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What's Food Got to Do With It?: The Host Mother's Role in the Cultural Education of Students Studying Abroad in the Rabat Medina

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**What's Food Got to Do With It?:
The Host Mother's Role in the Cultural Education of
Students Studying Abroad in the Rabat Medina**

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ABSTRACT

The dynamic between students studying abroad and the host families with whom they stay is significant to both the study abroad experience and the way people in receiving countries view those from the West. Through my research, my goal was to explore and reach a fundamental comprehension of this global dynamic from the Moroccan perspective. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the process of cultural exchange and absorption which occurs through the use of food. I draw conclusions from information attained through formal interviews of mothers who host American students studying abroad in Rabat, and supplement this with descriptions of contributors' homes from participant observation, to uncover answers to the question 'do host mothers living in the old medina of Rabat see themselves playing a role in the cultural education of their guest students through the use of food?' I then look to Franz Boas' theory of cultural relativism, Roland Barthes' article *Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption*, and Sonia Shiri's study titled *The Homestay in Intensive Language Study Abroad: Social Networks, Language Socialization, and Developing Intercultural Competence* to help analyze my findings. Using the aforementioned ethnographic research methods, I discover that these women do recognize their part in developing students' understanding of Moroccan culture. The domestic sphere reveals itself to be a strong influence in students' comprehension of tradition while in Morocco, and host mothers understand the dishes they serve and knowledge they provide supplements and affects students' comprehension of society in Morocco.

Keywords: Multicultural Education, Regional Studies: Africa, Gender Studies, Cultural Anthropology

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INTRODUCTION

Every semester, a group of students from colleges all around the United States fly to Rabat to spend three months learning about life in Morocco. Once here, these students are taken in by families living within the medina (old city), and spend several months absorbing all they can about the culture in this new place, eager to live and learn about a lifestyle unlike their own. The families hosting these students undergo a change, too, for they now have one more person living under their roof- a person who does not yet know the ways of Moroccan life. It is in their homestays that students learn much about the day-to-day operations of life in the Rabat medina and how it differs from life in the States. A central difference between the two societies involves food- the types, the ways of eating it, and the times it is served. Because of this, students have the opportunity to learn a great deal about Moroccan culture from Moroccan food. Though an overarching dynamic I am interested in exploring is the cross-cultural dynamic between students studying abroad and those local to the country being visited, for the purpose of this investigation I am studying an element of this dynamic on a smaller scale, and from the Moroccan perspective. The purpose of my Independent Study Project is to uncover if the mothers hosting students studying abroad in the medina of Rabat see themselves playing a role in the cultural education of said students, through the use of food.

Throughout this paper, I reference the terms ‘food culture’ as well as ‘cultural education’ and ‘cultural educator’. Food culture “refers to the practices, attitudes, and beliefs as well as the networks and institutions surrounding the production, distribution, and consumption of food” (Lexicon of Food). A cultural educator is someone—in this case my contributor, the host mother—who teaches another (either directly or indirectly) —in this case, the American

student—about their culture. For the purpose of my Project, I am focusing on cultural education specific to matters of food.

Beginning with a review of pre-existing literature on the subject, I will then continue on to assumptions I held prior to conducting this research. This section will lead into my discussion of methods used and how I conducted the ethnographic portion of my research. Once setting up this introductory information, I write a thorough analysis of my findings. Finally, I conclude with further questions, final reflections, and a restatement of the answer to my initial inquiry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While narrowing my topic, I began to search for articles relating to food culture, cultural exchange, and the study abroad experience. After sifting through online databases and with the help of my Academic Director, I selected two articles and one anthropological theory with which to work. I will be using these to support my findings and discuss the importance of being conscientious of positionality when discussing other ethnicities and cultures.

The first piece of literature I reference was written by twentieth century French philosopher Roland Barthes. Entitled *Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption*, this article focuses on food's place in the French sociocultural and economic contexts. However, Barthes looks past food's conventional function of something to be consumed, instead thinking further into how it functions in other spheres.

Barthes' (1961) article ponders the following:

For what is food? It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior (p. 29).

The philosopher wishes to discover what food as a system can signify. In order to answer his inquiries, Barthes first explores how food can be broken down into quantifiable units and sorted. Once classified, the respective groupings can be used as a means with which to gather data about society and its' interaction with food. But on what basis can such a system be established? Barthes considers several methods as he continues through the article.

Further into his ponderings, Barthes identifies three themes within food's various significances, the first of which applies to my research. This theme ascribes food a "commemorative" function (p.32). Each time a person prepares or eats food is a time they participate in carrying forward the cultural history of their nation. In Barthes' words, "through his food the Frenchman experiences a certain national continuity... food permits him to insert himself daily into his own past and to believe in a certain culinary 'being' of France." (p. 32). This function of food exemplifies what 'food culture' is and how it carries significance to understanding the history of a group of people.

Barthes' final passage ponders food's function as a sign in various situations, which relates to question 10 in my interviews.¹ These situations—be they related to work, leisure, or a celebration—can all be communicated through food, argues Barthes; different situations call for different dishes, meaning every situation can be characterized by the foods served therein. Food carries cultural significance in the understanding of various events. In essence, one can learn much about a certain event—and the culture of the nation itself—through learning what foods are tied to every such occasion. Though Barthes writes from the French perspective, his concepts are far-reaching and can be applied in the Moroccan and global contexts.

The second article which proved useful to my research is Sonia Shiri's *The Homestay in Intensive Language Study Abroad: Social Networks, Language Socialization, and Developing Intercultural Competence*. This piece relates more directly with my study than does Barthes', as its' focus is also a study abroad program in North Africa (Tunisia, specifically). Though Shiri concentrated her research on language proficiency and socialization, she also places an emphasis

¹Question 10 asks: 'If there are any specific events (religious, familial, cultural) you make an effort to include your students in, are there specific foods which go with them so students have a better understanding of Moroccan culture?'

on the homestay and how students perceive its' role. Because of this, I was able to find data which correlated with my focus of food within the homestay experience.

The first finding which caught my attention concerned the host mother: according to Shiri's results, host mothers are "the primary locus of interaction" (p. 5). Relatedly, data revealed that students would interact with members of the host family on a regular basis (the interaction would occur at home 93% of the time). Not only this, but oftentimes the aforementioned interaction would occur during mealtimes. Together, this shows that actions taken by members of the host family, namely the mother, affect students' experiences abroad and knowledge of authentic [food] culture of the respective location. This provides further evidence to support my reasoning for choosing the mother as my contributor, as I discuss in my analysis.

