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The Bean Pie: Black Muslims and Identity in Early Twentieth Century Detroit

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THE BEAN PIE: BLACK MUSLIMS AND IDENTITY IN EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY DETROIT

Alexandra Bicknell, M.A.

Western Michigan University, 2022

The bean pie is the product of culinary traditions set forth by the Nation of Islam. Nation members used the navy bean to whip up a custardy dessert utilizing religiously approved ingredients. Milk, eggs, brown sugar, and whole wheat flour transformed a savory, well-cooked bean into a sweet treat. Pies made from beans were not invented by the Nation of Islam, but they became symbolic of the culture and institutions established by Black Muslims in America. The Nation of Islam shaped Michigan and the midwestern region's social and cultural identity. The Nation promoted that Black people ought to have power in society. "We must have land!" reiterated nearly every issue of the Nation's official newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*, often on multiple pages in succession. The Nation invented ways that Black people could achieve power, separation, and nationalism through agriculture and food systems. The Nation of Islam linked Black residents of Detroit to their agricultural, religious, and industrious roots that connected them to the greater narrative of the African diaspora and midwestern American history. This essay looks specifically at how the Nation's vision for Black America manifested into an obsession with the navy bean. In the two-part series, *How to Eat to Live*, the navy bean is continuously proposed as a solution to Black Americans' problems. If Black people could establish their own economy, and provide for their own needs, they could overcome American white supremacy and establish Black empowerment.

THE BEAN PIE: BLACK MUSLIMS AND IDENTITY IN EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY
DETROIT

by

Alexandra Bicknell

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INTRODUCTION

The bean pie, as it is known today, emerged from the culinary and ethical traditions set forth by the Nation of Islam. Nation members used the iconic navy bean to whip up a custardy dessert utilizing religiously approved ingredients and procedures.¹ Milk, eggs, brown sugar, and whole wheat flour transformed a savory, well-cooked bean into a sweet treat. The bean pie closely resembles the sweet potato pie, both follow similar preparations, many of which originated from African and diasporic cooking methods.² The Nation of Islam's affiliation with bean pie can be partially attributed to the religion's ban on sweet potatoes. Sweet potatoes were full of too much starch and not enough protein, claimed Elijah Muhammad, former Supreme Leader of the Nation of Islam. Beyond the potato's unhealthful reputation among the Nation, the sweet potato specifically possessed an antebellum stigma associating them with historic and ongoing oppression towards people of color in the United States.³ The navy bean replaced many foods in the diets of Nation members, but one of the most notable examples was the transition from sweet potato pie to bean pie.

Fard Muhammad founded the Nation of Islam in Detroit, Michigan where other Muslims had already begun introducing citizens of all racial backgrounds to Islam to combat social inequality in all facets of American society. Fard Muhammad arrived in Detroit to find the same problems that oppressed people faced throughout the United States. Unemployment, exacerbated by the onslaught of the Great Depression, affected workers of color across sectors. Access to healthy and fresh foods, as well as dietary knowledge and cultural tradition, caused Black

¹ "NOI" is an abbreviation often used by scholars to refer to the Nation of Islam; I will use "the Nation" for shorthand in this essay.

² Angie Mosier, "Pies," in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture Volume 7: Foodways*, ed. John T. Edge (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 225.

³ Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live. Book one* 1967 Reprint, (Newport News, Va.: National Newport News and Commentator, n.d), 5.

people, more than their white counterparts in nearby regions, to suffer from diabetes and other illnesses at higher rates.⁴ To Fard Muhammad, and his successor Elijah Muhammad, anti-white religion would combat poverty and diet-based disease among converts who would become the members of the Nation of Islam. Elijah Muhammad conceived plans to achieve healthy and holy communities by using existing institutions and ideas about economics and ethics alongside Islamically oriented precepts that he and his followers established. One of Elijah's dreams was a self-sufficient supply chain that would take farm-raised products to the tables of Nation members. On the journey to the mouths of converts, the fresh food would pass from Nation-owned farms to grocery stores, bakeries, and restaurants. In fact, the Nation did establish farms, stores, and shops, but they were not able to close the chain of production on beans, as Elijah Muhammad had envisioned. Instead, the observable changes that Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam brought to American cities included the increased popularity of Black Islam and the commodification of the bean pie.

Pies made from beans were not invented by the Nation, but they became symbolic of the culture and institutions established by Black Muslims in America. These unique foodways reshaped Michigan and the Midwestern region's social and cultural identity by changing the local agricultural landscape. Demand for certain foodstuffs, like pork and potatoes, decreased while others increased, particularly the demand for the navy bean. Beans, which were already a popular crop in the region, became an even more valuable commodity for Michigan farmers during the twentieth century. A contributing factor that increased the demand for beans was the

⁴ "African American Dietary Patterns at the Beginning of the 20th Century," *The Journal of Nutrition*, American Society for Nutrition, 01 July 2001, https://academic.oup.com/jn/article/131/7/1881/4686889?maxtoshow=%252520&HITS=10&hits=10&RESULTFORMAT=&titleabstract=History%20African%20American%20&%252520searchid=QID_NOT_SET&stored_search=&FIRSTINDEX=0&journalcode=nutrition

African American Islamic Renaissance that spanned from 1920 to 1975. The Nation of Islam was an early and long-lasting manifestation of the Renaissance.⁵ Across the United States, mainly concentrated in northern urban centers, tens of thousands of Black Americans converted to Islam, swearing off pork products, a main culinary staple for many Americans.⁶ Fard's message separated him from previous attempts at conversion in Detroit's Black communities because he sought to solve the problems plaguing individuals at the onset of the Great Depression. By promoting economic and social solutions to everything from diabetes to unemployment, Fard Muhammad welcomed more Black Detroiters to Islam. The bean pie is a result of the Nation's attempts at bringing environmental and racial justice to the Black people of America.

DEFINITIONS

The Nation of Islam, especially under the leadership of Fard and Elijah Muhammad, was not entirely Islamic. Elijah Muhammad's overall understanding of Islamic tradition was quite weak, even nearly forty years after his conversion.⁷ The Nation's interpretation of Islam catered to Detroit residents' struggle against white oppression and urban poverty. The Nation of Islam should not be confused with traditional Islam, particularly under the control of Elijah and Fard Muhammad. While the Nation's tenets were not wholly Islamic, they did align well with the specific challenges that Black Detroiters were facing at the height of the Great Depression.

⁵ Patrick D. Bowen, *A History of Conversion of Islam in the United States*, volume 2 (Boston, MA: Koninklijke Brill, 2017), 1.

⁶ Bowen, *A History of Conversion of Islam in the United States*, volume 2, 1.

⁷ Herbert Berg, "Elijah Muhammad and the Quran," 45.

Dennis Walker described the Nation's use of Islam as a "clinical instrument to lance out the subculture that ordinary Detroit Blacks had carried with them from the USA's rural South."⁸ In the FBI's 1955 report on the Nation, they wrote that Elijah Muhammad's main goal was "to clean up the dark people physically and spiritually. So, they will be respected by other civilized people of the earth."⁹ This instrumental "Islam" was designed to specifically address Black issues of poverty, exclusion, and sickness.¹⁰ Fard and Elijah promised Black Detroiters freedom from white oppression by founding their own nation within the United States. Their rhetoric would ultimately land the organization on the FBI's watchlist and influence future leaders to scale back calls for nationhood and separatism.¹¹

One branch of the Nation would realign itself with more traditional Islam after the organization splintered following the death of Elijah Muhammad in 1975. Elijah Muhammad was not much interested in incorporating what he called "Old Islam" Muslims into his Nation of Islam. He was also increasingly less interested in how "white Muslims" interpreted the Qur'an.¹² Moreover, he was not overly concerned that the Nation's members were accepted as Muslims by "Old Islam" but rather that the public perceived the Nation as Muslim to "prevent harassment."¹³ Though the Nation was Islamic in name and practiced several aspects of Islamic tradition, its leaders, like Elijah, were clearly educated in and impacted by different sects of Christianity.¹⁴ This was particularly evident in Elijah Muhammad's seminal work on nutrition: *How to Eat to*

⁸ Dennis Walker, *Islam and the Search for African-American Nationhood: Elijah Muhammad, Louis Farrakhan, and the Nation of Islam* (Atlanta: Clarity Press, 2005), 258.

⁹ Federal Bureau of Investigation, "The Nation of Islam, Part 1," 21.

¹⁰ Walker, *Islam and the Search for African-American Nationhood*, 257.

¹¹ U.S. Department of Justice. Federal Bureau of Investigation. "The Nation of Islam, Part 1." 1955. <https://vault.fbi.gov/Nation%20of%20Islam/Nation%20of%20Islam%20Part%201%20of%203/view>.

