

Beyond Bowties & Bean Pies

A Material Analytic Approach to Eating & Meaning-making in the Nation of Islam

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THE BEAN PIE IS MADE OF JUST A FEW ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS: white beans, sugar, butter, cinnamon, pie crust,¹ and—most importantly—grit, that jagged grain of blues, tragedy, and generational pain that has textured Black American history from the outset. Perhaps more than any other signifier, the bean pie has become representative of the Nation of Islam (NOI), a Black religious and political organization that at one time was America's largest Muslim cohort. Of course, food is never just food: what we eat represents a complex entanglement of ideas, customs, histories, and relationships.

The bean pie is an important product of Black American and American Muslim culture that influences family histories, politics, culinary traditions, music, and business. Although its precise origins remain elusive, popular legend goes that Lana Shabazz invented the bean pie, while others claim that NOI founder W. D. Fard created the recipe himself.² Eating the bean pie has no explicit ritualistic purpose in the Nation of Islam, and yet the dish has symbolic and practical potency as a cultural artifact unique to the religion.³ Bean pies, I argue, are a fusion of foodways from the Islamic diaspora and the Great Migration. This paper inspects how the bean pie's production and circulation functions as an anti-slavery tool, a radical marker of a new Black identity, and a practical instrument for economic independence, by analyzing the dish as a piece of edible material culture. Throughout, heat permeates: warm bean pies bake in hot ovens, their ingredients working together to nourish the body politic of a radical reli-giopolitical movement. If thermogenesis is the metabolic process whereby food heats the body, can a slice of pie also warm the heart? Can it feed the soul of an entire nation?

Against a Black Status Quo

The Nation of Islam was founded by W. D. Fard in 1930 in Detroit, Michigan.⁴ Under the direction of its second leader, Elijah Muhammad, the NOI reached its height in the 1960s with over 500,000 members and 75 mosques across the United States. The organization also ran hundreds of businesses that employed over 11,000 Black people.⁵ Many of the Nation of Islam's beliefs and gestures can be read as resistance to White oppression and Black American orthodoxy. For the Nation of Islam, every facet of the Black American project was to be re-thought and re-made. Each mainstream Black call to action—which of course, was typically rooted



Untitled, Chicago, Illinois, 1963 (Above)

Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

Making a Bean Pie From Canned Navy Beans, 2022 (Background, Left)

Photograph by author.

in the Black Christian church—had its own opposing counterpart in the Nation of Islam. If your equality was a fight for *integration* into normatively “White” systems, NOI’s idea of equality was a separatist desire for a new, totally Black system.⁶ If your civil rights called for peaceful non-violence, then the NOI demanded action by “any means necessary.”⁷ It is not surprising, then, that this position could even be imposed onto food: if the Black status quo was to cook black eyed peas, the NOI cooked navy beans. If most Black folks ate sweet potato pie, the NOI baked and sold bean pie. In fact, the entire NOI enterprise rejected what Elijah Muhammad saw as vestiges of slavery in the Black psyche and body.⁸ It is not incidental that one of the first things NOI converts do is to “restore” their Muslim name from their “slave name”⁹—perhaps most popularly exemplified in the refashioning of Cassius Clay as Muhammad Ali.¹⁰

The bean pie is based on the sweet potato pie, a staple of the Black American “soul food” diet.¹¹ The oldest-known published recipe for sweet potato pie can be found in *A Domestic Cookbook: Containing a Careful Selection of Useful Recipes for the Kitchen*, written in 1866 by Melinda Russell.¹² A similar recipe also appears in *What Mrs. Fisher Knows about Old Southern Cooking*, written in 1886 by Abby Fisher, a former slave.¹³ It is exactly the proximity of this dish to the plantation that bothered Elijah Muhammad.