In her section titled *Reflections on the Homestay Experience*, Shiri compiles a chart itemizing responses to how students felt the "role of the homestay [was] in connecting [them] to local culture and society" (p. 15). The figures correlate to question 2 of my interview and support matters in my study which concern the homestay's role in cultural understanding and absorption while abroad.²

The final concept reflected upon in my analysis is not an associated article, but rather a theory. Franz Boas' theory of cultural relativism ties into my overarching exploration of 'the other' and deserves to be brought into my conversation of cultures coming together and being understood by outsiders. Born in the 19th century, Boas is known as the pioneer of modern anthropology. He believed that the concept of cultural evolution, though accurate in the Darwinian sense, was not applicable to cultures (if applied to cultures, this becomes similar to what is known as 'ethnocentrism', a belief no longer accepted in the modern anthropological

²Question 2 asks: 'What do you think is the importance of the homestay for students studying abroad?'

field).³ Instead, Boas hypothesized each culture develops in its own way based on its’ “particular historical and environmental circumstances” (New World Encyclopedia, 2017), not through a pre-determined hierarchy of stages. Through this line of thinking, the concept of one culture being better than another because it has yet to reach a higher evolutionary standing is no longer plausible. This leads Boas towards his theory of cultural relativism: “all cultures are of equal value and need to be studied from a neutral point of view” (Glazer, 1994). When studying a culture that is not your own, all claims must be made objectively. Researchers must be cautious not to use their own culture as the standard of ‘the norm’ from which to pass judgment upon others; one should not judge all societies along the same scale, for not all cultures are comparable. Through the theory, claims of European societies being more advanced or better than African ones are nullified. In the words of the New World Encyclopedia, “Boas’ approach of ‘cultural relativism’ superseded cultural evolution, becoming dominant in anthropology”.

My Project helps to fill the gap in research concerning not only my specific research question, but the overarching subject as well. I have not been able to find many articles which deal with matters of relations between students studying abroad and the people in countries which receive them. This dynamic is broad, so I was surprised to find such an absence in research regarding it. Many American college students study abroad through numerous programs in a wide variety of countries each semester, be it in the Global North or Global South. The existence of these programs and students undoubtedly affects countless communities’ economies and understanding of American culture. Yet, I was unable to find many articles on topics concerning this relationship between U.S.-based students and locals abroad, including the effect

³Cultural evolution is the notion that all cultures develop and evolve to their full potential in stages, meaning some cultures are thought to be more evolved than others. This creates a societal hierarchy.

students have in their respective locations while abroad, locals' perceptions of American students, or the reciprocal understanding and/or teaching of students' and locals' respective cultures. Though my research is not long-term or exhaustive, it is the first step of many in my attempt to understand more about the roles both students and locals have in the exchange of culture.

ASSUMPTIONS

Before conducting my interviews, I held several assumptions regarding possible answers to my overall research question and interview questions, as well as how elements within my methodology would play out. I also made two hypotheses which corresponded to my overall research question. Both reached the same conclusion: that my contributors *do* see themselves as playing the role of cultural educators to the students they host through the use of food.

In regards to my general exploration, I predicted my contributors *would* see themselves as playing the role of cultural educators via the use of food, though possibly not in the conventional sense: perhaps the women would take on this position but were unaware of its' educational significance as a component to students' time abroad, instead seeing themselves as being thoughtful. This is not to say the hosts were not fulfilling the role in question, but rather that they may not be cognizant of their impact on students' understanding of Moroccan (and Rabati) culture. After all, these women live in a place where culture dictates the hostess welcome guests warmly- students moving into a homestay are told to expect a mother/child relationship more so than a landperson/tenant one. It is because of this I came to the assumption that the hosting party may just see themselves as treating their guest students in a fashion better described as motherly than that of teacher. Therefore, I projected the host mothers' role of cultural educator would be present, though possibly subconscious, masquerading as hospitality.

Despite the aforementioned, I also hypothesized a secondary version of how my contributors may view themselves. This theory is based on interactions with my own host family as well as a wide variety of Moroccans I have made acquaintance with throughout my semester here. I have felt a great deal of cultural pride from Moroccans, pride which locals seem keen to pass onto visitors (be they long term such as the guest students on which I am focusing, or

tourists passing through). I am unsure if this phenomenon I have witnessed is due to actual interest Moroccan people have to share their traditions with Westerners, or an attempt to dispel any myths visitors may have of this nation. Personally, I have felt that with matters of food, it is the former. Whether in my own homestay or a guest in another's, the hosting company shows strong interest in hearing guests' thoughts on the food served. Not only this, but my host family and other families with whom I have eaten make a point of teaching myself and my peers the names of foods prepared. A final component I have noticed is locals' interest to explain culturally significant events—such as holidays—and foods which go along with them. Put together, these components lead me to believe this pride of culture and eagerness of hearing foreigners' approval of it can be interpreted as Moroccans being aware of their role as cultural educators to foreigners, even if the term 'cultural educator' itself is not one previously heard by the population in question. All the above being said, I came to the assumed theory that my contributors may well be cognizant of the part they are able to play in the understanding students studying abroad have of Moroccan culture through the use of food. Despite the possibility of the contributing host mothers not thinking of this concept as one pertaining to academics, but rather as one of cultural sharing, I feel it is fair to say the underlying motivations are similar enough to rationalize that my phrasing of 'cultural education' and the actions taken by my contributors are analogous enough to the point of saying 'yes', mothers *do* see themselves as playing the role of cultural educators to the students they host.

Through my time spent living in the Rabat medina and conversations held with my Academic Director, Taieb Belghazi, I came to recognize that many women living in my research site are not highly educated (in the traditional sense, anyway). Because of this, I realized early on in my formulation of this study that certain phrasing I would be inclined to use would prove to be

too academic for my contributors to fully understand. This is not to say the host mothers are not intelligent women, but rather that their lack of formal education would require me to reformulate the interview to encompass my area of research without terminology seen only in the academic sphere; I planned on reaching conclusions by articulating my inquiries in a way which would be more understandable to my contributors. It never crossed my mind to shift the focus of my study due to the academic nature of my concept—my contributors' lack of formal education does not make them unintelligent, I wish to make this point clear. The issue at hand was one of phrasing only; to remedy this matter I did not so much simplify the questions as go about changing the sorts of questions I asked in general. Instead of attaining direct answers through the use of the aforementioned 'academic terminology', I opted for a more indirect approach. This revised method would entail my asking modified versions of some questions which would not provide direct answers to my research question initially, leaving me to draw conclusions from the answers received, instead. My interview questions now focused on differences between the 'daily food life' of Moroccan host families (routines, dishes, etc.) with and without a guest student in their homes, descriptions of events outside the home setting and how food served at such events interconnects with students' education of Moroccan culture, and speaking to what the mothers perceived as the importance of the homestay experience and food therein. From these more straightforward inquiries, I hoped to receive information from which I could draw conclusions regarding my initial research question.

Secondary assumptions I had revolved around presumed responses to my questions. After spending a considerable amount of time living in Morocco and with a host family of my own in the medina, I expected to hear my contributors name certain foods when replying to the question pertaining to dishes typically served for each meal. For breakfast, I expected a variety of

Moroccan breads with cheese, jam, honey, butter, and chocolate spread with them, along with Moroccan style coffee and tea. The traditional couscous lunch served on Fridays was something I projected to be brought up by all mothers as well. I assumed all families would serve *kas korot* in the early evening prior to dinner.⁴ At dinner, I imagined most families served *tajines*, and expected to hear pasta dishes, *harira*, and a variety of Moroccan salads mentioned often.⁵⁶ Importantly, I assumed to hear the word *hobs* frequently—bread assumes a central role in Moroccan food culture, for it is used to scoop up food in place of utensils in many Moroccan dishes, and as such is served with most meals.⁷

With regards to students, I imagined their presence in contributors' homes would alter, if only slightly, the typical routine of what dishes are cooked and when they would be served. A main assumption I held therein was that the mothers would cook more meat and elaborate meals when hosting a student, due to the hospitable and generous nature of the people here and the additional monetary compensation provided to the families for taking in a student.