¹² Talal Asad, "The Idea of An Anthropology of Islam," *Qui Parle* 17, no. 24, (2009): 24.

¹³ Berg, "Elijah Muhammad and The Quran," 54-55 and Claude Andrew Clegg, *The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 183.

¹⁴ Clegg, *The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad*, 73 and throughout, and Jane L. Smith, *Islam in America*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1999), 82.

Live, where he spends page after page condemning different Christian practices across sects. The Nation of Islam, for many members including Elijah Muhammad, was reactionary to the perceived failings of the Christian Church in the fight against white oppression in the urban centers of the United States.¹⁵

The people who joined the Nation of Islam were not only united by their shared religion but also their racial identity. When Fard first arrived in Detroit, he targeted segregated communities within the city where people were all loosely connected to a shared history of oppression. Some Black people in Detroit were descendants of enslaved Africans and Native peoples of the Great Lakes region, some were recent migrants from the South, also descended from enslaved Africans and Native peoples.¹⁶ Other residents were immigrants from the many places that globalism spread Africans. Many people were not sure where they had descended. All of Detroit's Black residents felt the crushing pressure of racial politics within the city; limited job security and racial covenants were among the ways citizens were segregated by race. Without protections for workers, employers could fire and hire based on race. Racial covenants banned the sale of property to people of certain phenotypes, often by writing the restrictions into the deed. People of color were pushed into communities with less resources, older housing, and less public services. Fard Muhammad was able to use this segregation to his advantage when he preached to Detroiters as he first met converts by selling wares door-to-door in the neighborhoods of Paradise Valley and Black Bottom, some of Detroit's most segregated communities before they were paved over in the 1960s. Once Fard had gained access to the homes of residents, he would preach about Islam, and living a healthy life. A large part of his

¹⁵ Clegg, *The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad*, 13.

¹⁶ Clegg, *The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad*, 13

message was that Black people were Islamic and that their current lives were so askew because of the influence of their white oppressors.

“Black,” in my essay, refers to any group or individual that was identified in generic or archaic terms (i.e. “negro” or “colored”). I chose to capitalize black when used as a proper description as an ethnic identity. W.E.B du Bois once asked that the *New York Times* capitalize racial identities for Black people as they would other national descriptors. *The Times* did not oblige du Bois’ request at the time; however, in 2020, they referenced the letter campaign du Bois had started in their defense of the capitalized “Black.”¹⁷ Because the Nation of Islam was specifically founded for Black people, I decided that “person of color” and “African American” were too imprecise and inaccurate. Any traces of ancestral African Islam were actively stamped out by various culture-destroying practices of enslavement.¹⁸ Fard Muhammad offered his converts an opportunity to establish their own identity shaped by their ancient and recent past by reclaiming the racial identity: Black.

Early Leaders of The Black Islam

Before arriving in Detroit in 1930, Fard Muhammad spent some time in Chicago, a major center for Black empowerment organizations in the twentieth century. During the time that Fard was in Chicago, the Ahmadiyya Movement, the Moorish Science Temple of America, and the Garveyites were active in the city as well.¹⁹ Fard Muhammad built his platform from ideas that these organization promoted. Biographer Claude Andrew Clegg suggested that Fard had been in

¹⁷ Nancy Coleman, “Why We are Capitalizing Black,” *The New York Times* (5 July 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/05/insider/capitalized-black.html>.

¹⁸ For example, enslaved people were often intentionally kept separate from others whom they shared a language, or relationship.

¹⁹ Clegg, *The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad*, 21.

contact with these organizations before he arrived in Chicago in 1929.²⁰ Though Fard's stay in Chicago was brief, as he had moved on to Detroit after less than a year, these precursory movements influenced Fard's understanding of Islam and Black power.

Organizations that Fard connected with in Chicago also tried to expand into Detroit. The Ahmadiyya Movement was imported from the Punjab region in present-day Pakistan to urban centers in the United States in the early twentieth century. The Ahmadiyya attempted to convert Black Americans to Islam during the 1920s, and though it introduced many people to the principles of Islam, it largely failed to win over converts in the community. Although the movement promoted accessibility and equality, it did little to address Black Americans' reality. It did not provide a guide to circumvent the poverty and despair Black Americans faced because of enslavement and Reconstruction. Previous Muslim immigrants to Detroit were not as successful at converting their Black neighbors to Islam as later organizations like the Ahmadiyya and ultimately the Nation of Islam.²¹

The Moorish Science Temple of America enjoyed more success than the Ahmadiyya, but their influence remained limited. The Moorish Science Temple was founded in 1913 by Noble Drew Ali who claimed that Black people were Moorish and inherently Islamic. Fard coopted the idea that Black Americans were related to an ancient Asiatic past. To trace the connections between these Islamic organizations, Herbert Berg proposed that scholars should determine when *Mahdi* entered the Nation's rhetoric.²² The title, *Mahdi*, refers to the eschatological redeemer who will return to with Jesus Christ to establish Allah's just kingdom on earth before the final judgment. Fard Muhammad claimed the title *Mahdi* and preached to his followers that a new era

²⁰ Clegg, *The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad*, 20-21.

²¹ Clegg, *The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad*, 18-19.

²² Herbert Berg, "Elijah Muhammad and the Qur'an: The evolution of his Tafsir," *The Muslim World* 89, no. 1 (Jan 1999), 42-55.

was upon them, as did other organizations before him.²³ This millenarian idea was a talking point used to bring in new Nation members. But Fard Muhammad's beliefs were not limited to religious life; he also borrowed ideas from more secular movements like Garveyism.

The Garveyites, followers of Marcus Garvey, thought that Black people from all over the world ought to return to Africa and have their own nations.²⁴ Fard did not agree that Black people had to return to Africa necessarily, but he did agree that they needed their own nation-like rule over their society.²⁵ Marcus Garvey would be studied in depth by Nation members in the pages of *Muhammad Speaks*, the Nation's official newspaper.²⁶ Garvey's movement was referred to in the magazine as "the backbone of the most spectacular movement for Negroes in history."²⁷ The Nation credits some of its success promoting Black power to the foundations that Garvey established.

In 1934, Fard Muhammad disappeared. According to FBI records on the Nation, Fard was banished from Detroit by the police.²⁸ Fard's appointed successor, Elijah Muhammad, preserved Fard's legacy and continued to spread it throughout the United States, although, he too would leave Detroit that year for Chicago.²⁹ Elijah Muhammad continued working towards Fard's goals of Black economic success and adherence to Islam. Under Fard Muhammad, and his successor Elijah, the Nation of Islam promoted the idea that Black people ought to have power in society. "We must have land!" reiterated nearly every issue of the Nation's official newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*, often on multiple pages in succession.³⁰ Elijah Muhammad invented ways

²³ The Ahmadiyya and Moorish Science Temple both utilized the term *Mahdi* to refer to their founders.

²⁴ Federal Bureau of Investigation, "The Nation of Islam, Part 1," 11-12, and Clegg, *The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad*, 18-21.

²⁵ Clegg, *The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad*, 20-21.

²⁶ *Muhammad Speaks*, May 1960, 2, 5.

²⁷ *Muhammad Speaks*, February 1962, 30.

²⁸ Federal Bureau of Investigation, "The Nation of Islam, Part 1," 19.

²⁹ Federal Bureau of Investigation, "The Nation of Islam, Part 1," 20.

³⁰ *Muhammad Speaks*, 1960-1976.

that Black people could achieve power, separation, and nationalism through agriculture and food systems. The Nation of Islam linked Black residents of Detroit to their agricultural and religious roots that connected them to the greater narrative of the African diaspora and midwestern American history. This essay looks specifically at how Elijah Muhammad's vision for Black America manifested in an obsession with the navy bean. In his two-part series, *How to Eat to Live*, Elijah returned to the navy bean continuously as a solution for Black Americans' problems. If Black people could establish their own economy, and provide for their own needs, they could overcome American white supremacy and establish Black empowerment. Farms, grocery stores, bakeries, and restaurants would be owned and operated by Black people. The food that they served would cater to the Black American diet, which Fard and Elijah sought to reinvent. They wanted Black Americans to be their own nation, with the institutions and structures of an independent state, and importantly, that nation would be one of Islam and its citizens would thrive on a diet of beans.