Whether it be Christian names, recipes, or the bean pie, the provenance and practice of everyday things was to be inspected, reconsidered, and re-crafted. The context of these two cookbooks helps illuminate the milieu in which the bean pie was produced. The Great Migration amounted to a diffusion of traditionally Southern recipes to new audiences northward, transmitting Black American food from oral traditions passed between families to private homes, to bakeries, and finally to cookbook audiences. The bean pie would follow a similar trajectory of exchange 50 years later.

Some of the first-ever widely published texts recording the NOI's beliefs about food are found in *Message to the Blackman*, written by Elijah Muhammad in 1965. Eating is first mentioned near the beginning of the publication, as Muhammad writes about the teachings of W. D. Fard, who he considered to be "God in the Flesh":

He taught us that the slave-masters had taught us to eat the wrong food and that this wrong food is the cause of our sickness and short span of life. He declared that he would heal us and set us in heaven at once, if we would submit to Him. Otherwise He would chastise us with a severe chastisement until we did submit. And that He was able to force the whole world into submission to his will. He said that he loved us (the so-called Negroes), his lost and found, so well that he would eat rattlesnakes to free us if necessary for he has power over all things.¹⁴

Here, Muhammad repeats phrases like "wrong food" and "chastise." He also focuses on the extreme and the dangerous, invoking sickness, rattlesnakes, and early death. Finally, Muhammad introduces a dualistic system where Fard is God while the slave-masters are the Devil. In the language of Muhammad, food is a life-or-death enterprise of ultimate significance. Of course, food and the body are important sites of spirituality in traditional Islam too. Strict dietary rules provide a cleansing of the body, while fasting enables space for gratitude and contemplation. In *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, Seyyed Hossein Nasr makes the claim that language in the Quran provides an ontological "hierarchy of the universe" that differentiates "good foods" from "bad foods."¹⁵ According to this cosmology, eating good foods makes a good human, while eating bad foods makes a bad one. Food therefore affects the character of the soul. Nevertheless, in both instances, the body is a battleground, while eating stages an ethical reckoning between the self and the divine.

In 1967, Elijah Muhammad published the seminal text *How to Eat to Live*, a dietary guide that drew on his decades-long proclamations about food. Five years later in 1972, he released *Book 2* of the series.¹⁶ Together, these books function as an official repudiation of traditionally Black foods in service of creating a new Black consciousness and identity-forming project both different from and in service of the radical independence that Elijah Muhammad saw as essential to Black Liberation. Delivered in compact sentences, with frequent shifts into all-caps, and often exuberantly punctuated with exclamation marks, each chapter takes an almost

sermonic weight, as if transcribed from the radio broadcasts that made Elijah Muhammad a household name. Navy beans are mentioned seven times in *Book 2* of *How to Eat to Live*, with Muhammad at one point asserting: "[God] said that a diet of navy beans would give us a life span of one hundred and forty years. Yet we cannot live one-half (½) that length of time eating everything that the Christian table has set for us."¹⁷ While such a health claim is certainly overstated, it is scientifically proven that navy beans—the primary ingredient of the bean pie—is one of the healthiest beans on the planet. Some dieticians even call it a "superfood." In addition to being rich in ferulic acid and vitamin B, white beans are the greatest non-meat source of phosphatidylserine, which has been proven to help with memory, cognition, health function, and stress release.¹⁸ While the navy bean's health credentials certainly inform the Nation of Islam's ideas of a purified Muslim body, to assert one's health isn't just a matter of wellness and longevity, but a form of resistance—a means of fighting back against a world seemingly designed to kill you.