A significant assumption I held was in regards to my place within the study. I myself am a student from the United States currently studying abroad through the same host institution and program as the students my contributors are hosting, and until recently was being hosted by a family in the Rabat medina. My main concern surrounded contributors' transparency: would they

⁴*Kas Korot*, a Darija term taken from the French *Casse Croute*, refers to the third meal of the day. Typically, this meal will be served in the early evening and will consist of tea and assorted pastries or cookies.

⁵*Tajine* is a ceramic plate with a triangular lid in which food is cooked and also on which it is served. More recently, the term has been used to describe a dish consisting assorted meats and vegetables.

⁶*Harira* is a traditional Moroccan soup, and has red and white varieties. The white variety has milk, while the red contains a tomato and flour base with chickpeas, spaghetti, lentils, and sometimes meat. It is usually served with *chebekia*, dates, and/or boiled eggs.

⁷*Hobs* is the Arabic word for 'bread'. Moroccan bread is round and flat, and can be white or multigrain.

Speak openly to me, despite my being within the population we are discussing in our interviews? After all, it is not strange to think the women would omit or alter some of their answers because of my positionality. Despite these presumptions, I also recognized my topic is not of a sensitive nature, and there are not much the women could say within the realm of food which would cause offense. Because of this, I came to the conclusion that my proximity to the focus group of this Project would (hopefully) not cause too much of a disturbance.

The final cluster of assumptions I held concerned the methodology itself. First, I anticipated for my interviews to deviate somewhat from the textbook definition of ‘formal interviews’. I say this for two reasons, the first being the interviews would take place in each contributor’s respective house, as opposed to a singular, neutral, secondary location. Already, this shifts the dynamic from one of a formal meeting to one of being welcomed into another’s home as a guest. The second reason I expected this deviation is lack of laypeople’s understanding of what a formal interview entails. I foresaw the combination of Moroccans’ hospitality, the setting of the interviews being in contributors’ homes, and this lack of understanding leading to two main concerns: *kas korot* being served, and the possible presence of others (friends, family, etc.) in the interview location. These would be issues because both would function as distractions, and the extra company could potentially alter the responses my contributors offered. My second and final assumption regarding methodology involves the translator. Having a third party directly involved with the interview has the potential to greatly affect countless variables within the meeting, and I had not worked with this variable in prior studies. Namely, the atmosphere in which the interview takes place will be affected, which is likely to affect what the contributor feels comfortable vocalizing in their responses (this especially rings true with sensitive topics). The relationship formed between interviewer and

interviewee will almost definitely suffer: since I will not be interacting directly with the contributor and we are not able to understand one another, the level of trust built will be much lower than if interaction was kept between the two standard parties (once again, this is significant when dealing with topics of a sensitive nature, or if the researcher is trying to gain trust in order to receive access further into the community).

METHODOLOGY

Before deciding upon a research question, I already knew I wanted to work with ethnographic research methods, specifically (formal) interview and possibly observation. These methods connect me with my contributors in ways which surveys and content analysis would not. Being able to have face-to-face communication is essential in order to observe body language, hear the manner in which my contributor speaks, and also pose any probe questions which come up. In regards to observation, seeing as my questions center around at-home food culture, I thought incorporating descriptions of the host families' homes—specifically of the kitchen and dining areas, as well as of the overall atmosphere of the space—would aid in humanizing the contributors, effectively breaking up the analytical aspect of the Project while adding a narrative, illustrative aspect to the study.

Once determining the group of possible contributors for this Project was comprised of the mothers who hosted my fellow peers studying abroad through this program, I reached out to Homestay Coordinator Doha Lmachichi. Doha was the gatekeeper who could help me gain access to the families in question.⁸ With the help of both Doha and Program Assistant Nawal Chaib, I was provided with a list of five willing contributors and their respective contact information.⁹ Once I compiled my interview questions, my Arabic teacher Ilham Haffoudi translated them into Darija for my translator to read from. Separately, I had reached out to Soufian, a student from a local university with whom I was in touch to inquire about his

⁸The only factor I needed to code for was location- all host families had to live in the medina of Rabat.

⁹The five contributors who I interviewed differed slightly from this list, as will be mentioned later.

willingness to be my translator for the purpose of this study.¹⁰He agreed, and we met up in order for him to place phone calls to the aforementioned families to schedule interviews.

After careful consideration, I had come to the decision to conduct all interviews in each contributor's respective home. Though the customary setting for formal interviews would be in an alternative, impartial location where all contributors would feel comfortable coming to and speaking openly, having the location be a variable rather than a constant would be beneficial for the purpose of my study. I came to this conclusion because of a number of reasons: This topic is not of a delicate nature, so locating a setting which would make contributors feel comfortable and safe enough to divulge sensitive information was not a concern. Also, I am investigating matters pertaining to host families' cuisine, so being able to include observations of where the students and hosts eat would be a further positive component to my study, and would help me in adding an additional level of understanding- I would be able to see where mealtimes occur and how traditional the layout is. Thirdly, with the reassurance of Academic Director Taieb, I concluded that these women feel more comfortable talking about their own home, kitchen, and food in their homes than in an alternative setting.

As for the meetings themselves, all five followed a set pattern. Navigating the old medina can prove to be difficult and addresses are challenging to locate, so Soufian arranged secondary locations for us to meet each participant. Once we met, the contributor (or a representative party) would walk us to their home and lead us to a couch. Refreshments and *helwa* were served at some point either during or after each interview; serving tea with *helwa* is standard when hosting guests in Morocco, even in the context of a formal interview.¹¹ Once settled, I pull out

¹⁰In order to maintain his confidentiality, I will call my translator Soufian.

¹¹*Helwa* is the Darija term for 'sweets', and is an all-encompassing word for cookies, pastries, biscuits, and other assorted baked goods.

the Statement of Consent provided to me by my host institution (in Arabic) for Soufian to complete (he had to write—in Arabic—the purpose of my study). I then ask him to ask the contributor if she is comfortable with being recorded (they all were). At this point, I turn on my recorder and Soufian will either read the consent form or let the contributor read it herself.¹²Sometimes, Soufian would have to clarify or further explain various points outlined on the form in order for the women to gain a better understanding of it. Once this is complete, I ask Soufian to ask the contributor to sign the form if they consent to all it says. Before starting the actual interview, I ask my translator to convey to each woman two things- that I can provide them with a summary of my results once my study is completed, and that she will be keeping the form so she has proof of giving consent and is aware of what rights and ethics I must adhere to. Any observations I made about the dining area, kitchen, and overall layout or design of each home were noted either during the time in which Soufian handled the Statement of Consent portion of the meeting, or immediately after returning to my apartment afterwards.