Foodways and Intellectual Tradition

Before the Nation of Islam, many Black Americans had little firsthand experience with Islam. African Islam was driven out of the lives of Black Americans before the Civil War by intentional culture destroying practices like separating families and friends. Black Americans learned about Islam as their white counterparts did, mainly from Muslim immigrants to the United States. Historically, since most Americans were and are Christian, and there are not food restrictions in Christianity, a wide range of foods that are banned in Islam and Judaism were consumed with frequency in the United States. Under Islamic practice, pork is forbidden, and meats must be properly sacrificed and prepared for consumption. Eventually, immigrants and

their descendants would introduce *halal* meat markets for Muslims to purchase products prepared properly and free of pork; before the existence of such markets in the latter half of the twentieth century, people had to butcher their own meat.³¹

Most African Americans were not thinking about the production of their food or their consumption habits much before the Nation of Islam. Pork was a very popular meat among Black and white Americans when Fard Muhammad began to spread Islam. Niche groups of scholars, philanthropists, and politicians more contemporary to Fard Muhammad took an interest in proper dieting. Public societies sprung up in the nineteenth century promoting bean-based dishes in substitution for meat. These charitable organizations, like the Order of the Golden Age, were interested in feeding the poor and helping them maintain optimal nutrition while convincing people that there are health benefits to vegetarianism.³²

The Seventh-day Adventists, formed in Battle Creek, Michigan, in 1863 in the wake of the Second Great Awakening, also promoted the importance of vegetarianism. The Seventh-day Adventists, like the Nation of Islam, prescribed a strict dietary code that boasted both holy and healthful foods.³³ Brothers John Harvey and Will Keith Kellogg, founded a cereal company in 1906, in Battle Creek, Michigan, about one hundred and twenty miles west of Detroit. Both brothers were vegetarians and members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, motivating them to bring healthy foods to the American table. In 1923 they hired a dietician, Mary Barber, and were the first company to put nutrition labels on their products. By the 1950s, after the Kellogg brothers had passed away, Kellogg's, the brand, had introduced new cereals to the American

³¹ Sally Howell, *Old Islam in Detroit: Rediscovering the Muslim American Past* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 158, 201. *Halal* is the preparation process meat undergoes in order for Muslim consumption. The meat must be properly blessed, sacrificed, and butchered.

³² *The Herald of the Golden Age* 2, no. 10 (1897), 1.

³³ <https://www.adventist.org/health/>.

public that had higher sugar counts than the Kellogg brothers' original corn flakes.³⁴ By the 1970s, when Elijah's books on nutrition were published, Kellogg's cereal could be found on grocery shelves across the United States. In the first volume of *How to Eat to Live*, Elijah Muhammad told his followers to avoid white flours because it had been "robbed of all its natural vitamins and proteins sold separately as cereals." He went on to say "the white race is a commercializing people and they do not worry about the lives they jeopardize so long as the dollar is safe. You might find yourself eating death if you follow them." While he did not mention Kellogg's by name, it appeared to be a clear shot at the widely popular brand.³⁵

Elijah Muhammad's fascination with "white devils" and their misinterpretation of holy texts was more important than any one religion's direct impact on the Nation. To Elijah, white people of all religions were against Black people and their success. The Nation's obsession with diet, race, and nutrition allied them with the rising eugenics movement in the United States. The connection between diet, eugenics, race, and religion, would be an interesting point for further research. For Fard Muhammad, ridding Black people of the negative past and promoting positive historical memories through foodways, was a different way to control the racial narrative that did not require justifying Black nationhood through the lens of popular eugenic theories.

Elijah Muhammad added food associated with Black culture like greens, sweet potatoes, and peas to his list of banned consumables because he believed, as did Fard Muhammad, that separating Black people from foods associated with enslavement was important for better living. Many Black people had learned to cook and provide for themselves by relatives and friends. Food is a cultural and intellectual tradition shared across communities. Under American enslavement, food was one of the only freedoms that people had. "Soul food," or African

³⁴ https://www.kelloggs.com/en_US/who-we-are/our-history.html.

³⁵ Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live: Book One*, 6.

American heritage cooking, which the Nation of Islam was a direct reaction against, developed when the cultures of many African kingdoms connected in the Americas and created a new identity through food culture. While for many, soul food was an acknowledged manifestation of poverty and enslavement, it was and is a factor of pride for chefs and home cooks alike.³⁶

Unfortunately, nutritional science attacked the “soul food” diet and pointed to it as the primary factor of the ill-health of African Americans. Diseases of affluence, that is, diseases that affect people primarily in post-industrial countries, such as diabetes and obesity, were on the rise in the early twentieth century.³⁷ New studies in food science and public health brought consumption under scrutiny, particularly of the poor. The Nation viewed their diet as the solution to both poor health and poverty. *How to Eat to Live* claimed that if you followed the Nation’s diet, you could live the longest life possible, even as long as Old Testament kings.

According to Elijah Muhammad, Old Testament Kings enjoyed beans, particularly navy beans. The navy bean was essential for the adherence to the Nation’s diet. The Nation of Islam did not invent bean-based diets, nor did they invent the bean pie. The Nation changed the way that many people, particularly Black people, viewed diet, religion, and identity in the Midwest. Before the bean pie became symbolic of the Black Islamic culture, Americans ate pies made from beans across the country. The first traces of bean pie come from early California, interestingly where Fard Muhammad was rumored to have spent time in prison. Fard was likely a California native and came across bean pie in this way, finding a recipe among the culinary

³⁶ Michael W. Twitty, *The Cooking Gene: A Journey through African American Culinary History in the Old South* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2017), 5 and throughout.

³⁷ “Diseases of affluence” are still known as such even though the title is rather misleading. For the purpose of this essay, the terminology fits the progressive understanding that people were suffering from these diseases due to lack of commitment to healthy living and overindulgence. Today, we know that diseases of affluence affect the poorest in American society more than the most affluent.

possibilities of the San Quentin cafeteria, although, most Nation members attribute the bean pie to later descendants of the Nation and not its founder.

CHAPTER 1: A PIE MADE OF BEANS

The bean pie had a short journey before its association with the Nation of Islam. American people, mainly of the working class, utilized versions of the bean pie to make thrifty use of their food supplies. Beans are indigenous to the Americas and many varieties can be grown throughout the continental United States and the wider Americas. Dry beans are shelf stable, which made them a vital source of nutrition before modern food preservation. The invention of canned beans drastically decreased the preparation time, making beans a food of convenience and a longtime pantry staple in American homes. Both Fard Muhammad and canning corporations favored the navy bean because it was digestible, abundant, and profitable throughout the American Midwest.

The bean pie was invented in response to the Nation's dietary code that sought to weed out unhealthy foods and those associated with white oppression. Nation women created new recipes emphasizing approved ingredients and, on many occasions, women submitted bean pie recipes to the Nation's paper *Muhammad Speaks*.³⁸ The bean pies of the Nation of Islam were nearly the same in every issue of the paper: navy beans, whole wheat crust, eggs, spices, and a little brown sugar. These recipes were intentionally reminiscent of sweet potato or pumpkin pie to encourage new converts to accept the dietary code by using familiar flavors and preparations. Beans pies that predate the Nation are not as standardized.

³⁸ Dawn-Marie Gibson and Jamillah Karim, *Women of the Nation: Between Black Protest and Sunni Islam* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 52.

The First Batch of Bean Pies

Pies made from beans date back to the pre-Civil War era. One man in a mining town on the edge of the American West sold bean pies so popular that his legacy was recorded in the memoir of Colonel James J. Ayers. In 1849, Colonel Ayers moved to Mokelumne Hill, California where he met Fash, a store owner who invented a bean pie. Colonel Ayers claimed that Fash invented the bean pies because of the unstable supply of dried apples for his famous apple pies. Ayers recounted that the miners took these bean pies on the job and fought over the “novel and delicious luxury,” though he did not share a recipe. Ayers also did not indicate where Fash may have come up with the idea of the bean pie; perhaps Fash had seen Native peoples use this method of combining smashed beans and milled grains to make a dessert-like dish; and perhaps Fash was of Native American heritage. Ayers did not identify the bean-pie inventor, Fash, in any way nor did he provide a surname or description for Fash. Ayers did recall, however, how Fash made his bean pies using a large sheet-iron stove and asserted that “that stove brought him in more money than any stove had ever before made its owner.”

The bean pies were profoundly popular. The savvy store owner and pie baker’s name soon became the colloquial name for the camp: Fashville. Fash was so successful selling wares at his store that he opened a bank in the camp to facilitate moneylending for the community. In the spring of that year, Ayers noted that the camp had broken up after which there was not another mention of Fash or his bean pies.³⁹ Fashville made appearances in several popular works on pioneer ghost towns; none of them mention Fash, his bean pies, or his enterprises in any more

³⁹ James J. Ayers, *Gold and Sunshine, Reminiscences of Early California* (Boston: The Gorham Press, 1922), 64-67.

detail than Colonel Ayers.⁴⁰ After the mining season, Fashville became a ghost town, and with it, Bean pies faded from the record.

