as Madagascar, East Africa, North Africa, Yemen, India, Indonesia and Malaysia—each with their own rich traditions, culinary and otherwise…The treasure trove of kitchen secrets they brought with them…would contribute to creating a lifestyle and community at the Cape that has left a lasting
legacy” (Mouton, p. 16). This quote sums up very well both the difficulties of discussing Cape Malay identity and the impact that it has had on Cape Town, and South Africa more broadly. Despite the problematic aspects and the painful legacy of the term “Cape Malay,” slaves and their descendants have created an incredibly important and significant culture that influences South Africa in countless ways.

Although I initially chose to research the topic of Cape Malay identity because it is something that I have a personal interest in as someone who is part of the Indonesian diaspora, I now realize that the only people who really have any authority to speak about Cape Malay identity are those who identify as such, as I mentioned in my ethical reflexivity section of this paper. In accordance with my goal to uplift the voices of marginalized people rather than to speak for or over them, I will end with a quote from the introduction to Bo-Kaap Kitchen: “The Cape Muslims, strongly bound by their religion, and blessed with an affinity for and a love of cooking, have created and managed to retain a strong identity. And nowhere is this more evident than in the Bo-Kaap, the original home of the Cape Malays, which has survived all attempts—including those by the apartheid government—to eradicate it” (Mouton, p. 17).

The story of Cape Malay identity and cuisine is more than just a story of slavery or one of oppression. It is important to understand how the history of slavery played and continues to play a role in the construction of the Cape Malay identity, but more than anything, this is a story of resilience, celebration, and self-determination.

**Recommendations for Further Study**
To be frank, I don’t believe that there is a need for people like myself to be doing further study on the topic of Cape Malay identity. There are already too many Western scholars doing sociological research on the “Third World.” In fact, that is the basis of entire fields such as anthropology. If you are interested in learning more about Cape Malay identity, I highly recommend you read the books and articles I have cited in my bibliography, especially *Bo-Kaap Kitchen* by Maggie Mouton, *Regarding Muslims: From Slavery to Postapartheid* by Gabeba Baderoon, and *What Is Slavery to Me?* by Pumla Dineo Gqola. All of these texts can speak to Cape Malay identity and the legacy of slavery in South Africa much better than I ever could. Support and uplift the voices of South African scholars of color writing about their own communities and experiences rather than people like myself who are writing about these issues just to further their own academic careers.

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**Appendix A: Interview Questions**

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I didn’t actually have written interview questions that I used because I participated in casual conversations rather than formal interviews. However, these are the general topics that I discussed with each of the people I spoke to:

- Favorite foods to eat and cook
- What makes Cape Malay food different than other types of cuisine (especially in South Africa more generally)
- The history of Cape Malay food/people/identity
- The connection between food and religion
- How recipes/cooking styles are passed down from generation to generation
- Tradition vs. modernity in Cape Malay cooking

However, because I did not set out with a structure in mind, the conversations I had ended up breaching a variety of different subjects, both related and unrelated to Cape Malay identity and food.

Appendix B
Map of the Bo-Kaap and surrounding areas