The question portion of the interview was fairly straightforward: I have a list of questions which I read from in English. Soufian will then repeat each question to the contributor in Darija, using his own language skills and the translations with which I provided him. Once again, he sometimes has to further explain the questions so the contributors will understand what is being asked of them. My questions remained the same throughout all five interviews, but deviated slightly from my original list based on which elements seemed fit to focus on once commencing with the first interview. The mothers will then answer in Darija, sometimes having a short back-and-forth with Soufian as they elaborate, before their responses are reiterated back to me in

¹²Some Moroccans, especially women living in the medina, are illiterate. Because of this, it was important for my translator to ask the mothers which option was preferable so they were aware of their rights, regardless of whether or not they could read the form itself.

English. Depending on the answer, my translator will take a moment to explain a portion of the reply I did not fully understand- usually this will be a certain Moroccan dish or pastry, if I was unsure of the Arabic word for it. Typically, I would refrain from writing much down during an interview so I can focus my attention on my contributor. Noting a word here or there which caught my attention—so I could go back to it via a probe question—is ordinarily all I write. However, during the five interviews conducted for this study, I jotted down more extensive notes. Because my translator did much of the conversing with the contributors and I received the responses from his restatement of them, I had the opportunity to write more than I usually would without further disrupting the flow of conversation. As I would hear the contributor say something in Darija which I understood, I would take note of it, and I completed writing the answers to each question when Soufian would translate them to me. This entire process is repeated until the interview is complete. Once I am finished with the questions, I will turn off my recording device. If tea is served after the conclusion of the interview, I will use this time to clarify some responses with Soufian or speak further with the mothers. Soon after, my translator asks if I am ready to leave before thanking the contributor for her time and heading out. Each interview lasted approximately half an hour, but with the added time spend on refreshments and any further discussion, I was at most women's houses for an hour.

Though I am satisfied with the methods used, there were aspects of the interviews which were not ideal, and stem from the presence of the translator. Soufian was enormously helpful and professional, in spite of his completely voluntary participation and lack of education in the field of anthropological data collecting. Therefore, I want to make clear the issues I present are not due to Soufian himself, but rather the presence of a third party altogether.

Due to my being unable to conduct the interviews independently of Soufian, my direct communication with the contributors was kept at a minimum, hindering my ability to form relationships with these women. A main reason why the field of cultural anthropology as a whole is so appealing to me is because of the interpersonal relationships and trust built through conducting ethnographic research; the inability of my contributors to get to know me—the person exploring and studying their way of life—was difficult for me to accept.

Stemming from the above is my frustration with my inability to communicate directly with my contributors, and therefore relying on a ‘middle man’ to convey to me what it is these women are expressing. Herein lie two main concerns- the inability to accurately capture direct quotes from my contributors and relying on Soufian for clarifying points. Each host mother’s answers were being retold to me in Soufian’s own words and in a more condensed manner, making it challenging to understand the tone, personality, or underlining connotation behind the women’s responses- even direct quotes which Soufian translated are not in their original or intended language, which takes away from their overall intention.¹³ My final concern which is linked to having a translator is that some of the clarification was provided to me by Soufian, not the host mothers. Most often these explanations were simply my translator explaining to me what a certain Moroccan food was, so it did not directly detract from the interview, though it did create a (albeit minor) secondary dialogue which was not between the interviewer and the interviewee.

Thirdly, I neglected to probe further in certain instances of the interviews; doing so would have proved helpful in my analysis. Since the interviews conducted did not consist of direct two-person interactions and I have not previously worked with a translator, there were extenuating circumstances which I had not navigated in earlier studies. This affected my ability to

¹³All direct quotes were translated to me by Soufian, so they are not an exact wording as told by the contributors.

conduct interviews as I would normally and at times distracted me from the task at hand- receiving detailed answers. I found myself being overly conscious of how much time everything was consuming due to Soufian's presence, so my attempt at moving swiftly along through the questions took away from my attentive focus on attaining further elaboration of various subjects. I did not take a moment to reflect upon which aspects of the questions I had not received full explanations of, due to my feelings of uneasiness because of the third party 'sitting in on' my interview. This could potentially be remedied with me building a closer relationship with my translator, so I would feel more at ease with his presence and could conduct my interviews in a manner more similar to what I am comfortable with.

ANALYSIS

Analyzing Interview Questions

To begin, I compile the answers to each interview question from every contributor in order to have a database from which to draw conclusive information. Having all participants' responses to a single question in a unified location provides the researcher with a compiled, organized version of all their data. If there are any comparable quotes or foods listed by more than one contributor, this format will make it easier to notice them; with this, the process of noticing themes, similar responses, or glaring outliers is streamlined.

I began each interview by asking my contributors how long they have been hosting students. Contributor 1 said since 2008 (9 years), Contributor 2 said since 2009 (8 years), Contributor 3 said since 2007 (10 years), Contributor 4 said for 5 years, and Contributor 5 said for 2 years.¹⁴ I should note that each student stays with their respective host family for a semester, so my contributors potentially host two or more students per year. Because of this and none of the mothers being new at the position of 'host', I feel confident that the data I collected is fairly representative of the overall population of host mothers in the Rabat medina.

The second question asked participants what they think to be the importance of the homestay for students studying abroad. However, the women seemed to be answering a question of what is important in the homestay, rather than the importance of the homestay experience itself (this is most likely due to translation error). This being said, there was an underlying theme of my contributors wanting students to experience feelings of overall happiness and comfort while staying with them. Contributor 1 said if the students are happy, she is happy. This sentiment was carried on in Contributor 2's response, though she also mentioned the importance

¹⁴In order to maintain anonymity, I will refer to contributors with a number as opposed to with their names.

of “good vibes”, “good food and communication”, and for students to have a feeling of peace at home (personal communication, November 22, 2017). Contributors 4 and 5 also included that it was important for students to feel ‘at home’ and comfortable in their homestay. Contributor 4 went so far as to say she treats her guest students the way she would want her own daughter to be treated, if she was to be in a homestay abroad; it is because of this that this mother puts so much care into the students’ meals. Contributor 3 mostly discussed how some of the first students she hosted helped teach her then-school aged daughter English, and that the family collectively taught the American students Darija.

Question three asks contributors if they see themselves as having a role in the cultural education of students they host. The unanimous response was a resounding ‘yes’ or even “of course”, said by Contributor 2 (personal communication, November 22, 2017). Contributors 1, 2, and 4 answered very similarly, best summed up with Contributor 1’s response: “I have a role in teaching the students about Moroccan culture and Islam” (personal communication, November 21, 2017), while Contributors 2 and 4 added they learn from students’ respective cultures, too. Contributor 3 talked about making students feel at home, while Contributor 5 laughed out loud while joking about how she teaches her guest students “everything- the bad things and the good things [and Arabic]” (personal communication, November 25, 2017). Overall, the women unquestionably saw themselves as playing the role of cultural educator, and enjoyed the reciprocal learning of students’ cultures.

I continued along this line of inquiry with question four: ‘do you use food as a means of cultural education- if so, how?’ Once again, all five women responded with a ‘yes’. Many women said they cook popular Moroccan foods to exemplify Moroccan food culture (even if these foods are not ones typically served on a regular basis), listing some dishes typically served

(such as *harira*, couscous, *tajines*, and assorted Moroccan breads). Contributors 2 and 4 explicitly said they want students' honest opinions of each dish so they know what to continue (or not to continue) cooking, while Contributor 4 mentioned some of the students she has housed will cook their own hometown dishes as a way to show their own food culture to the host family. Though each contributor had their own response, the theme of each woman genuinely caring about students enjoying the food prepared for them runs throughout.

