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The pig in Judaism and the cow in Hinduism as constructs for the maintenance and preservation of religious and social identities : a case study in Durban, South Africa

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Abstract

The symbolic significance of food may be seen in the cultural and religious practices of many societies. This is a detailed study of two cultural and religious communities in the city of Durban, South Africa, the purpose of which is to explore the role of food, its preparation and consumption, in identity construction. This study investigates how food and dietary prohibitions amongst observant Jews and Hindus in Durban preserve and maintain social and religious identities, and describes the fundamental features of the religion and culture of the participants in this study. This comparative study uses qualitative research based on 14 interviews with Jews and 20 Hindus. The study adopts a sociological perspective to explain how their dietary exclusions, of the pig and the cow respectively, are observed in everyday practice and on special occasions, and how these practices shape and maintain group identity formation. Drawing on sociology, anthropology and religious studies literatures this thesis examines why animals that are perfectly edible and consumed by many humans, such as the pig and the cow, are excluded from the dietary practices of these religious groups and how this is sustained in multicultural communities in a diaspora, geographically distant from their communities of origin. The study finds that in Durban the anthropological insights of Mary Douglas remain apposite – showing that ideas of purity and pollution are essentially about boundary maintenance and are found in the classification systems of both Hinduism and Judaism as lived religions in Durban. The thesis demonstrates that whatever threatens the cognitive classifications demanded by these religions is prohibited, lest the categories are distorted. This study also shows that where there are proscriptions there are prescriptions, and these are based on a complex set of ritual practices around which group identities are constructed. It concludes that these specific food prohibitions are not only sufficient, but necessary for the creation, maintenance and preservation of each group's religious and social identities. The thesis concludes by reflecting on the tenaciousness and power of these forms of human traditions and beliefs in shaping and reshaping a sense of self into the 21st century.