

## The Aspects Of Food In The Rites Of Passage In Turkish Culture

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### ABSTRACT

No matter who we are or where we live, our lives revolve around food, which is much more than a merely sustenance. As a part of the human culture, food carries complex significance and symbolic meanings.

Turkish people attribute great value to food and its usage specifically tied to rites of passage of human life. Traditions, especially the ones practiced during rites of passage, such as birth, circumcisions, weddings and funerals, have always been accompanied by food in Turkish culture. Since food celebrates and symbolizes human progress in life in the culture, it also surrounds by aspects of belief, custom, magic, ritual and religion and has always been used in ceremonial context during such rites. Even though that context may be different depending on the religious, economic and social nuances of the various Turkish regions, like wheat, meat and bread, certain kinds of food play key roles during Turkish rites, generally upholding traditions. This paper highlights the place of food in the rites of passage in Turkish culture.

**Key words:** food, culture, rites of passage, ceremony.

### INTRODUCTION

Food is an indispensable component of everyday life. It carries complex significance and symbolic meanings since it is part of a culture. Moreover, it is vital for both the biological aspect of a human organism as well as the making and maintenance of social relations: “*Any given human individual is constructed, biologically, psychologically and socially by the food he/she chooses to incorporate*” (Fischler 1988: 937-953).

Recently, there has been a growing cross-disciplinary interest in food and all of its aspects, specifically within the so-called social sciences. Food habits, processes, preparations, rituals and customs are just some of the topics academically discussed in a number of ways. Anthropologists, for example, tend to view food practices as one element of customs that make up a culture. On the other hand, nutritionists are mostly concerned with the impact of rituals and ceremonies on health. They focus on health effects ignoring the cultural values of food. Those two approaches provide one with fruitful research within an emerging discipline known as nutritional anthropology. In other words, nutritional anthropology is concerned with the relationship between nutrition and culture as well as their interaction (Fieldhouse 1991: 17). However, it should also be pointed that food culture goes beyond the boundaries of nutritional anthropology. It is an important research area that invites the curious eyes of historians, folklorists, sociologists and geographers, among others. Foodways has also become a focal point as well as a fine example for one to understand cultural and historical values inextricably intertwined within a society. Especially at different social gatherings, such as ceremonies, celebrations and rituals, food displays the importance of culture in every society.

Moreover, food in ritual context is also has been studied by scholars, specifically by anthropologists, sociologist and religious scholars. The earliest studies about food and its ceremonial context concentrated mostly on tribal societies. Those studies were conducted by cultural anthropologists at the beginning of the nineteenth century. They primarily focused on the significance of food in primitive rituals. To provide you with an example, in his 1964 book *The Raw and the Cooked*, anthropologist French Lévi-Strauss explored natural and cultural relationships on a culinary level. Furthermore, he maintained that culinary rites are not inborn but rather acquired phenomena (Lévi-Strauss, 1975: 586-595). Moreover, in the early twentieth century, Freud investigated the psychosexual aspects of consumption. Advocates of the structuralism tradition, such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Douglas, have successfully shown how food is used to classify different phenomena, thereby creating a common worldview among people who share a culinary culture. Bronislaw Malinowski, the founder of functionalism, coined the basic strand of functionalism opposing the evolutions and historical particularism. Malinowski used the term “needs functionalism”, believing that “humans had set of universal biological needs, and that customs developed to fulfill those needs” (Conrad 2011: 65). His form of functionalism focused on the individual, satisfying the basic seven needs of humans which include nutrition, reproduction, bodily comforts, safety, movement, health and growth (Moore 2009: 141).

Furthermore, scholars in the disciplines of anthropology and sociology viewed ceremonies and rites of passage as a way to examine a culture. Emile Durkheim, the founder of classical social science and religious theories, claimed that a ceremony is approving events in a society. Just like Durkheim, an expert on religion and ritual, Arnold van Gennep, who made the most devastating critique to Durkheim’s views, innovated the term “rites of passage”, in

his work *Les rites de passage*, “Rites of Passage” in 1960. Arnold van Gennep plainly stated that Durkheim’s opinions of primitive cultures were “entire erroneous”. He claimed that passage in social groups requires a ceremony, or ritual hence rite of passage. Later, some other scholars, such as Geertz, Turner and Rappoport, worked on ritual and ceremonies without mentioning the role of food at their studies.

Turkish folklore scholarship has not focused on food from a folkloric perspective since no books on traditional Turkish food culture and its role in the rite of passages have been produced yet. The book, for instance, *Yemek Kitabı (Food Book)*, deals with how the old Turkish sources provide us with concrete information on the Turkish food tradition, such as *Divan-ü Lügati’t –Türk* and *Kutadgu Bilig*, which are considered very important works in terms of Turkish cultural history. They also focus on food and its relationships with folklore, history and literature (Koz, 2002). However, there are abundant incomprehensive studies in that field which focus on food culture of a particular cuisine, ingredients and aspects of food production, as well as preparation and consumption of specific foods. Ethnological perspectives on the role of food in human life illuminate different aspects of food, such as culture, relations, identity and power.