In hopes of reaching conclusions about which foods the host mothers see as significant to Moroccan culture, the subsequent question asks if there are any dishes my contributors make sure to serve for their students. Contributors 1, 3, and 4 mention *tajines* (1 and 4 specifically identify the beef and prune variety).¹⁵ This group of women also note cooking a wide variety of foods, with Contributor 4 commenting that it is “impossible” for students to not familiarize themselves with typical Moroccan fare due to their staying in a Moroccan homestay for a period of several months (personal communication, November 25, 2017). *Ghaif* and *m'semen*, two similar Moroccan flatbreads, were mentioned by Contributors 3 and 5.¹⁶¹⁷ While all women mentioned foods characteristic in everyday Moroccan cuisine, Contributor 4 placed emphasis on a dish of ground beef with a blend of spices which she calls her specialty, noting with pride that she created this recipe herself and that students always like it and ask how she cooks it.

Tying the former two questions together, my following question asks the women if they think food plays an important role in the homestay experience. Though Contributor 1 did not explicitly reply with a ‘yes’ or ‘no’, her response of:

¹⁵In Morocco, ‘meat’ refers to beef. Other animals such as chicken are called by their name.

¹⁶*Ghaif* is a type of square flatbread with a flaky exterior and doughy interior.

¹⁷*M'semen* is very similar to *ghaif*, except it is folded differently before being fried and is round.

“Moroccans like to welcome people- it’s a country of generosity. Before dinner...I serve *helwa*...with tea. The students think that’s all, but then I serve them dinner and the students get so happy then! As long as the students are happy I would be glad to serve them”

can be interpreted as a ‘yes’, making this response unanimous among all the contributors (personal communication, November 21, 2017). Contributor 4 emphasizes her answer further with an explanation of just how central a role food *does* play in the homestay experience for her personally: if the host mother does not put forth effort to serve good food to her students, “some of [the students] will hate coming home and will eat out which isn’t good” (personal communication, November 25, 2017). She finishes by adding that “some students even bring their friends to eat here”, emphasizing that her cooking is liked by the students (personal communication, November 25, 2017).

Though the seventh question, ‘is there a difference between food served depending on if you have a host student living with you’, does not yield a specific theme, each response was helpful in revealing insight into the thought processes host mothers have regarding food while hosting a guest. The question also served as an important marker in shedding light onto the authenticity of students’ homestay experience: are the experiences true to the standard lives of medina families, or does the presence of students shift elements of day-to-day life enough to alter students’ understanding of what an authentic lifestyle for these families actually is? Are students living a somewhat inauthentic version of traditional Rabati life because of their own presence, or maybe because hosting families treat their students differently than they would their own kin? Contributors 1, 2, 3, and 4 initially indicated there were no differences- Contributor 1 said

“Whatever I eat, I give the students...” (personal communication, November 21, 2017). However, Contributor 3 (who initially replied ‘no’) went on to explain she *does* cook differently when hosting: certain foods which are typically only cooked on occasion (due to ingredients not being readily available or accessible) are prepared much more regularly when students are present so as to “familiarize them with Moroccan cuisine” (personal communication, November 22, 2017). Contributor 4, who began her response by saying she serves four meals each day regardless of students’ presence, continued to say there was one notable difference- when not hosting, her family tends to eat leftovers from lunch for that night’s dinner (when leftovers are available). If a student is living in the household that semester, the woman will prepare a fresh meal for the evening. Contributor 5 answered similarly to 3, though her initial response was ‘yes’ (unlike Contributor 3’s ‘no’): she added onto the reply with an example of one of these ‘special’ meals: *t’feyeh*, to which she adds eggs and almonds.¹⁸ Something to note: Contributor 4 mentioned that host families are not paid to serve *kas korot*, but she (and from my experience, most other host families) offer this meal daily. She concludes by stating: “It’s not like I won’t serve [*kas korot*] to the students just because I’m not paid for it” (personal communication, November 25, 2017). This quote is emblematic of all contributors’ answers for this question- they do not do the bare minimum of what is expected of them through the program. They go above and beyond, treating the guest students like their own kin, making sure their time in the homes are full.

The eighth question had 3 sections, asking the women to describe what is served at a typical breakfast, lunch, and then dinner. For breakfast, all contributors listed jam, tea, and coffee. *Komeer* with cheese and chocolate spread, *ghaif*, and other pastries and breads were

¹⁸*T’feyeh* is the sweet variety of couscous, served with caramelized onions and raisins.

popular answers listed by most.¹⁹ An interesting finding was that Contributor 3 favored black coffee over tea during the morning meal, a marked shift from the usual in two ways: not only does she not make Moroccan tea often, but the coffee is not prepared in the traditional style either (Moroccan coffee is made with a considerable amount of milk and sugar). Another distinctive answer came from Contributor 4, who likes to eat white *harira* with her breakfast. She says her students enjoy having it with her- this would have been a good opportunity to probe and see if this contributor's students think having the soup in the morning is part of a traditional Moroccan breakfast, or if they know it is an outlier. For lunch, students will eat at their host institution, with the exception of Fridays—when they are released to their homestays for couscous—and weekends. On weekends, the trend (drawn from the answers of Contributors 2, 3, 4, and 5) is to serve *tajines*. My interviews have led me to the conclusion that *tajines* are typically prepared for lunch, but students are led to believe they are an evening food. This is because mothers will make the dish for dinner when hosting, so as to familiarize students with this quintessential Moroccan food. A second trend which came to light from Contributor 3, 4, and 5's responses is the popularity of salads as a portion of the typical lunch- Contributor 3 calls the food “obligatory” (personal communication, November 22, 2017). Finally, Contributors 2, 3, and 5 all list chicken as popular options for this meal. A possible trend which began to emerge is the popularity of fish during lunch: only two contributors mentioned it in their responses, but this combined with the absence of fish being mentioned during any other meal leads me to believe that with additional participants, fish as a lunch food may be a trend. After lunch comes *kas korot*, or ‘teatime’ as students call it. Though I did not explicitly ask about this snack during the interview, all but one contributor (Contributor 5) brought it up independently of my questioning.

¹⁹*Komeer* is the Darija word for ‘baguette’.

This shows its' importance and abundant presence in the average Moroccan home. Contributors mentioned Moroccan breads (such as *ghaif* and *bghreir*) and assorted *helwa* as the typical foods served with tea.²⁰ Contributor 4 brings up her family's love for Moroccan style coffee, saying she makes only an individual-sized pot of tea for any students who do not wish to partake in her affinity for the beverage. Later in the evening, dinner is served. *Harira* (both the red and white varieties) was listed by Contributors 2, 3, 4, and 5- some served the soup with homemade bite-sized pizzas, others with a combination of boiled eggs, dates, and *chebekia*.²¹ Various pasta based dishes came up often: Contributor 2 liked to bake hers in the oven with cheese, as did Contributor 4. Contributors 2 and 5 also make *s'fa* and *f'dowsh*.^{22,23} Finally, plain spaghetti was listed by Contributors 4 and 5. Contributor 4 brings up that *rofeeza* is usually prepared for lunch (further proof of this is seen when Contributor 2 mentions serving the dish weekly during the second meal of the day), but she makes it for dinner because of its' high spice content which leaves diners feeling hot; she believes those who eat this dish and go outside afterwards are more likely to catch a cold, so she serves it for dinner on the premise that diners will remain indoors for the remainder of the night.²⁴ There was limited mention of red meat by any contributor, forming a trend of foods which are more cost effective (pastas, chicken, soups, and the like) being favored by medina families. An additional item to discuss here is the importance of dessert. As Contributor 3 states, "[dessert is] obligatory with or without students' presence", "the meal isn't complete without it", and "[it is] impossible to go without dessert" (personal

²⁰*Bghreir* are Moroccan pancake. They are doughy and have along on the top.

