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Food in Alevism

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Summary

Social activities pertaining to food such as cooking, sharing, eating and fasting are central to the expression of the lived religiosities of Alevis in Turkey, the Balkans and Western Europe. Throughout these Alevi geographies, one may find a wide variety of meals and beverages entrusted with symbolic meanings or produced and consumed in ritual settings. From an anthropological perspective, food is therefore a good entry to address the topics of rituals, symbolisms, bodies, purity, healing, community making and practices of good-doing in Alevism.

Ritual Meals and Social Cohesion in Alevi Communities

Anyone who spends time attending Alevi rituals will eventually find themselves with their hands full of slices of cake or sitting at a table in front of a tray garnished with cooked meat and bulgur rice. Despite the variety of beliefs, ideologies, social and geographical backgrounds that exist between the numerous Alevi communities of Turkey, the Balkans and Western Europe, the collective activities pertaining to food may be seen as one of their undoubtedly shared social features. This is not specific to Alevism, as anthropologist Jack Goody noted: “In complex written religions, there is always food at some point, partly because regular celebrations are ‘feasts”, requiring special preparations on an annual or weekly basis” (2008, 18). The relationship between food and religion is indeed a classical anthropological topic, it the sense that it may be seen as both universal to humankind and particular to specific social contexts. Throughout the Alevi geographies, one may find a wide variety of meals and beverages entrusted with symbolic meanings or produced and consumed in ritual settings (Ersal & Görgülü 2017). More than food itself, it is therefore the social acts of eating, fasting, cooking and sharing in Alevi contexts that are the topics of this article.

Eating, Fasting and the Issue of Purity

Activities related to food may be seen as religious when “they govern the fundamental relationship we have in the cosmos” and “create and sustain worldviews” (Brumberg-Kraus 2024). In that sense, dietary rules and food taboos are central to understanding

the moral and spiritual discipline exerted over physical and social bodies. Expressed in the language of purity and corruption, the Alevi dietary rules may be understood in the larger framework of control over the instinctive urges to sin of the “lower soul” (*nafs*), as resumed in the call to “be master of one’s hand, tongue and waist” (*eline, diline, beline sahip olmak*). According to that worldview that seeks to nurture the divine part of the human soul, the licit (*helal*) and illicit (*haram*) may be understood according to what increases or diminishes this spiritual progression[1]. Licit food encompasses all products that have been rightfully earned in the moral, social and cosmological sense and can thus be blessed. The usual formula before eating in Alevi communities is “May the licit pleasure be” (*Helal hoş olsun*), for many believe Afiyet to be the name of one of Yezid’s daughters. On the contrary, food is considered illicit when it was not produced in accordance with these rules and is therefore considered harmful to the body and the soul – such is the case for the hunted mountain goat’s meat in Kurdish Alevism, considered *haram*. Due to the absence of central institution that can rule over an Alevi official diet, there is no consensus over the precise rules to apply. As in the rest of Islam, many consider Qur’an as the reference: they thus forbid pork meat, but also rabbits’ one for reasons emerging from specific religious interpretations, including references to the animal’s high reproductive rate.

Worldviews that favour the spiritual world over the material one tend to value the rejection of food as an expression of this progression along the spiritual path. Alevi holy men (*evliyalar*), especially dervishes, were often known for their emaciated body signifying poverty, renunciation, ascetism and morality. As in other Persian Sufi cultures, these dervishes were going through an extraordinary difficult fast known as *çile*, “forty (days)” in Persian, done in the heart of winter. In our research, we found that a specific diet was that of Başköylü Hasan Efendi, a much-respected Kureyşan *dede* from Erzincan, known to eat nothing but sheep meat, milk and yoghurt.

On a much wider scale, religious fasts are the main occasions for Alevis to cleanse their body and mind in commemoration of specific events held dear in their collective mythology. The first fasting period known as “Hızır’s fast” (*Hızır orucu*) lasts three days. It commemorates the healing of Hasan and Hüseyin after their parents, Ali and Fatma, fasted on Muhammad’s advice and gave their fast-breaking meal (*iftar*) to Hızır. Traditionally, families of *talip* were supposed to fast one after another for three weeks, while the *dede* families were supposed to fast on the last week. The other main fast is known as “Muharrem fast” (*Muharrem orucu*) or “Fast of the Twelve Imams” (*On iki imam orucu*) and usually lasts twelve days, starting twenty days after the “Great Aid” (*Kurban bayramı*). It commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Hüseyin and his companions at the plain of Kerbela by the armies of Yezid in 680 and ends on the day of Aşure. During this fast, not only is eating forbidden, but also drinking, cleaning,

shaving and having sexual relations. Fasts usually end with the cooking of specific food such as Aşure, made of chickpeas, beans and dried fruits. Individual or more local fasts can also be noted in this geography. In today's Alevism, fasting is usually depicted as a personal choice upon which no social pressure should be exerted – a way to differentiate from the majority Sunni population.