In 1892, Mrs. Emma E. Smith wrote to the editor of the *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine's* women's department documenting her experience eating a bean pie at a boarding house:

I will tell of the bean pie an old lady made where I boarded once. I ate what I thought to be pumpkin pies for some time, but noticed they were darker, and attributed it to the cinnamon. She asked me one day how I liked her bean pies. I replied that I had not eaten any. 'Why,' she says, 'you have a piece on your plate.' I had to acknowledge then they were good. I have made them several times and never found a person yet who could tell what they were made of. Cook dry beans until perfectly done, in clear water, mash and carry through a sieve to remove the skins or hulls. Two teacupfuls of beans, two of sugar, three eggs, half a teaspoonful of cinnamon; thin with a little milk or water. This makes two pies, and bake with one crust. To put an extra touch to your pie, beat the white of an egg, add two heaping spoonfuls of sugar and spread over top, return to the oven and let slightly brown.⁴¹

Smith described the bean pie in great detail. She retold the story of how she was introduced to the pie, how she came to like the bean pie, and how she invented a recipe to mimic this bean pie she once enjoyed. She never described her boarding host, nor did she say where she had traveled or even in what year this occurred. She said that she had never found a person who knew from what the pies were made. This could have meant that the people for whom she made the pie did not know it was made from beans; or that she was not sure her recipe was the same as the one she had at the boarding house because she had never met anyone who knew how the pies were made. Considering she had made many pies by the time she wrote this letter; she must have first encountered it long before 1892. No other context was provided. Before this excerpt Mrs. Smith talked about her life on the farm in Millville, California. She then switched her letter directly to

⁴⁰ Remi A. Nadeau, *Ghost Towns & Mining Camps of California* (Santa Barbara, California: Crest Publishers, 1992): 88.

⁴¹ Emma E. Smith, "Letter to the Editor," *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine* 16, no. 1 (1892): 136-137.

the bean pie. After the bean pie discussion, she gave the recipe for another pie, and bean pie again vanished from record, and a sweet bean pie would not return to the American table until the Nation spread its popularity.

Pies of Necessity

Navy bean pie appeared again in 1921, when J. J. M. from Iowa wrote to the *Bakers' Helper* asking for a recipe for navy bean pie. He said "he had a baker who made this product some years ago. We have never even heard of such a pie and have no idea how to make it. Perhaps some readers of the *Bakers' Helper* may be able to supply the information?"⁴² It does not appear that anyone ever wrote back to J. J. M as most Americans were not familiar with this type of dessert pie made from beans. Savory bean pies, resembling meat pies, were much more common across the country. Bean pies were commonly made from items that families would likely have on hand: milk, butter, eggs, flour, and of course, beans. The Nation of Islam stressed the importance of the navy bean, but bean pies were also made with pinto beans, mainly in the Great Plains, and lima beans on the west coast.² A multitude of sources, like the ones I have already mentioned, do not even specify what type of bean the recipe required. As time passed, bean pie recipes became standardized. Tools of industrialization shaped the production and consumption of the bean pie.

Bean-canning companies, like Libby's, advertised ways to use their beans for a variety of meals. The bean pie was advertised to Americans during the first World War to engage everyday people in the war effort. By eating bean pie, a homemaker could reduce the amount of meat the family consumed in order to ensure the supply was intact for the soldiers. Many of the recipes

⁴² "Letter Box," *The Bakers' Helper* 46, no. 430 (1921), 1132.

from the war period were made savory with many eggs or vegetables. Pies made of beans were advertised through World War I and II as a resourceful, economic, and healthy meal. The bean pies advertised by bean-canning companies were not like the ones sold in bakeries or served up to paying customers. The pies of the war era were served for a meal as a savory dish, instead of as a treat. Bean pies advertised by canning companies would not have met the Nation's standards of health and holiness due to their reliance on banned meats and complex mixtures. Nonetheless, Elijah Muhammad would adopt rhetoric similar to bean-corporation propaganda from the 1910s to encourage his navy bean-based diet. The bean was healthy, cheap, and abundant.

The Nation's Pies

Contrary to the bean-canning corporations of the war era, Elijah Muhammad preached a bean-based diet among his followers to promote religious devotion rather than patriotic sentiment. Elijah Muhammad did not relate the navy bean to America's past or present. The navy bean is native to the Americas, not the Near East, although Elijah claimed that, "this dry bean, or pulse, is of ancient origin. It was this bean, according to certain historians, that Daniel preferred for himself and his followers in the prison of Nebuchadnezzar."⁴³ The navy bean to Elijah Muhammad was biblical, ancient, and unrelated to the current state of Black American affairs. Ironically, nearly a century later, the bean pie would become "as American as apple pie" to the living descendants of Black Muslim Americans.⁴⁴ Elijah Muhammad encouraged his followers to establish stores, bakeries, and restaurants where followers could purchase Nation-approved

⁴³ Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live: Book One*, 5.

⁴⁴ *Who's Afraid of Aymann Ismail?* "This Pie Tells One of the Most Essential Stories About Muslims in America. And It's Delicious," directed by Aymann Ismail, 22 July 2018, on *Slate*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yWjDBWXzBLO>.

foods. Nation-owned bakeries produced a profit for members and provided a place where people, both members of the Nation and non-members, could purchase bean pie.

According to Nation member Imam Johari Abdul Malik of Washington, D.C., only the bean pie provides an authentic Muslim American experience.⁴⁵ In the United States, Muslim holidays are often celebrated with bean pie. Bean pie came to represent all Black Muslims, and Black liberation in the United States uniting people throughout the Black Power and civil rights movements. Bean pie's influence spread further than the Nation's community of converts, reaching mass media by the 1990s. Bean pies have made in an appearance in the hit show *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, and inspired many dedicated songs and YouTube videos.⁴⁶

Documentaries about the bean pie, its creation, and its legacy have been produced by large news corporations as well as independent creators. Bean pie lives on even if Nation-owned bakeries no longer line city streets.

⁴⁵ Hassanah Thomas, *Bean Pie, My Brother?* directed by Hassanah Thomas, (2009), YouTube video.

⁴⁶ *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, season 2, episode 15, "My Brother's Keeper," directed by Ellen Gittelsohn, written by Benny Medina, Jeff Pollack, and Andy Borowitz, featuring Will Smith, James Avery, and Janet Hubert, aired 13 January 1992, in broadcast syndication, NBC.

CHAPTER 2: WHY BEANS?

Wallace Fard Muhammad's obsession with healthy eating was born out of other movements of the early twentieth century. Rising rates of heart disease and diabetes coupled with advancements in medical science brought nutrition under the scrutiny of society. Religious leaders, politicians, charitable organizations, and individuals all became infatuated with proper diets. The United States Department of Agriculture first published guidelines for healthy eating in 1916, that recommended Americans decrease fat and sugar intake.⁴⁷ Food safety was the primary concern of the federal government until the 1940s when the Department of Agriculture published nutritionally based diet resources once more micronutrients had been discovered. The Nation of Islam was ahead of the curve when it came to diet prescription. While not all of Elijah Muhammad's *How to Eat to Live* was scientifically based, it was not entirely based on existing religious practices either. Elijah Muhammad's recommended diet was a combination of modern food science and body ideals, religious traditions, and a rejection of "slave" culture.

How to Eat to Live

In 1967, Elijah Muhammad released a book immortalizing the Nation's dietary code. In a two-book series titled *How to Eat to Live*, Elijah Muhammad wrote that "There is no way for us to learn the right way to eat in order to live a long life, except through the guidance and teaching of Allah, who came in the Person of Master Fard Muhammad."⁴⁸ The second book was released in 1972.⁴⁹ The code set forth by the leaders of the Nation of Islam banned many foods

⁴⁷ Carole Davis and Etta Saltos, "Dietary Recommendations and How They Have Changed Over Time," *Nutrition Today* 27, 1992, 34.

⁴⁸ Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live: Book One*, 1.

⁴⁹ Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live: Book One*, and Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live: Book Two*, 1972. Reprint, (Newport News, Va.: National Newport News and Commentator, n.d).

that were popular among Black communities in the early twentieth century. It also promoted foods that were local, abundant, and cheap. At the forefront of Elijah's work was the navy bean. Elijah Muhammad provided biblical, historical, nutritional, and economic evidence to support Black Muslims reliance on the bean. Elijah was an advocate of "eating well." His dietary code included the restrictions of *Kashrut* and *Halal*, from Jewish and Muslim tradition, respectively. He also added the rejection of foods associated with American enslavement such as collard greens, corn, white potatoes, peas, and sweet potatoes. This severely limited diet would breed ingenuity among Nation members.

In Elijah Muhammad's *How to Eat to Live* many common American foods were prohibited. He wrote, "Virtually all vegetables are good to eat except collard greens and turnip salad;" cabbage and cauliflower were acceptable, but not their leaves. No kale, sweet potatoes, or white potatoes were permitted. Absolutely no peas or nuts were edible. It was never recommended that followers eat corn bread, white flour, or white sugar. Pork was forbidden. Chicken was not recommended. Other meats could be consumed, in limited quantities, if it was available and affordable; lamb and beef were permitted.⁵⁰ Indeed, all beans were forbidden, except the small pink or white navy beans.