²¹*Chebekia* is a pastry in the shape of a rose, composed of deep-fried strips of dough which are then covered with honey and sprinkled with sesame seeds. This is a type of *helwa*.

²²*S'fa* is a communal pasta dish made of short spaghetti which is then shaped into a mound, and has strips of powdered sugar, cinnamon, and other sweet spices running vertically down the mound.

²³*F'dowsh* is a dish composed of short spaghetti, chicken, and spices which is baked in the oven.

²⁴*Rofeeza* is shredded *ghraif*, and is served with soup and chicken.

communication, November 22, 2017). Contributor 2 adds to this sentiment by laughing about how her husband gets mad if he does not eat dessert. Contributors who spoke about the beloved meal (all contributors except 4) said they serve seasonal fruit- apples, oranges, bananas, and pomegranates were common replies.

Moving along, I now ask if meals are served at the same time whether or not a student is being hosted. Contributors 1, 3, 4, and 5 all say ‘yes’ - “students tell me Moroccans eat so much”, the fifth woman adds with a laugh (personal communication, November 25, 2017). Contributor 2 says her family tends to eat first and leave food for the students during the week (due to her children often studying), though they will wait to eat all together if the mother receives a message from her student that they will be home in time for dinner (this occurs mostly over the weekend). This sentiment—of waiting to eat until students have come home—is shared by Contributor 3.

Question 10 asks ‘if there are any specific events (religious, familial, cultural) you make an effort to include your students in, are there specific foods which go with them so students have a better understanding of Moroccan culture?’ This question was not interpreted as I had intended, and as such I received slightly different answers than ones I hoped to hear. All five participants discussed how they have students whom they host join them for any weddings, baby naming ceremonies, or other such events, dressing them in traditional Moroccan *caftans* or *jelabas*.²⁵²⁶ From this answer, I can see how the women place importance on exposing the students they host to Moroccan culture via these enjoyable social events. Aside from this overarching theme of response, there were a few other comments which proved useful to my topic. Contributor 1 spoke to this question at length, starting by explaining food ritual associated

²⁵A *caftan* is a traditional dress worn by women, especially for special occasions.

²⁶A *jelaba* is a traditional long tunic worn by men.

with *Eid K'bir*.²⁷ She makes sure students are engaged with the goings-on, starting with the sacrificial slaughter and cooking of a sheep. After the sacrifice, she cooks chicken, salads, and the heart and liver of the sheep over coal. In the evening they eat couscous with lamb shoulder. Another prominent holy day, which celebrates the birth of the prophet, is observed by cooking and eating with family members; this mother bakes many different cakes and *helwa* for the occasion, and proudly showed me photos of her creations. Sometimes, she will go to the House of Candles in neighboring Salé where traditional Gnawa music is played. Throughout the description, the woman explains that breakfast for holy days consists of Moroccan coffee, *helwa*, and pastries- *bghreir* in particular. Another significant response came from Contributor 5, who agreed with the former contributor in that students enjoy participating in the purchasing of the sheep for *Eid K'Bir*. She also brought up that *bastille* is a dish typically served at Moroccan weddings.²⁸

My final two questions were very straightforward, and though I did not intend to ask them when planning out interview questions, I decided tea and couscous are such quintessentially Moroccan foods that I would like to see what contributors had to say about both. My second to last question inquired about how host mothers typically made their tea- I wanted to see how many families drank their tea with mint, sugar, a combination of the two, or with something else. Personally, my host mother made tea with a healthy serving of sugar but no mint; since I was receiving most of my food-related cultural education through her cuisine, I could have easily made the assumption that mint is not typically added to traditional Moroccan tea, altering my perception of customary foods here. All five of my contributors said they

²⁷*Eid K'bir* is what this contributor called *Eid al-Adha*, a holy day in Islam known in English as the 'Feast of the Sacrifice', wherein a lamb is sacrificed.

²⁸*Bastille* is made of flaky dough and is filled with meat or vegetables. The top is sprinkled with powdered sugar.

steeped the tea with both mint and sugar, though several mentioned making a separate pot of sugar-free tea for those students who preferred their drink unsweetened. The only notable variation in response came from Contributor 2, who said she rotates between making her tea with mint, *louiza*, and *sheeba* to see what her students prefer.²⁹³⁰ At the moment, mint is out of season so she is staying away from using it altogether because it is not of good quality. The last question simply asked if the hosting women always make couscous on Fridays for their students- each answered with an emphatic ‘yes’.

Overall Findings from Interviews

With the initial analysis complete, I am able to move onto the final, comprehensive analysis to answer my general research question. The initial analysis involved compiling all responses for each question to attain an in-depth understanding of what my contributors think about the topic at hand. I then sifted through all five responses per question to identify trends which presented themselves within each. Now, I have narrowed down five interviews of twelve questions each into twelve themes, one per question. From these, I can draw a conclusive answer to my initial research question.

‘Is there a role mothers living in the Rabat medina who host students studying abroad see themselves playing in the cultural education of their students through the use of food, from their perspective?’ The findings indicate they do. As seen from question 3, contributors said they see themselves as having a role in the cultural education of students they host. Though the question did not specify the role being played through using food, a key part of my research question was already definitively answered: the host mothers do see themselves as playing a role

²⁹*Louiza* is the Darija word for ‘lemon verbena’.

³⁰*Sheeba* is the Darija word for ‘tree wormwood leaves’

in their students' cultural education. The question I asked was direct, meaning I did not have to examine the women's answers in order to come to a conclusion. This was done on purpose so as to avoid misanalysis of the responses for this critical question. The fourth question asks the host mothers if they use food as a means of cultural education. Once again, the question was asked in a straightforward manner because of its direct correspondence to my research question; I did not want to risk misanalysis *or* misunderstanding of a more indirect question on the contributor's part. All women answered "yes" to the question. After this, my research question was definitively answered. Nevertheless, the interview is a process which enables the researcher to develop an understanding of their contributor, so the following questions served as support for the overall answer of 'yes' and to answer how the host mothers fulfilled their perceived role.