Other soul food staples banned by Elijah Muhammad in *How to Eat to Live* include pork, catfish, lima beans, black-eyed peas, and cornbread—all of which he describes as "bad" foods.¹⁹ Ultimately, Muhammad's sense of culinary ethics made for a new type of Black American: one who was interested in lower-cholesterol, lower-fat foods like fish, bean soup, fresh vegetables, and even bean pie—all in a quest for greater health autonomy. In *New World A-Coming*, historian Judith Weisenfeld summarizes the aims of Muhammad's dietary stricture:

The NOI's dietary practices were intended to restore individuals to their original state as Asiatics, heal and fortify them to withstand the hardships of life under the devil's rule, prepare them for the coming judgment and destruction of the devil's society, and make them worthy of life in the paradise that would follow.²⁰

While diet may have had practical, philosophical, and even cosmic implications, it could also impact the social order. Organizations like the NOI, according to Weisenfeld, offered new narratives that could "relocate" adherents by "rejecting the prevailing American system of categorization in which [followers] were Negroes at the bottom of a hierarchy."²¹ In this light, Muhammad's food restrictions (to fast, to eat once a day, and to reject the so-called "white man's diet") can be seen as a strategy to re-orient Black personhood both separate from and above Whites in American society—if not yet economically, at least dietarily.

While the NOI's version of Islam may have been practiced chiefly in the sequestered space of the mosque or the home, the familiar image of the bean pie and its distribution on street corners helped make the religion visible in the public sphere. You can see it immortalized in the *Life* magazine photographs by Gordon Parks: men in crisp suits, sunglasses, and ties, and women in long dresses and headwraps.²² However, complementary to these sartorial codes is the singular image of the well-dressed

NOI man who would station himself at busy intersections in American inner cities and sell the bean pie streetside.²³ In this way, the bean pie has become an important visual identifier for the group.²⁴

Outside the body, the remediation of the bean pie through music and culture further gives way to what critic David Morgan calls “cultural work”—in this case, providing an important new model for Black identity in America.²⁵ In her book *Racial Indigestion*, Kyla Wazana Tompkins argues that eating is a “trope and technology of racial formation during the first 130 years of the US republic.”²⁶ Elijah Muhammad used the power of food and eating to cement his vision for the new Black American family. It is not an overstatement to say that the bean pie has come to symbolize the Nation of Islam, while also subsuming itself into the greater cultural apparatus of the African-American community and beyond. Just look to hip-hop for proof. The website *Genius*, a lyrics aggregator for popular music, lists 119 rap songs that include a reference to the “bean pie.” Some of the earliest song mentions occur in 1993. In “You Betta Ask Somebody,” MC YOYO raps, “I can get mad as a mean guy / And on the other hand be sweet as a bean pie.”²⁷ Similarly, in Queen Latifah’s hit song “Just Another Day,” the performer recounts an average day in the neighborhood by paying homage to her own NOI roots: “Stomach ache, head to Steak-N-Take for a bean pie / Get a Final Call from the brother in the bow tie.”²⁸ Many of these songs rely on similar imagery like the NOI-owned *Final Call* newspaper and the bow ties that NOI men typically wear, attesting to the shared visual and cultural memory of the bean pie in urban areas. Perhaps most of all, these musical citations prove the bean pie’s ability to disseminate a distinctive aesthetic and identity for Black Muslims, while further serving as a conduit for creative expression and a new paradigm for American Blackness.

In analyzing the cultural work of the bean pie, I’m reminded of heat. Adaptive thermogenesis describes how the body expends energy and loses heat in moments of stress, even when the body is at rest. But what happens when stress is not a moment, but a metronome: a daily pang of discriminatory policies in housing, education, and just being Black in America? If the body strives for an equilibrium between absorbing and releasing energy, the physical nutrients of the bean pie is sustaining. But the psychic energy of the bean pie as a cultural signifier is even more nourishing, alleviating stress through social interaction, shared cultural identity, and the bliss of embodying the lyrics of a rap song.

Doing for Self

“Do for self,” is a familiar refrain for Nation of Islam members. Elijah Muhammad’s infamous motto is not just a statement of intent but a clar-

ion call for total independence through economic empowerment.²⁹ Significantly, such economics of self-reliance were achieved both at the scale of the individual and the group. In this way, each member’s personal drive for entrepreneurship could be fulfilled while also galvanizing collective action to support the greater organization. The bean pie is a near-perfect metaphor for these two scales of financial autonomy.