Food and Enslavement

The diet that Elijah Muhammad prescribed would be fairly healthy by today's standards. He recommended that his followers limit sugar and carb-heavy foods that have come to be associated with type-two diabetes. Many of these foods were explicitly banned in holy texts, such as pork. Others, like peas and corn, were considered "animal food" by Elijah, and unfit for

⁵⁰ Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live: Book One*.

human consumption. Large beans or sweet potatoes were too difficult to digest, according to Elijah. He claimed that he had received this dietary proclamation from Fard Muhammad, the earthly manifestation of Allah. In the opening of *How to Eat to Live*, Elijah wrote that:

The Bible says that He will give us more life abundancy, but He demands strict obedience to His Will. There is no way of prolonging the life of human beings – or any other life – unless it begins with restrictions of the foods which sustain life: the right kinds of food and the proper time when it should be taken into our bodies.⁵¹

Elijah commanded his followers to adhere to this dietary code to extend their life. If they ate fruits, vegetables, milk, wheat flour, brown sugar, eggs, squabs, lamb, beef, and navy beans they could achieve a longer life on earth. “He [Fard Muhammad] said that a diet of navy beans would give us a life span of one hundred and forty (140) years,” Elijah explained.⁵²

Living to be a hundred years old or older was important to Elijah, as evident in his writing. Often in the pages of *How to Eat to Live* Elijah wrote of people who taught other ways of eating to the Black community. He was angered by their inattention to forbidden foods and claimed that ancient people from the Old Testament lived to be one thousand. Living to be eighty was not a long life to Elijah. “The Christians – white and black – try to force or deceive my followers into eating foods they know we, the Muslims, do not approve.”⁵³ Elijah was convinced that these foods were intentionally shortening the life of Black Americans. He claimed that white and wealthy people did not eat these “slave foods.” Scholars, in the decades that separate *How to Eat to Live* from this essay, would decode the “slave diet” and debate whether it was more unhealthy than white Southerners. The literature on this topic is too great to assess.⁵⁴ In some respects, Elijah Muhammad was right and the diet that he prescribed was relatively healthy.

⁵¹ Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live: Book One*, 1.

⁵² Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live: Book Two*, 170.

⁵³ Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live: Book One*, 2.

⁵⁴ Anne Bower, *African American Foodways: Explorations of History and Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

On plantation farms, white plantation owners would choose white-flour bread over corn bread. Cornbread was often given to enslaved people. On poorer farms, and in times of struggle, everyone ate cornbread. Both cornbread and white bread were banned by Elijah in favor of wheat bread, a carbohydrate more nutritionally dense than corn or white bread. Various volumes of *Muhammad Speaks* from this period included articles about nutritional science with special attention given to breads.⁵⁵ These articles demonstrated Elijah's and the Nations' interest in nutritional studies and public health, and although Elijah was not a nutritional scientist, he used his self-taught skills to defend the navy bean.

Defending the Navy Bean

The navy bean was a food that Elijah Muhammad claimed one could rely on for substantial health benefits. The navy bean was particularly small, unlike other beans that grow to be larger. The hulls were also soft. These two traits made the beans more digestible than other beans. Chickpeas were best served shelled, according to Elijah, making them harder to process and cook.⁵⁶ Besides Elijah's emphasis on health outcomes, there was another side-effect of his healthful diet: beauty. Being slim was an important trait that manifested from correct eating across genders. Women were particularly held to these standards and could have their religious devotion questioned if they were not thin enough.⁵⁷ Elijah Muhammad encouraged his followers

Robert William Fogel, and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974).

Herbert G. Gutman, *Slavery and the Numbers Game: A Critique of Time on the Cross* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1975).

Jennifer Jensen Wallach, *Dethroning the Deceitful Pork Chop: Rethinking African American Foodways from Slavery to Obama* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2015).

⁵⁵ *Muhammad Speaks*, 15 March 1968, 23, and *Muhammad Speaks*, February 1962, 14, 26 and *Muhammad Speaks*, 19 January 1968, 11.

⁵⁶ Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live: Book Two*, 71.

⁵⁷ Ula Yvette Taylor, *The Promise of Patriarchy: Women and the Nation of Islam* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 2017), 47.

to fast for twenty-four hours between meals to achieve this physique. Navy beans, while not noted by Elijah, are also low in caloric density, therefore, they would help his followers maintain his ideal.

Navy beans were mentioned repeatedly in *How to Eat to Live*. Navy beans made up the staple food in the Nation's diet. Elijah recommended his readers eat "that bean seven days a week."⁵⁸ In the very first chapter of the book, "Beans (dry)" was the second section heading. The navy bean was the first food item that Elijah Muhammad defended in *How to Eat to Live*, but only the small navy bean that was either brown-pink or white was acceptable. To new members Elijah recommended you first "get yourself some common food. Number one, a bag of navy beans."⁵⁹ In detail, Elijah explained why the navy bean was an ideal food to eat to live a long life:

This bean He [Allah] valued to be very high in protein, fats and starches, and it is a safe food for prolonging life. As you will find, most of the Muslims like their bean soup. These beans are dry beans. He said that He could take one of our babies and start him off eating the dry small navy bean soup, and make that child live 240 years. He described no other beans.⁶⁰

In this introductory passage, Elijah Muhammad singled out the navy bean as a healthful and holy food. The navy bean contained all the necessary nutrients that people needed for good nutrition, according to Elijah and additionally, the bean was biblical.

Besides being healthful, navy beans were practical and economical. Beans were traditionally an inexpensive food in America. Advertisements for beans were popular during the World Wars and the Great Depression as a cost-saving healthy food. The navy bean was a feature in popular American dishes before the bean pie such as Boston baked beans, which was

⁵⁸ Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live: Book Two*, 71.

⁵⁹ Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live: Book Two*, 175.

⁶⁰ Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live: Book One*, 5.

occasionally served in a pie crust. The navy bean became especially iconic as it derived its nickname the “navy” bean from the United States Navy’s use of the bean during the nineteenth century. Canned bean producers, the United States Government, and Elijah Muhammad promoted the economic value of the navy bean.⁶¹ Elijah claimed that his prescribed diet would save his followers money.⁶² Boasting healthy, holy, and economic lifestyles helped the Nation gain traction in Detroit and the country.

⁶¹ J. F. Cox and H. R. Pettigrove, *Bean Growing in Michigan* (East Lansing, MI: Agricultural Experiment Station Michigan Agricultural College, 1924), 5.

⁶² Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live: Book One*, 20.

CHAPTER 3: DETROIT, RELIGION, AND BEANS

Islam was brought to Detroit long before the Nation. The second mosque ever built in the United States was erected in 1921, in Highland Park, Michigan, which is a city totally encapsulated by Detroit. Formal Islamic practice was not present in the United States before the 1890s; as Islam practiced by enslaved Africans had been intentionally stamped out long before the 1920s. Though African Islam did not survive enslavement, white Americans became more familiar with Islam during the “American occult revival” beginning in the 1870s.⁶³ “American liberal religiosity, which by the 1830s was epitomized by Transcendentalism and which produced a space in American religious culture for the serious appreciation of certain religious aspects of Islam.”⁶⁴

In 1893, during the Columbian Exhibition in Chicago, the United States’ first mosque was completed. Middle Eastern travelers returned to the Levant after the Exhibition and shared stories of American acceptance of Islam. A massive migration of Muslims to America followed the 1893 exhibition.⁶⁵ By 1897, there was a small population of Syrian peddlers in Detroit. The early Syrian population was largely Christians until 1908 when Syrian Muslims began moving into the city. In the early 1900s, Muslim societies were popping up all over the nation. Hailing from villages in Lebanon, the Muslim community in Highland Park did not contain many women or children. Individuals recognized themselves in national and cultural identities, and thus lived in ethnic enclaves. Many of these immigrants were not invested in American life, only waiting until they had turned enough profit to head home.

⁶³ Patrick D. Bowen, *A History of Conversion of Islam in the United States*, volume 1 (Boston, MA: Koninklijke Brill, 2015), 17.

⁶⁴ Bowen, *A History of Conversion of Islam in the United States*, volume 1, 18.

⁶⁵ Howell, *Old Islam in Detroit*, 30-31.

Other Muslim immigrants, who had brought a wife or married in the US, would stay in America, and invest in the local mosques. Men who married non-Muslim women would sometimes convert to Christianity or practice an Islam-Christianity hybrid. Many of these men, however, converted their wives and their descendants still pray at Detroit's mosques to this day. The mosque was not the center of life for many bachelors; rather it was the coffeehouse. Inside the coffeehouses, men of all races and religions enjoyed the space, shared stories and news, and mingled. Formal societies were often organized within the houses. When there was not meeting space available, celebrations and prayers happened within the homes of Muslim families allowing women access to the center of religious and political life. The Old-World sects of Islam, Sunni and Shi'a, were transplanted to Detroit in the early twentieth century. This imported religious conflict, and lack of interpersonal network within the city, made it difficult to convert Detroiters to Islam.⁶⁶ Overall, Islam had hardly reached Detroit's Black community before Fard Muhammad.