By telling me they believe food plays a substantial role in students' homestay experiences and about the thought put into which dishes to prepare for students, my participants showed their understanding of their cultural educator role. Even when differences between food served with and without the presence of a student is noted, they are not substantial enough to affect students' general perceptions and comprehension of Moroccan culture, nor were they substantial enough to cause contributors to give two sets of responses for the subsequent question about typical food served for each meal of the day.³¹ Host mothers also do not change the routine of mealtimes, and will serve meals at the times which are typical for them without a student. Finally, all contributors made it abundantly clear both in their verbal responses and body language that Moroccan style tea and couscous for Friday lunch is a necessity for students to partake in. Together, all these strands join to form a conclusion that not only do the contributors *say* they feel the role of 'cultural educator' toward the students they host, but their answers back up these

³¹Food served will still fall within the norms for Rabati cuisine, and changes revolve more around amount of variation of the types of dishes.

claims. This means that even if the *term* ‘cultural education/educator’ was unclear to them, the women’s *sactions* show how they have taken on the role.

Findings in the Perspective of the Literature

Now that I have drawn the conclusions for my interview questions and my research question has been answered, I will interweave the aforementioned literature into these findings. The purpose of this is to relate my data with research which has already been recognized in the academic sphere, and to compare my findings with theirs. As for Boas’ theory, I will reflect on positionality and overall awareness of one’s culture when studying another.

Roland Barthes’ notion of food serving a “commemorative” (p. 32) function, as seen in his *Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption*, applies to my research; what Barthes calls the commemorative function of food, I call food culture. As a person eats food customary to their culture, they partake in the historical continuity of their society and its culture. Each nation has historically meaningful foods that carry cultural significance, and continuing to prepare and consume these traditional foods through the years permits people to take part in and continue their society’s traditions. This function Barthes proposes is parallel to my concept of ‘food culture’- both are ways of understanding food’s role in carrying cultural understanding and implication.

The second idea which applies to my findings is Barthes’ belief of food’s function as a sign in situations. Writing that situations can be communicated through food, the philosopher thinks the dishes served at any given event have a strong enough societal meaning that it can define in which situation it is being served. Taking his belief, I apply this to my research via question 10 (are there specific foods which are associated with specific events so, when served,

students will gain a better understanding of Moroccan culture?). If certain foods hold a strong enough societal significance that one can identify any given event based solely on it, this is a subject worth exploring in my investigation. For if students abroad are to join their host families for events such as baby naming ceremonies, weddings, and various holidays, these could serve as excellent learning opportunities about Moroccan culture through food.

Elements from Sonia Shiri's study of students abroad are proving helpful in supporting some central concepts in my Project. In *The Homestay in Intensive Language Study Abroad: Social Networks, Language Socialization, and Developing Intercultural Competence*, the author examined students' perceptions of the role played by the homestay. Her findings revealed the majority of students studying abroad in a program comparable to the one on which I am focusing value the homestay experience, saying it adds to their time abroad. Specifically, Shiri's chart lists responses to which students answered in reference to what they felt the "role of the homestay [was] in connecting [them] to local culture and society" (p. 15). 77% strongly agreed that "having a homestay made me feel more connected to the local community, 80% of students strongly agreed that "a homestay is a critical component of any formal study abroad experience", and 85% strongly agreed with the following statement: "the homestay offered a much more valuable insight into the local culture than living in dorms or hotels" (p. 15). From this data, I am able to support *my* findings on the homestay: not only do mothers see this experience as meaningful in students' time abroad, but according to Shiri's findings, so do students. Together, this reflects back to my initial question in that it shows both parties (the host and the guest) place importance on the homestay and therefore look to it as a place in which to further cultural education and absorption.

This study revealed another finding which supports a central element of my research- the host mother. As Shiri's results show, the host mother is "the primary locus of interaction" (p. 5). This supports my choosing the mother as the person whose perspective on which I concentrated. These women are the center of their families, and as such have a more holistic perspective of the goings-on within their domestic sphere; the mothers have a more well-rounded position than other members of the family. This combination of their insight and role of choosing which foods to prepare with and without students makes them the best choice of contributor for my explorative study on cultural learning through food within the homestay. Continuing along this vein, Shiri's findings show students interact with their host families in the home setting 93% of the time, often during mealtimes. This presents opportunities for the host family to discuss the foods which are being eaten, offering the chance for students to expand their knowledge of the respective culture. Thus, students are participating in cultural education. These findings directly support my analysis and research.

Franz Boas' theory of cultural relativism does not correlate with my analysis, nor did I intend for it to. Instead, I am reflecting on his theory as an examination of the ethical side of conducting cross-cultural ethnographic research (especially as an anthropologist from the West). It is vital for researchers to see other societies with a neutral eye, and not to presume anything on the basis of what they know from their own culture. Each society develops in its own way, meaning just because Moroccans may eat different foods or at different times than Americans, this is not a sign of their level of development. Differences are just that- differences. Through this theory, I must not compare Moroccan culture against that of the United States, because the two are not analogous. Each culture stands on its own merit, and must be understood through the careful and conscientious studying *of the people through the people*—not by comparing it

against what I have grown up with. This is why I believe ethnographic research methods to be imperative in cross-cultural research; reading other Westerners' interpretations of Moroccan culture is no comparison to asking locals to speak for themselves. In an attempt to avoid any remaining bias which may have presented itself inadvertently, I chose to visit native Moroccans' homes and simply compile the information which I was told, as opposed to deducing my own findings from research conducted as an outsider. Through my examination, I took into consideration Boas' theory and attempted to conduct this research in as neutral a manner as I could.

Participant Observation

I chose to conduct participant observation to supplement to the more 'human' side of my research. The following is not information to analyze and incorporate into my findings. Instead, it is a separate section which reminds both myself and the reader that my contributors are people, and this study is not so much about the statistical findings as it is about speaking to women in the Rabat medina about their interactions with and understanding of students like myself.

Soufian and I were met by a man (whose relation to Contributor 1 was unknown) in the afternoon and lead to my first participant's house. Ducking through the arched doorway, I looked up to find a grand, open-air riad-style home, covered with mismatching blue tiles and paint. The central space was enormous—deceptively so, I remember thinking—given the narrow alleys and unassuming front door leading into the room. We were led upstairs to a humble guest room where a classmate of mine was conducting an interview with my contributor. The room we sat in was lined with Moroccan guest couches, a coffee table placed in the middle. My classmate insisted my presence was no issue, so myself, my translator, the student, her translator, the host

mother, and her friend all sat together. Once finished with her interview, our contributor's friend agreed to be interviewed by my classmate as well. They disappeared into the adjoining room, coming back towards the end of my interview to share tea and wafer-style biscuits.³²Contributor 1 had a warm personality, and was eager to help with my Project despite her hoarse voice. Over the course of the interview, the woman invited me for couscous that Friday, offered to teach me to cook, and invited me to make *helwa* in her home- "just make sure you call two days in advance!" she added (personal communication, November 21, 2017).

Contributor 2 met the two of us the following day, and lead us to another multi-purpose room. Again, the walls were lined with guest couches—these ones golden in color—and a Western style circular dinner table stood at one corner of the room. The walls were decorated with ornate crown molding, a small skylight letting in the sun above us. This light and another adjacent guest room hinted at a riad style home. This time, the contributor's fifteen-year-old daughter was present for the interview. She sat quietly on the couch, interrupting only to bring me a glass jar of lentils to remedy Soufian's difficulty when trying to translate the word 'lentil' to me. The participant stressed her strong feelings of motherliness and pleasure in hosting students, saying "they are like my own children" (personal communication, November 22, 2017). After I concluded asking my set questions, we drank tea with cookies as she spoke for a long time about various students who have lived in her home, emphasizing the good relations they maintain even after returning to their respective home countries.