In 1964 Elijah Muhammad launched the three-year economic plan, also known as the National Savings Plan.³⁰ Members were encouraged to donate 10% to 30% of their income to the Nation of Islam while living modestly for three years. Practically, the plan was not dissimilar from the practice of tithing, where congregants are encouraged to give 10% of their income to the church. However, in the NOI, proceeds were used to start various types of businesses operated by the NOI. (Controversially, donations would also enrich Muhammad and his family.) As the historian Nafeesa Muhammad writes for the website *Black Past*: “In Chicago alone, the NOI organized fifteen different businesses including Your Supermarket, Shabazz Grocery, Chicago Lamb Packers, Shabazz Bakery, Good Foods, Shabazz Restaurant and Salaam Restaurant, Shabazz Barber Shop, and a clothing factory.”³¹ But the NOI wasn’t only interested in servicing the end-user; their ideal enterprise operated across the entire pipeline as a fully vertically integrated business. For instance, the NOI owned farms in Alabama, Michigan, and Georgia to produce food delivered via NOI-owned delivery trucks and flown via NOI-owned airplanes, to be sold at NOI-owned supermarkets.³² This collective capital-building is also present in the bean pie. Streetside salesmen did not receive the proceeds from their bean pies; instead, the mosque did. In this way, the bean pie is a potent symbol for the type of cooperative service and enterprising spirit embedded into the ethos of the NOI. The bean pie, therefore, is not only about eating but also about giving, perpetuating a gift economy of charitable works that maintains an invisible, selfless spirit among buyers and sellers as it circulates.³³ Of course, charity and generosity are foundational practices in Islam at large. *Sadikah* (voluntary giving) and *zakat* (the mandatory giving of 2.5% of one’s yearly savings) are mentioned several times in the Quran, although the NOI’s sense of giving was much more gumptious.

The bean pie also represents the individual entrepreneurial spirit of Nation of Islam families and businesspeople. While members operated their own dry cleaners, barbershops, and clothing stores during the organization’s height in the 1960s, the most common NOI businesses in American cities were bakeries whose star product was the bean pie.³⁴ Decades before the contemporary “Buy Black” movement galvanized Americans to shop at Black-owned businesses, the NOI had developed large-scale plans to concentrate Black wealth into member-owned businesses. It is not an overstatement to say that the bean pie epitom-

mized the NOI's successful program in building its own world through business—using collective and individual means—and represented the group's value system and shared sense of community.

This economic empowerment also extended to women, despite the Nation of Islam's patriarchal vision of a Black nuclear family with a father who worked, a mother who kept the home, and children who learned Black Islamic values in NOI schools. Women in the NOI were trained in “pink-collar” work like housekeeping, sewing, cooking, child-rearing, and other domestic skills.³⁵ It was a decidedly American individualist fantasy, absorbed from dated Protestant social mores, rather than the more collectivist extended family models found in Arab Islam.³⁶ Considering the NOI's androcentric worldview, it is tempting to think of the bean pie as technology that extended the group's patriarchal aims. After all, it's not hard to imagine women constrained to the domestic space while tending to the gendered work of preparing and baking bean pies while men dominated the social sphere, selling the dish on the streets. In reality, both men and women made pies at home and in bakeries. Furthermore, many of the NOI bakeries were women-owned and operated—often run by some of the first women entrepreneurs in the wider Black community. So what if we reframed the bean pie as a feminist foodway that subverted the group's own retrograde treatment of women? After all, a successful female-led bakery presents a paradox: women could simultaneously be hierarchized as secondary to men—while also functioning as their families' primary breadwinners. This economic power shift reorients the NOI's retrograde gender dynamic. If entrepreneurship is really a force of economic emancipation (as NOI members believed), then the bean pie offered up a surprising, if uneven, version of female liberation on a plate.