Black Society in Detroit

Black society in Detroit before the Great Migration of the early twentieth century was a caste of the white social order and not an independent institution. "By 1900, blacks were less in the mainstream of American life than they had been in the previous decades."⁶⁷ White Americans had cut off opportunities of integration in favor of a Eurocentric social order that prioritized being wealthy, successful, and white. Furthermore, a Black "elite as a separate and distinct group apart from the rest of the black community disappeared around the turn of the

⁶⁶ Howell, *Old Islam in Detroit*, 31-41.

⁶⁷ David M. Katzman, *Before the Ghetto: Black Detroit in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 209.

century.”⁶⁸ Growing racial intolerance in the city created a hostile and often dangerous situation for Black residents.⁶⁹ As more Black and white southerners moved to urban centers like Detroit, tension rose as steadily as the population while more people crowded into already bustling neighborhoods.

Much of the Black community in Detroit resided in either Black Bottom or Paradise Valley. Black Bottom was bounded by Gratiot Avenue, Brush Street, Vernor Highway, and the Grand Trunk railroad tracks. Paradise Valley bordered Black Bottom to the north. In these neighborhoods, there were several systemic problems. First, the homes in the region were built decades earlier by immigrants from Europe and were constructed with little funding and expertise. Secondly, when these original owners acquired more wealth and abandoned the neighborhood for other neighborhoods further from Detroit’s manufacturing center, they maintained ownership of their original homes and then rented them to Black Detroiters. Reports have accused these landlords of purposefully ignoring residents’ concerns and charging outrageous rent prices to live near the factories. The inevitable dilapidation of properties in Black “ghettos” was often blamed on the renter. Thus, there “arose the legend that Negroes destroyed property values by ‘running down’ the buildings they occupied.”⁷⁰ As more Black migrants moved to Detroit, white neighborhoods scrambled to keep them out. Suburbs put racial covenants into place that legally barred Black homeowners. Housing discrimination as well as mob violence and intimidation kept Black residents segregated from white neighborhoods.

In Paradise Valley and Black Bottom, eighteen drug stores, fifty-one groceries and markets, ninety-one barbershops, sixteen hotels, and two loan associations were owned by Black

⁶⁸ Katzman, *Before the Ghetto*, 209.

⁶⁹ Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy, *Anyplace But Here* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1966), 296.

⁷⁰ Bontemps and Conroy, *Anyplace but Here*, 296.

entrepreneurs in 1920. Many other residents of the neighborhoods were part of the labor force at local factories and businesses but protections for Black workers were nonexistent. White business owners sought to hire and retain white laborers whenever possible, making turnover much higher for Detroit's Black population. By 1929, many Black workers found themselves completely cut off from the economy and trapped in a cycle of job turnover and poverty.⁷¹ The Great Migration of both Black and white southerners to the city of Detroit, and other urban centers during the early twentieth century, was swiftly followed by the Great Depression.

Fard and the Great Depression

The car industry, on which Detroit's economy was built, collapsed under the Great Depression, and Fard Muhammad appeared Detroit during the height of this crisis, capturing some public attention for the religious and economic solutions he proposed. Black Detroiters took the brunt of the widespread layoffs and unemployment. They were often the first let go and the last brought onto the factory floor, leaving over 40,000 Black Detroiters on the relief rolls in 1932.⁷² With work drying up, the Depression cut deep into retail spending for Detroit's Black community. To Fard Muhammad, the solution to their suffering was clear: economic independence. White people did not want Black people in their neighborhoods, stores, or schools, so Fard suggested that Black people embrace segregation by establishing an independent Black economy whereby Black enterprise would not fall victim to the downturn of the national economy or the material manifestations of white segregationist principles.

⁷¹ Clegg, *The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad*, 15.

⁷² Bontemps and Conroy, *Anyplace but Here*, 296.

Wallace Fard Muhammad gained access to the homes of Black Detroiters by selling wares from door-to-door in the redlined communities of Paradise Valley and Black Bottom, “like other Arab and Syrian peddlers.”⁷³ He would tell Black Detroiters that the silks he carried were modeled after the ones people wore in “their home country.” Many of these Detroiters were recent migrants from the American South, and descendants of enslaved Africans, who did not know where their ancestors had previously lived or what Fard Muhammad meant when he told them about their “home country.” After coming around a neighborhood a time or two, Fard would talk with the families for an extended amount of time and often be invited for a meal. He would always eat what was on the table, but he would talk with the family after the meal:

Now don't eat this food. It is poison for you. The people in your country do not eat it. Since they eat the right kind of food, they have the best health all the time. If you would live just like the people in your home country you would never be sick anymore.⁷⁴

Fard believed that it was of utmost importance to live a healthy, long life. Healthy eating remained at the forefront of the Nation's message throughout decades. Beans were often the star of Nation dishes such as bean pie and bean soup. The navy bean, the small white or pink bean, was especially important for Fard's prescribed diet.

Beans in Michigan

Conveniently for the Nation's Detroit converts, navy beans were abundant in Michigan. Before European colonization, the Great Lakes region was occupied by Native Americans who hunted, fished, and farmed on the land. The navy bean, while not native to the Great Lakes

⁷³ Erdmann Doane Beynon, “The Voodoo Cult Among Negro Migrants in Detroit,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 43, no. 6 (1938), 895.

⁷⁴ Beynon, “The Voodoo Cult,” 895.

region, was spread throughout the midwestern United States by Indigenous economic forces. Indigenous societies used beans for a variety of dishes, including a mashed bean bread. The bean bread popularized by the Cherokee Nation was a blended batter consisting of cornmeal, flour, sugar, milk, shortening, egg, honey, and brown beans⁷⁵. These preparation techniques likely found their way into the Black American cooking repertoire from the shared legacy of Black and Indigenous slavery.⁷⁶ The navy bean has been known by many names such as the white pea bean, in American census records, or the “Indian bean,” by European colonizers.⁷⁷ Native Americans grew the navy bean along with maize and squash in a symbiotic agricultural system. The maize would provide support to the bean stalk and the ground coverage of the squash made for easy weed management; together they were known as the “three sisters.”⁷⁸

In 1920, just under a quarter of all Michigan farms were producing dry edible beans; at the same time, over a quarter of all bean farms in the United States were located in the state. Michigan was producing two-thirds of all navy beans in 1924.⁷⁹ Canning beans had become a large industry in the state with most of the production concentrated in the Saginaw Bay area located near the “thumb.” Michigan’s navy beans were favored by the Nation and Americans in general. Large canning companies made up thirty-five percent of Michigan’s bean consumption in 1924, selling their canned beans across the country.⁸⁰ Acreage dedicated to bean farming nearly doubled between 1920 and 1930 and then increased again by ten percent from 1930 to

⁷⁵ The United Cherokee Nation, <http://theucn.com/beanbread.html>.

⁷⁶ See Tiya Miles, *The Dawn of Detroit* (New York, NY: The New Press), 2017 for more about African-Indigenous culture in early Detroit.

⁷⁷ Cox and Pettigrove, 3

⁷⁸ R. Douglas Hurt, *Indian Agriculture in America: Prehistory to the Present* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1987), 11.

⁷⁹ Cox and Pettigrove, 3.

⁸⁰ Cox and Pettigrove, 20.

1935. Nationally, twenty-percent less land was dedicated to farming beans between 1930 and 1935. Michigan today produces the second most bundles of navy beans nationally.

Elijah did not acknowledge that navy beans were grown in abundance in Michigan, but he did note that they were cheap and easy to locate at the store. Later he experimented with the idea of Nation-owned bean canning factories and bean farms. While the Nation did not own a canning factory, they did own farmland where they presumably grew beans. Although the Nation never developed an independent agricultural economy, they did encourage their members to participate in food production in some capacity. Michigan farmers, like farmers throughout the country, lost land and income due to the Great Depression, and in the north and south alike, farmers of color took the brunt of the hardship. By 1940, however, Michigan's farmers of color were able to recuperate farm ownership at a higher rate than the national average. Movements like the Nation of Islam encouraged people of color to return to agricultural practice to farm for their own preservation.