Later that afternoon I conducted an interview with Contributor 3. Ducking through another doorway, I was met by an extravagant riad-style entry room. We sat on black couches in one of the guest rooms, multicolored tiles filling the walls while pure white ones covered the

³²This friend ended up becoming my fifth contributor.

floor. Once again, a low table was placed in front of the couch, and several small wooden tables were brought out to accommodate the numerous tea pots, plates of *helwa*, and glasses displayed. Despite all these being laid out prior to the interview, fresh tea was served by the contributor's adult daughter during the interview, interrupting the mother mid-answer. This contributor's replies were more straightforward and concise than other's, but her kind nature and love of hosting was still evident: after answering the first question, she beamed as explaining to us how the first student she ever hosted (10 years ago) will be visiting her soon.

The next contributor was a reference of Contributor 2's, a loquacious and generous woman. The interview was disrupted numerous times because of the two young children in Contributor 4's home, only one of whom was hers. Nevertheless, this mother gave extensive answers to all my questions, even leading me into the kitchen to show how she prepares tea when I asked question 11 (how do you typically serve your tea?). Soufian, myself, and the woman sat at a Western-style circular dining table in one of the rooms off the main area. Another riad-style layout, all the rooms on the periphery of the open area had carved arches defining the edges of their doorways and intricate crown molding bordering the ceiling.

My final participant was the friend of Contributor 1. There was some miscommunication of when the interview was to take place, so Soufian and I waited for her arrival with the woman's husband, Contributor 1, and a teenage daughter who was doing chores in the background. These people all stayed for the interview, interjecting with their thoughts at times. The husband was a laid back, kindhearted man. Seemingly unbothered by my presence as he lay on a couch, he joked about how I could only record the interview if I posted it on YouTube. The room was another multi-purpose space, filled with guest couches covered with plaid blankets and a low table sitting in the center. Toward the end of the interview, we were served Coca-Cola with

vanilla cookies, and Contributor 1 told an anecdote about her love for the soft drink. After finishing, my contributor's husband walked my translator and me out, placing his hand on his heart while saying goodbye.

Through these interactions, I was able to feel the mother's sincere affection for the students they host, something which is hard to convey through methodical analysis of their interviews. My contributors genuinely try to make the students' experience in Rabat as realistic and yet as privileged as they can afford. As I assumed, the interviews themselves were not as formal as procedure dictates, mostly due to the company of others. Though the contributors may not have altered their answers due to these people's presence, at times a woman would lose her train of thought due to a disruption, or another person in the room would speak up, causing the actual contributor to add more to her answer than she originally intended. The final general observation I made was the functionality of a single room in any given woman's home. The homes had one main space which served numerous functions. Lined with couches, these rooms would usually house a television and table, meaning this space was used for eating, leisure, and possibly sleeping. A purpose of my conducting participant observation was to get a feel for how other guest students were living- the setting of the cultural exchange, if you will. I feel I accomplished this, and was able to leave with enough information about the women and their lives to write this humanizing passage of my otherwise analytical research project.

CONCLUSION

When beginning this Project, my goal was to uncover if host mothers see themselves as playing the role of ‘cultural educator’ to the students they host, specifically through the use of food. The answers provided to me from the interviews I conducted lead me to say with quite certainty that the answer to my question is a solid ‘yes’. There is still much to be learned from these women- about their place in Moroccan society, about their role in the cultural education of their own families, about their perceptions of U.S. culture attained through the students they host.

For now, I am thankful for the opportunity to learn what I have, and release it into the academic sphere.

Given the opportunity to repeat this study, there are a few things I would modify in an effort to improve the outcome. An important change is expanding the number of contributors I worked with. Because of time restraints, I only interviewed five host mothers. Though this was enough to start drawing conclusions and themes on my topic, my exploration would benefit from a larger pool of answers and experiences. With this, I would receive more accurate overall findings.

Before initiating my field study, I identified two apprehensions. The first of these concerned the lack of formality I expected my interviews to have. It was my thought that my contributor's answers as well as my findings would suffer from conducting interviews in a more informal environment. However, I came to realize a more relaxed atmosphere is not necessarily negative, and may in fact have been a benefit to my methodology. This was an important lesson for me to learn: depending on the subject matter being researched, having a setting which is not ultra-formal may result in a more positive interview experience for participants. In regards to my study, this more relaxed format was advantageous; a main issue to be cognizant of when conducting interviews is that one's contributors feel at ease. If this is attained through a setting where participants are in their homes, surrounded by friends and family, and are able to serve tea as they normally would a guest, then so be it.

A second issue I faced was the presence of a translator. Though Soufian and I built a relationship through our time together, his company still affected me negatively during the interviews. There is no getting around the use of a translator in certain circumstances- if you need one, you need one. Therefore, I must learn how to adapt to their presence. If possible, I will

build more of a relationship before conducting interviews so I am comfortable with the translator being alongside myself and the contributor. On the other hand, I have also realized how much is taken away from the process of building a relationship with contributors—a central component to ethnographic research—when having a translator speak for you. Not being able to communicate for yourself affects the level of trust and understanding contributors have of me (an issue which is especially significant when interviewing about sensitive information). How do I circumnavigate the language barrier and attempt to build a relationship nevertheless? Learn as much about the contributors' culture as I can in an effort to lessen my status as an outsider, learn some phrases in the local language, find common ground on which to relate, be expressive in my body language. Build a relationship with the contributor in these other ways, and show them you can be trusted with a warm but strong presence.

The process of interviewing contributors and analyzing their responses has left me with further questions and directions which I would like to take this study. These questions revolve around details within specific interview questions and also around the larger conversation of cultural exchange. If given the chance, I would like to explore food preparation. All cultures have food customary to them, but do the people of each culture prepare these foods similarly? Roland Barthes' (1961) ponderings on food's "commemorative" function have made me wonder how the preparation of food affects the passing down of the historical understanding of each dish (p. 32). Do the possible differences in making traditional foods affect one's cultural understanding of the dish, shifting its' significance as the recipe is passed through generations? Secondly, I would look into how one's knowledge of Moroccan culture (including food culture) varies with students who have diverse dietary needs (vegan, gluten free, vegetarian, etc.). Does students' abstaining from eating certain dishes which commonly appear in Moroccan cuisine

affect their comprehension of Moroccan culture due to their lack of exposure to all the traditional foods?

I came to Rabat knowing I wanted to learn more about food's role in the country's culture, and that this exploration would involve speaking to Moroccans- asking them to share with me an aspect of their lives. What this Project has brought me is so much more, and the process of it all has made me even more passionate about the field which I am entering and the dynamics which I was exploring. Being welcomed into the host mothers' homes—me, a young student from the United States intending to study these women and ask about the way they run their homes—and yet still treated with such warmth only goes to further demonstrate the boundless openheartedness the people of this city and country have. I aimed to serve as a middle man in this exploration- not someone who does research on a population so much as someone who compiles the stories told to me by my contributors. My role in this process was not to insert myself into situations in which I did not grow up. My role was to form relationships and learn about what host mothers really thought and felt of the presence of students like myself. This is how we attain accurate information about others, by letting them speak for themselves.

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