Here, heat again becomes a useful metaphor—this time to think through the gendering of calories in the NOI. In many ways, the *performances* of thermogenesis in men and women were totally different. Sisters in the Nation of Islam were expected to weigh themselves twice a month and take mandatory “weight moderation” classes. Meanwhile men were pushed to train in jiu jitsu. But the economic exchange of the bean pie destabilizes these separate spheres of caloric intake and release: imagine heat energy taken out of hot ovens and passed between male and female sellers and buyers, bakers, and street vendors in a rhizomatic network much like human organs—feeding warm Black bodies huddled together in protest and prayer.

A Nation Within a Nation

Religion is the living and breathing embodiment of practices, relationships, and moments of individual and collective meaning-making. These beliefs and customs are elastic, gaining potency, weakening, refracting,

and distorting as practice is passed down through oral tradition, crisscrossing cultures and continents. This is a lot like the bean pie—a family recipe, standardized but re-invented each time it's re-made; written down, but prone to improvisation; colored by personal family histories; and inherited through generations of love and toil. By inspecting the bean pie as a piece of material culture, we see how the Nation of Islam's sense of community, Black resistance, spirituality, and economic independence was circulated and codified, ultimately living on through its members, music, businesses, and artifacts.

For Elijah Muhammad, the diasporic nature of Islam is Black. It was imperative for Muhammad to trace Islam back to the African continent (in his view, Africa was part of Asia, the original home to Black Muslims) to legitimize the religion as a Black one.³⁷ In fact, according to Muhammad's cosmology, the original man on Earth *was* a Black Muslim.³⁸ It is therefore ironic that Elijah Muhammad failed to trace the roots of the bean pie to its African beginnings. Just last year, a new origin story has emerged, laying out an alternative history of the bean pie. In the family memoir *The Bean Pie: A Remembering of Our Family's Faith, Fortitude, and Forgiveness*, Tiffany Green-Abdullah makes a bold claim: the bean pie is not only an improvised version of the sweet potato pie—it is a recipe derived from the African diaspora that was created by her own family.

Green-Abdullah describes a story about how her great grandmother Daisy (not Lana Shabazz or W. D. Fard, as popularly understood) invented the bean pie out of her love of the Nigerian dish moi-moi, which had been passed down in her family for generations. While the original moi-moi is



My Dad Rafiq's Bean Pie Recipe, 2022.

Image by Author.

a savory dish made from mashed beans that are rolled into a ball, Daisy crafted a remixed version that accommodated her own sweet tooth, the NOI's taste for canned white beans, and the practicalities of selling the product at NOI bakeries.³⁹

Considering Daisy's formative bean pie recipe and its lost African provenance, perhaps we can re-read the bean pie as a talisman that unwittingly connects the eater back to the food of the African continent. In this way, the bean pie is an interface that tethers the body to the epigenetic memory of a distant—but not lost—past. This also tracks with one of the foundational beliefs of the first Blacks in America. Enslaved peoples believed that death didn't send one to heaven; instead, it would send one back to Africa.⁴⁰ We are thus confronted with a final potentiality: if only for a few moments, eating a forkful of bean pie might send one back to the motherland. 🔥