At the onset of the Great Depression nearly a quarter of all bean farms in the country closed, although the bean farms that remained open produced more beans than the decade previous. In other states, corporatization brought prices down and drove smaller farms out of the market. On the contrary, Michigan's producers began growing beans on an additional five-thousand farms in 1930. Thirteen percent of Michigan's farms closed between 1920 and 1930, but not bean farms. Bean production in Michigan continued to grow steadily from 1920 to 1940.⁸¹ Nationwide, a quarter less farms than in 1920 were producing over forty percent more beans by 1930. Bean farms were growing larger, producing more, and becoming more

⁸¹ In 1935 bean production fell nationwide but grew again in 1940.

corporatized. Independent farmers in Michigan, however continued to grow a significant amount of beans on smaller farms.

CHAPTER 4: THE NATION'S BEANS

Even after the Nation moved its headquarters to Chicago in 1935, Michigan's navy bean would remain an important part of the Nation's economic plan though connections in Detroit were weakened by constant police surveillance which made business and conversion efforts difficult. The Nation remained resilient in Michigan with three formally recognized groups and two formal temples existing in Michigan's lower peninsula in 1964. In 1962, the Nation held a rally in Detroit where Elijah Muhammad spoke to his followers at the first established temple.⁸² Moreover, *Muhammad Speaks* often ran advertisements for Detroit businesses where subscribers could shop with and purchase from other community members.⁸³ In the 1960s, listeners could tune in weekly to hear the Messenger Elijah Muhammad on nearly a dozen radio stations across Michigan.⁸⁴

Big Bean Ideas

Elijah witnessed the bean corporation's success in Michigan and contemplated the ways that he could bring economic success to his community. He was influenced by his time in the Federal Correctional Institution in Milan, Michigan where he was imprisoned for refusing to register for the draft and encouraging his followers to do the same.⁸⁵ While incarcerated, he was impressed by the prison's "self-sufficiency."⁸⁶ The prison grew, processed, and served food all on one property. Elijah thought that Black Americans could imitate what was happening at these prisons to create a closed supply chain. They could farm their own land, buy, and manufacture

⁸² *Muhammad Speaks*, July 1962.

⁸³ *Muhammad Speaks*, July 1962, 33 and *Muhammad Speaks*, 19 January 1968, 22.

⁸⁴ *Muhammad Speaks*, March 1962, 31.

⁸⁵ Elijah Muhammad's refusal to register for the draft, and encouragement to his followers to do the same, landed him with a four-year sentence from 1942 to 1946.

⁸⁶ Clegg, *The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad*, 98.

their own wares, and completely exclude others from their economy. “We should raise and prepare our own food,” he claimed.⁸⁷ Elijah’s message was heard by converts.

In 1945, a year before Elijah Muhammad’s release from prison, individual Black Muslims pooled their finances to purchase 140-acres of farmland in White Cloud, Michigan.⁸⁸ White Cloud is in northwest Michigan, and lies between Detroit and Chicago, each roughly two-hundred miles southeast and southwest, respectively. In 1962, the Nation was still fundraising to purchase farmland.⁸⁹ By the 1970s Nation-owned farms were producing a great quantity of milk and eggs that were sent to the Nation owned and operated bakeries in Chicago. In 1968 *Muhammad Speaks* ran job advertisements for farm workers at Nation-owned farms.⁹⁰ Elijah’s farm enterprises appeared to bring the Nation financial success. Ultimately, his farming expenditures would end up exceeding his profits, and his dreams were never fully attained. Elijah Muhammad wanted a completely closed economy, not just one closed supply-chain.

No attempt at a bean-based farm seems to have brought the Nation success. Elijah envisioned a bean operation that could feed the masses. He recommended that:

WE SHOULD have a great field of hundreds and thousands of acres of beans to feed our people. It is a very cheap and very healthy food for us. We should buy canning factories for ourselves and can beans.⁹¹

The Nation never owned a canning factory. Elijah Muhammad’s vision of a Black-owned, Black-operated bean corporation did not come to fruition. The Nation did, however, own land in states across the country and still do today. They turned navy beans grown on these properties into their iconic bean pies.

⁸⁷ Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live: Book One*, 7.

⁸⁸ Clegg, *The Life and Times and Elijah Muhammad*, 99.

⁸⁹ *Muhammad Speaks*, February 1962, 9.

⁹⁰ *Muhammad Speaks*, 19 January 1968, 20.

⁹¹ Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live: Book Two*, 71.

Selling Bean Pies

The bean pie is attributed to various creators and perfectors from Fard Muhammad to Lana Shabazz. Jabir Muhammad, son of Elijah Muhammad, first marketed the pie to grocery stores as the “South Park Special” after the bakery where he was employed in New York City, but he attributed the invention of the pie to Lana Shabazz of New York City.⁹² Long after her creation of the bean pie, Shabazz would become the personal chef of Muhammad Ali, famous heavy-weight champion. Shabazz touted the health benefits of bean pie and other Nation-approved meals, which helped motivate the boxer to convert to the Nation of Islam. Shabazz and Ali were often asked about the Nation’s diet since Americans were infatuated with the boxer’s athletic success. Lana Shabazz explained how the Nation’s interest in healthy eating predated other American health movements:

We in the Nation of Islam were talking about healthy meals and balanced diets long before anyone else. It wasn’t just what you shouldn’t eat. It was also what you needed to be healthy. So, whenever Ali was in New York, he came to our restaurant. I’d go out and wait on him, and he’d look at me and say, ‘Sister, feed me.’ I’d feed him lamb shanks, string beans, rice, carrots. I always believed in people eating right. I used to be famous for making bean pies, so I’d give him my bean pie and ice cream.⁹³

Shabazz and Ali brought attention to the Nation of Islam, particularly their dietary code and the bean pie. Elijah Muhammad spoke out against Ali and his success in 1969, claiming that Ali had bought into the “white man’s” world. Ali remained a member of the Nation nonetheless and aligned himself with more mainstream Islam under the leadership of Elijah’s son and successor Warith Deen Muhammad. Ali famously blamed the popularity of bean pie in Muslim-owned bakeries for his loss to Joe Fraizer in 1971, claiming he overindulged in the sweet treat.

⁹² Hassanah Thomas, *Bean Pie, My Brother?* directed by Hassanah Thomas, (2009), YouTube video.

⁹³ Thomas Hauser, *Muhammad Ali, his Life and Times* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1991, 118.

The Washington Post ran a story in 2015 about Lana Shabazz's bean pie recipe that she used to feed Muhammad Ali. Her recipe called for:

FOR THE CRUST: About 2 1/4 cups (9 1/2 ounces) whole-wheat flour, plus more for the work surface, 1/2 teaspoon salt, 2 tablespoons corn or vegetable oil, plus more for greasing, 3 tablespoons ice-cold water, or more as needed, 1 large egg, beaten.

FOR THE FILLING: 3 cups sugar, 16 tablespoons (2 sticks) unsalted butter, at room temperature, 2 tablespoons ground cinnamon, 2 tablespoons cornstarch, 5 large eggs, beaten, 3 cups cooked, no-salt-added navy beans (drained and rinsed if using canned), 2 cups evaporated milk, 5 drops yellow food coloring (optional), 1 teaspoon lemon extract (may substitute 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice).⁹⁴

While this recipe mostly followed the guidelines set by the Nation of Islam, the elaborate details and mixtures would not have been favored by the Nation's earliest leaders. Fard Muhammad encouraged his followers to overcome gluttony and the complicated recipes that could hinder digestion.⁹⁵ Nation members would follow the dietary restrictions set forth by Fard and Elijah to a certain extent. Pork, and other substances banned in Islam and Judaism, would maintain their adverse status within the community.

The bean pies fueled the need for Nation owned bakeries. Elijah noted in the first few pages of *How to Eat to Live, Book One* that he had ambitions to "install health food departments in our bakeries, grocery store, and restaurant soon."⁹⁶ Besides bakeries, Nation members were famous for selling bean pies and along with their newspaper *The Final Call* on the corner of city streets from New York to Seattle.⁹⁷ Chicago, where the Nation was headquartered, was a center for Black Muslim life. By 1968, Shabazz Bakery in Chicago had three locations selling Nation-approved dishes.⁹⁸ Advertisements for job openings at Shabazz Restaurant stated that they would

⁹⁴ Deb Lindsey, "Lana's Bean Pies," *The Washington Post* (15 September 2015).

⁹⁵ Edward E. Curtis IV, *Black Muslim Religions in the Nation of Islam, 1960-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 27.

⁹⁶ Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live: Book One*, 7.

⁹⁷ Raja Abdulrahim, "Nation of Islam member peddles bean pies a ritual going back decades," *Seattle Times* (Seattle, WA), 19 June 2011.

⁹⁸ *Muhammad Speaks*, 15 March 1968, 8.

accept both Muslim and non-Muslim applicants.⁹⁹ The 1960s saw the height of the Nation's popularity with promoters such as Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali. In 1962, there were established temples in thirty-eight cities and organized groups in thirty-one more. The Nation had temples across the country from New York to California, and from Wisconsin to Florida.