As it is true for all human beings all over the world, the entire life-cycle of a person, from birth to death, is marked by a series of rites of passage. This paper is primarily concerned with a specific food and its importance in the rites of passage within Turkish society. Since the role of food, particularly in the rites of passage is still overlooked, this study aims to highlight the significance of food during the rites of passage. By focusing on specific food and rites of passage, this paper also aims to make some contributions to studies on food and culture in general.

### **The Characteristics of the Turkish Food**

Turkish food culture was established during the Nomadic period and the first settled Turkish States of Asia, called Anatolia. In that period meat, dairy, vegetables and grains characterized the core of Turkish food culture. The typical food used in that period was of course wheat which was cultivated and used liberally in several types of leavened and unleavened breads baked in clay ovens, on the griddle, or buried in ember. The use of layered dough is rooted in the nomadic character of early Central Asian Turk. Dough based specialties an integral part of traditional Turkish food culture. Skewering meat as well as other ways of grilling varieties of *kebab* and dairy products, such as cheeses and yogurt, had been convenient and staple foods of the pastoral Turks. Sheep breeding was one of the most important forms of farm life for the Turks.

Another aspect of food is related to its ingredients, mainly sheep meat and onion. The other aspect is the cooking style: Coal fire. The utensil used the copper stewpot (Anger 1994:78). Turkish food gets its sources from rich vegetables, variety of herbs as well. The typical and traditional Turkish beverages are tea, coffee and *ayran*, namely a popular yogurt drink. Tea is the main source of caffeine for Turkish people and an essential part of a working day. It is prepared in a special way, by brewing it over boiling water and served in delicate, small clear glasses to show the deep red color and to keep it hot.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Food in the Rites of Passage in Turkish Culture**

Food functions as a way to give structure to daily life and to ritualistically mark the passages from one formal life stage or informal life stage to another. Like in every culture, there are certain kinds of food consumed in the rites of passage that are pervasively performed within the Turkish culture.

As in the rest of the world, the first passage of birth, is almost always considered as the happiest event. It is believed that birth increases strength in Turkish society. It also makes people safer and powerful at their communities. Since it is a happy event, birth has to be celebrated accompanied by a rich, sweet pastry, the so-called *baklava*. In fact, except the dead ritual, *baklava* is the most social and ritual dessert in Turkey because it is served almost all ceremonial events, such as births and weddings. *Baklava* is made to share with the guests who attend the ceremonies. There are many variations of *baklava* in terms of ingredients, sizes, flavors and shapes. The most popular *baklava* is made of flaky layers of dough filled with pistachios or walnuts, stacked and brushed with butter and sugar syrup cut into rectangles or diamonds. Although many ethnic groups with ancestry going back to the Middle East claim the origin of this luscious pastry, there is no solid historical evidence (--though it is strongly supported that it stems from Central Asian Turkish tribes). Besides, in Turkey, the *baklava* recipe known and used today, was probably developed in the kitchens of the *Topkapı Palace*. Indeed, the sultan presented trays of *baklava*

<sup>3</sup> There are many studies done about Turkish food culture in general. For example, the study by Bahaeddin Ögel *Türk Mutfağının Gelişmesi ve Türk Tarihi Gelenekleri* and another study by Mehmet Eröz “*Türk Yemek Adetleri*” give information about Turkish food culture.

to the Janissaries every 15th day of the Ramadan, a time of fasting for Muslims all over the world, in a ceremonial procession called the *Baklava Alayı*.

After the rite of birth, there is a teething ceremony, namely when a child gets his first teeth. The main food in this ceremony is boiled wheat. Both the food and the ceremony are commonly named similarly: *diş buğdayı* or *diş hedigi*. In Turkish, *diş* is tooth and wheat is *buğday*. *Hedik* refers to a traditionally cooked wheat dish eaten on this specific occasion. Boiled and pounded wheat is called *bulgur* in Turkish, another common name for this tradition. *Bulgur* plays an important role in the Turkish cuisine. It has a higher nutritional value because *bulgur* is considered an ideal grain in a vegetarian diet too. *Bulgur* is the first food produced after wheat is processed. Wheat is boiled so as to taste a bit softer than *bulgur*. The ceremony “tooth wheat” celebrates the appearance of the baby’s first tooth. It is believed that, if the ceremony is not held, the baby will have tough teething (Saritas 2011: 122). The anonymous, following lines symbolize the frustration of teething for the baby and the importance of wheat:

*“If my mother sells my bed, she would make the wheat; I would then get my teeth easily. If my mother does not make the wheat for me, she should keep my coffin ready.”*