Notes

- 1 Ameenah Diggins-Muhammad, *Bashirah and the Amazing Bean Pie* (CreateSpace, 2018).
- 2 Mike Sula, "Bean pie, my brother?" *Chicago Reader*, November 18, 2013, <https://chicagoreader.com/food-drink/bean-pie-my-brother/>.
- 3 Asad El-Malik, *Bismillah & Bean Pies* (New Orleans: Muslim Fresh Publishing, 2016), 15.
- 4 Edward E. Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam 1960–1975* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 2.
- 5 Nafeesa Muhammad, "The Nation of Islam's Economic Program, 1934–1975," BlackPast.org, April 1, 2020, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/the-nation-of-islams-economic-program-1934-1975>.
- 6 Louis Lomax and Mike Wallace, "The Hate That Hate Produced," *News Beat*, WNTA, (New York: WNTA-TV, July 13–17, 1959) 1:12:25. In the infamous TV program, Elijah Muhammad even called for the government to give Black Muslims their own state in the western part of the country.
- 7 Malcom X, "By Any Means Necessary Speech," New York City, filmed June 28, 1964, 7:36, <https://youtu.be/WBS416EZsKM>.
- 8 Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam 1960–1975*, 98.
- 9 Ayman Ismail, "This Pie Tells One of the Most Essential Stories About Muslims in America. And It's Delicious," *Slate Magazine*, July 22, 2018, <https://youtu.be/yWjDB-WXzBLQ>.
- 10 Victor Nather, "In the Ring He was Ali, but in the Newspapers He Was Still Clay," *New York Times*, June 9, 2016, <https://nyti.ms/3yPhmWV>.
- 11 El-Malik, *Bismillah & Bean Pies*, 16.
- 12 Melinda Russell, *A Domestic Cookbook: Containing a Careful Selection of Useful Recipes for the Kitchen* (Ann Arbor: William L. Clements Library, 2007), 23.
- 13 Aby Fisher, *What Mrs. Fisher Knows about Old Southern Cooking* (Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 1995), 26.
- 14 Elijah Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman in America* (Goodyear, AZ: Secretarius MEMPS Publications 1973 [1965]), chap. 8, par. 9.
- 15 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines: Conceptions of Nature and Methods Used for Its Study* (Albany: State University Of New York Press, 1993), 70.

- 16 Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live, Book 2*, (Atlanta: Messenger Elijah Muhammad Propagation Society, 1972).
- 17 Ibid., 179.
- 18 Michael J. Glade & Kyl Smith. "Phosphatidylserine and the human brain," *Nutrition* 31, no. 6 (2015): 781–6. doi:10.1016/j.nut.2014.10.014.
- 19 Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live, Book 2*.
- 20 Judith Weisenfeld, *New World A-Coming*. (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 147. Note that the NOI believes that the Black Man is from Asia, therefore "Asiatic."
- 21 Ibid., 87.
- 22 Gordon Parks, "What Their Cry Means to Me—A Negro's Own Evaluation," *Life*, May 31, 1963, 22–33.
- 23 Jessica Harris, *High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), 247.
- 24 El-Malik, *Bismillah & Bean Pies*, 107.
- 25 Tim Hutchings and Joanne McKenzie, *Materiality and the Study of Religion: The Stuff of the Sacred* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 23.
- 26 Kyla Wazana Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 22.
- 27 YOYO, "You Better Ask Somebody," track 6 on *You Better Ask Somebody*, Atlantic Records, 1993, cassette.
- 28 Queen Latifa, "Just Another Day," track 11 on *Black Reign*, Motown Records, 1993, cassette.
- 29 Elijah Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman in America*.
- 30 Nafeesa Muhammad, "The Nation of Islam's Economic Program."
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Harris, *High on the Hog*, 214. This spirit of giving, where the body becomes a site or conduit of generosity, loosely recalls other Black American practices like "pinning," where Black Cajuns place a pin on the lapel for others to clip on money for one's birthday. It also echoes rent parties in Harlem where guests would donate money to help pay their neighbors' rent.
- 34 Jennifer Wallach, *Every Nation Has Its Dish* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 180.
- 35 Dennis Walker, "Elevating the Family in the Nation of Islam," *The Gnostic World* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 556.
- 36 Edward E. Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam 1960–1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 127–128.
- 37 Elijah Muhammad would consider Africa to be Asia in his conception of the "Asiatic Black Man."
- 38 Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam 1960–1975*, 11.
- 39 Tiffany Green-Abdullah, *The Bean Pie: A Remembering of Our Family's Faith, Fortitude, & Forgiveness* (New Degree Press, 2021), 79.
- 40 Suzanne Smith, *To Serve the Living* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).