Jamillah Karim remembered eating bean pies as a child in 1970s Atlanta that were loaded with refined sugar and white flour.¹⁰⁰ Bean pies became so popular that they spread beyond the Nation's community to the wider Civil Rights movement. Rosa Parks was known for her bean pies, according to a longtime friend and coworker, Lonnie V. Peek Jr.¹⁰¹ Peek met Parks in 1967 while both were working for then congressman John Conyers of Detroit. Parks was not a member of the Nation of Islam, although she was later asked to speak at the Nation's rally the "Million Man March" in 1995. Long before this public appearance, Parks was whipping up bean pies while working in Detroit politics, even sharing her treats with friends in the office. Bean pies, by the 1960s were in political offices, bakeries, and on television across America.

Today there is no listing for a Shabazz Bakery in Chicago; however, the Nation still sells bean pies at Supreme Bean Pie attached to the mosque named after Elijah Muhammad. Any person in the United States can purchase a bean pie and have it sent to their door straight from the Nation's temple in Chicago. At the Nation's domain *Muhammad Speaks* Elijah Muhammad's writings are for sale.¹⁰² Fard's advocacy for the navy bean lives on in the formal literature that the Nation promotes, and through more casual communications such as emailed newsletters of affiliated bean pie sellers.¹⁰³ Bean pie is still thought of as a healthy and holy food for many. To

⁹⁹ *Muhammad Speaks*, 15 March 1968, 30.

¹⁰⁰ Curtis, *Black Muslim Religions in the Nation of Islam*, 107.

¹⁰¹ Lonnie Peek Jr., "A Day with Rosa Parks," *Michigan Chronicle* 69, no. 8 (2005), A.6.

¹⁰² <https://www.elijahmuhammadspeaks.com/>.

¹⁰³ See "The Supreme Bean Pie," <https://www.thesupremebeanpie.com/>.

many others, bean pie is simply a tasty dessert with a history of Black liberation. To many scholars and white allies, the bean pie is just another dessert and not symbolic of a cultural identity.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Hassanah Thomas, *Bean Pie, My Brother?* directed by Hassanah Thomas, (2009), YouTube video.

CONCLUSION

Pies made from beans became symbolic of the culture and institutions established during the African American Islamic Renaissance. The bean pie was a solution to ill-health and poverty, a manifestation of twentieth-century fascination with health science and mysticism. The Nation offered a way for Black Americans to liberate themselves from their past of enslavement and their present reality of oppression through dietary control. The Nation changed the way that Black people viewed diet, religion, and identity in the Midwest, encouraging people to return to agricultural work and choose foods that followed the Nation's dietary code. At the center of the Nation's table was the navy bean.

Navy beans were an important food for all Americans. Many people equated beans with meat, as they were a source of vegetarian protein, but also thought of the bean as a diet food that was lower in fat and calories. The Nation of Islam's popularization of the bean pie promoted the bean in a different way – one that was sweet and healthy. Besides bean pie, navy bean soup was another recipe the Nation proliferated across American society. The foodways of the Nation of Islam spanned across boundaries of race, religion, and geographic region, making the navy bean an even more iconic American food. The foodways established by the popularity of navy beans reshaped Michigan and the Midwestern region's social and cultural identity. Navy beans remain a leading industry in the region and the main ingredient in several popular American dishes.

While the actual number of converts to the Nation of Islam were not more than ten thousand, the influence of the Nation expanded beyond its community. Bean pie is a Muslim American food today, not just one associated with the Nation of Islam. Beans have always been a popular food in African American culinary practice, and the bean pie's similarity to sweet potato pie made it a perfect substitute to share and spread across boundaries in American society.

APPENDIX¹⁰⁵

Table I Statistics on Bean Farms at the National and State Level	1920		1930	
	US	MI	US	MI
Number of Farms	6,448,343	196,447	6,288,648	169,372
Rate of Change over Ten Year Period: Number of Farms			-2.48%	-13.78%
Total Farm Acreage	955,883,715	19,032,961	986,771,016	17,118,951
Rate of Change over Ten Year Period: Total Farm Acreage			3.23%	-10.06%
Number of Bean Farms	168,185	46,561	128,561	50,469
Rate of Change over Ten Year Period: Number of Bean Farms			-23.56%	8.39%
Beans Harvested in Bushels	14,079,093	4,332,317	20,353,579	5,201,096
Rate of Change over Ten Year Period: Beans Harvested in Bushels			44.57%	20.05%
Total Bean Farm Acreage	1,161,682	314,873	1,866,655	574,596
Rate of Change over Ten Year Period: Total Bean Farm Acreage			60.69%	82.49%
Total Bean Farm Value	\$ 61,795,225	\$ 17,329,268	\$ 77,097,864	\$ 19,282,966
Percentage of Bean Farms to Total Farms	2.61%	23.70%	2.04%	29.80%
Percentage of Bean Acreage to Total Farm Acreage	0.12%	1.65%	0.19%	3.36%

Table I Statistics on Bean Farms at the National and State Level	1935		1940	
	US	MI	US	MI
Number of Farms	6,812,350	196,517	6,096,799	187,589
Rate of Change over Ten Year Period: Number of Farms			-3.05%	10.76%
Total Farm Acreage	1,054,515,111	18,459,922	1,060,852,374	18,037,995
Rate of Change over Ten Year Period: Total Farm Acreage			7.51%	5.37%
Number of Bean Farms	139,753	56,775	102,436	40,677
Rate of Change over Ten Year Period: Number of Bean Farms	8.71%	12.49%	-20.32%	-19.40%
Beans Harvested in Bushels	18,696,615	6,956,959	23,666,104	8,042,850
Rate of Change over Ten Year Period: Beans Harvested in Bushels			26.58%	15.61%
Total Bean Farm Acreage	1,488,376	631,669	1,582,983	488,388
Rate of Change over Ten Year Period: Total Bean Farm Acreage	-20.27%	9.93%	-15.20%	-15.00%
Total Bean Farm Value				
Percentage of Bean Farms to Total Farms	2.05%	28.89%	1.68%	21.68%
Percentage of Bean Acreage to Total Farm Acreage	0.14%	3.42%	0.15%	2.71%

¹⁰⁵ [Data collected](#) from the United States Census Bureau.

Table II	1920		1930	
Statistics on NonWhite Farm Ownership at the National and State Level	US	MI	US	MI
Number of Nonwhite Operators	233,222	563	158,857	561
Number of White Owners	3,691,868	158,843	2,752,787	168,811
Total Value of Nonwhite Farm Property	\$ 2,968,696,617	\$ 3,004,806	\$ 1,602,767,687	\$ 2,159,628
Total Value of White Farm Property	\$ 74,955,403,721	\$ 1,433,681,404	\$ 46,277,070,671	\$ 1,158,491,979
Total Acreage of Nonwhite Farms	44,944,521	48,713	41,087,982	38,391
Total Acreage of White Farms	910,939,185	18,984,248	945,683,034	17,080,560
Rate of Change over Ten Year Period: Nonwhite Owners			-31.89%	-0.36%
Rate of Change over Ten Year Period: White Owners			-25.44%	6.28%
Rate of Change over Ten Year Period: Total Value of Nonwhite Farm Property			-46.01%	-28.13%
Rate of Change over Ten Year Period: Total Value of White Farm Property			-38.26%	-19.19%
Rate of Change over Ten Year Period: Total Acreage of Nonwhite Farms			-8.58%	-21.19%
Rate of Change over Ten Year Period: Total Acreage of White Farms			3.81%	-10.03%

Table II	1935		1940	
Statistics on NonWhite Farm Ownership at the National and State Level	US	MI	US	MI
Number of Nonwhite Operators	173,314	654	201,098	761
Number of White Owners	3,036,910	195,863	3,498,079	186,828
Total Value of Nonwhite Farm Property	\$ 928,449,525		\$ 984,702,379	\$ 1,863,495
Total Value of White Farm Property	\$ 31,930,394,487		\$ 32,657,036,347	\$ 910,681,728
Total Acreage of Nonwhite Farms	35,586,283	39,761	45,739,931	40,191
Total Acreage of White Farms	340,619,918	18,420,161	1,015,112,443	17,997,804
Rate of Change over Ten Year Period: Nonwhite Owners			26.59%	35.65%
Rate of Change over Ten Year Period: White Owners			27.07%	10.67%
Rate of Change over Ten Year Period: Total Value of Nonwhite Farm Property			-38.56%	-13.71%
Rate of Change over Ten Year Period: Total Value of White Farm Property			-29.43%	-21.39%
Rate of Change over Ten Year Period: Total Acreage of Nonwhite Farms			11.32%	4.69%
Rate of Change over Ten Year Period: Total Acreage of White Farms			7.34%	5.37%

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