The passage of circumcision is another important rite of passage in Turkish culture. In fact, circumcision and the completion of military service are two major events throughout a Turkish boy’s life. Circumcision is considered as the first step on the ritual path to becoming a man. It is the strictest and the most widespread practice among religious and ritual procedures, even though both festivities and food vary according to region and ethnic origin. Since it is also a showing off to a society, there are certain kinds of food served throughout the ceremony. The main food is called *keşkek*, a traditional Turkish dish served at major ceremonies, such as weddings, funerals and some religious celebrations all over Turkey. *Keşkek* is made of wheat and meat and it requires a long process for both women and men. After being cooked in huge cauldrons, it is served to the guests. People participate by selecting the wheat in order to be blessed as well as by praying and carrying the wheat prior to cooking it. That cooking tradition is safeguarded and transmitted by master cooks to apprentices. Indeed, *Keskek* has officially entered UNESCO’s Intangible Heritage List.

Farewell to the soldiers is another important ceremony in Turkey since joining the army is both a duty and a political right for all Turkish men who are twenty years old. It is believed that every Turk was born as a soldier. Therefore, certain foods play crucial roles in the organization of that farewell party. The families of the young people who will attend the military soon may sacrifice animals. They organize “soldier meals” with the meat accompanied by rice, namely *pilav* in Turkish. The rice is cooked rather differently than the rest of the world in Turkey. It is sizzled in stewpot at first to have it a creamy, buttery, and melt in the mouth consistency and taste. At the meal, there is the soldier’s *baklava*, *asker baklavası*, the most popular sweet in Turkey. The farewell to the soldier ceremony ends at the bus station, holding the Turkish flag and dancing with the families that are left behind in pride and sadness.

The henna-night, *kına gecesi* in Turkish, is another important rite of passage. It is the most colorful part of the wedding female rituals. It takes place at the bride’s parents’ house, one or two nights before wedding ceremony. Usually dressed in red and veiled with a red headscarf, the bride enters to the room where all females are gathered. She sits on a chair and the young girls start walking in circles around her by singing specific songs all together. The mother-in-law takes some henna from the cup and tries to put it in the palms of the bride. The bride refuses to open her hands at first. When the mother-in-law puts a gold coin in the bride’s palms, the bride accepts the henna. Later, the henna cup is passed from one female to another and each woman puts some henna in her own palms. Throughout a traditional henna-night, some specific foods are accompanied by dancing, singing and talking. The main food in this tradition includes non-alcoholic beverages, dried fruits, nuts so called *kuru yemiş* in Turkish. Hazelnut, peanut, pistachio, pine nut, chickpea (roasted as *leblebi*), grape, plum, sunflower seed, squash seed, watermelon seed, apricot, almond, walnut, corn are just some examples of Turkish dried foods and nuts. In fact, nuts and dried fruits have social significance in Turkish culture because these foods always associated during the ceremonial events, such as wedding and teething.

The wedding ceremonies in Anatolia are unarguably the most important and noticeable communal events of the Turkish society. Even though the types of dishes served vary extensively from region to region, the main food is called *keşkek*, a traditional Turkish dish served in weddings as well as circumcisions, funerals and some other religious celebrations all over Turkey. Since marriage symbolizes not just the sacred union of two individuals but also the coming together of two families and extended families as well, a wedding, *düğün* dish, *keşkek* is shared with all who attend the celebrations. In rural areas, *keşkek* is served on a big *sini* a traditional alternative to a table during the wedding ceremony in Turkey.

The last rite of passage is dead. The main food at a funeral ceremony within the Turkish culture is *helva*. The preparation of *helva* is done communally. Made by pan-sautéing flour or semolina and pine nuts in butter before adding sugar, milk or water, and briefly cooking until these are absorbed, the act of consuming *helva* is a shared community experience, a show of support for the grieving. There are certain days, such as the 7<sup>th</sup>, the 40<sup>th</sup> and the 52<sup>nd</sup> day as well as the yearly anniversary of a person's death, that are being commemorated through a religious ceremony and a meal as well. In particular, the number 40 is a mystic number in Turkish culture. On that day after the death of a person, friends and relatives visit the immediate family all day and night. They bring a meal along and keep them company.

## CONCLUSION

In most parts of Turkey, whether religious or non-religious, a certain food is being consumed during the rites of passage. As a result, food is both ceremonial as well as significant within the Turkish society. It also represents the hospitality and the expression of friendship among Turkish people. Therefore, sensitivity to food preparation and consumption during rituals is important toward building and strengthening cross-cultural relationships. Food also plays an important role specifically marking ritual passages. In a ceremonial context what food is served and where individuals sit have symbolic meanings in Turkish society (Besirli 2010: 163). Because Turkish people share similar cultural backgrounds and have similar food habits, certain food plays key roles during specific rites. Hence, Turkish food patterns are identical. Finally, food brings social solidarity and integration via certain ceremonies and rituals. All in all, food reflects the history of Turkish culture in terms of spiritual, cultural, economic and political aspects.

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