Cooking for the Visible and the Invisible

In Sufism, cooking is not only a day-to-day common activity, but also a symbol for the spiritual path to the mysteries of Truth. It may be understood in a poetic context that uses kitchen metaphors to symbolise the spiritual maturation that occurs inside the dervish. In Mevlana Rumi's poetries, initiation to the Sufi path is sometimes described as a cooking process by the Divine Love that leads from a state of being "raw", or "uncooked", to "being burnt" (Schimmel 2014). In the Mevlevi brotherhood, a youth who wanted to join the order was supposed to "cook" for 1001 days, including by working in the kitchen of the convent (*Ibid*, 89). In the Bektashi brotherhood, "five of the twelve religious posts were dedicated to the missions of preparing food and drinks: cook (*aşçı*), bread maker (*ekmekçi*), butler (*kilerci*), coffee maker (*kahveci*) and "sacrificer" (*kurbancı*)" (Soileau 2005, 155). In Alevism specifically, this food symbolism is lesser known but may be identified in the feature of the hearth (*ocak*), understood both as a ritual cooking fire at the centre of the traditional prayer halls as well as the holy lineages of *dede* of prophetic descent in charge of keeping its miracles alive.

Cooking as an activity consist of mixing material elements of diverse origins to turn them into a coherent human-made product ready to be shared and consumed, thus imbuing them with meaning, intentions and emotions. As such, at specific Alevi occasions, cooking is about preparing some sacralised food that will then be shared as *lokma* to express peaceful relationships at both visible and invisible levels (see below). A difference is often made between "blood sacrifices" (*kanlı kurban*) and "bloodless sacrifices" (*kansız kurban*), both of which are cooked in ritual and votive contexts. The former refers to the meat of sacrificed animals that is cooked inside the *cemevi* or on a holy site, while the latter refers to the cakes known as *niyaz*, *kömbe* or *bicik* shared in the different Alevi social spaces. There are different recipes to this cake, revolving around the core elements of flour, butter and salt. In Eastern Anatolia, the flour traditionally used to make *niyaz* is known as *qavut* and is made during the holy month of Hızır. After being grinded with a stone mill known as *dester*, it is kept in storages where it is believed Hızır may appear and leave a foot or hoof print. As in other cultural contexts, salt is often understood as a magical element able to heal and protect from the evil eye, especially if it accompanied with prayers and blessings

(*bismillah* or *pismilay* in *kirmanckî*) during the cooking process. In Dersim, a similar mixture of floor/butter/salt was used to honour the memory of dead people when turned into *helva* and thrown into fire (Gültekin 2003, 68). Because cooking activities are overall mostly performed by women, there is also a gendered dimension to the expression of food-related religiosities in Alevism. While we know that the Alevi male spiritual hierarchy underwent major upheavals during the twentieth century, there is still much to discover about the continuity in the female transmission of these practical skills up to the present day.

Sharing : Community Making and Charity

Sharing food, sitting at the same table, eating together, shoulder to shoulders… The different aspects of commensality may be analysed in terms of how they create and perform a community. With whom, how and what one eats inevitably produces boundaries, lines of belonging and hierarchies that delimit the outside and the inside of collective life. In that sense, in Alevism, sharing food prior to eating it pertains to the activity of socially producing *lokma*, a term often translated as “morsel”, “bite”, or “mouthful”. As anthropologist Caroline Tee noted: “The *lokma* is a reference to shared food, used primarily in the ritual context of the *cem* to denote the communal meal of sacrificed meat at the end, but also used more broadly in reference to food given and shared amongst the Alevi community. The eating of *lokma* in the *cem* can only take place when everyone in the community has declared *rızalık* (approval, or consent) with one another; that is, when there is peace established within the community” (2013, 11). The ritual transformation of food into *lokma* therefore performs and materializes this state of *rızalık* that unites the participants into an appeased community, not ridden with conflicts or negative feelings of any sort. Sharing *lokma* allows participants to experience a change in status made possible by the ritual performed.

Sharing *lokma* is both about giving food and exchanging blessings: “May it be the *lokma* of God/Xızır” (*Hak/ Xızır lokması olsun*), “May God accept it” (*Allah kabul etsin, Haq qewul bo*). Traditionally, in villages’ regional economies, gifts of *lokma* came from the household’s annual economic production: bulgur, olive oil, butter, fermented cheese (*çökelek*), beans, dried fruit or shares of a sacrificed animal’s meat. They were also given as a tribute, known as *çıralık* or *haqullah*, to the *dede* and his assistant that were often traveling once a year, during winter, to solve conflicts and perform the *cem*. Today, *lokma* are often shared in the form of industrial cakes, home-made *niyaz*, or even money (coins, banknotes). *Lokma* are usually shared on special occasions: during *cem* ceremony, while visiting a holy place, in the streets or at home during religious celebrations. Some may also be shared due to life cycle events, such as funerals, to celebrate the fulfilment of a wish or the experience of a good omen

dream. The distribution of *lokma* is an integral part of the votive process of the holy visit (*ziyaret*, *jiara*): it is carried out on arrival, in a process of reaching the status of *rızalık* with the other people present, as well as with the holy place itself. Only once the *lokma* has been distributed can the pilgrims allow themselves to move towards the holy place, light a candle, pray and utter their wishes.

The sharing of *lokma* is also a good framework to think Alevi charity, or "practices of good-doing". Traditionally, *dede* who received *lokma* were responsible for redistributing part of it among the poorest families in their *talip*. At the holy sites, one may come across people waiting to receive donations from passing pilgrims; they are often referred to as *lokmacı*, a term expressing a specific social position that differentiates them from the regular beggars. Showing hospitality towards the guest (*misafir*) is also regarded as a religious obligation. In the Alevi cosmology, dervishes and travellers are also valued as "God's guest" (*Tanrı misafiri*), akin to the holy figures of Ali or Hızır. Through these narratives, the sharing of *lokma* reproduces a religious dialectic inspired by Sufism: it is about giving food "from God" and "to God", thus feeding God in the earthly world (Mittermaier 2019). Alevi associations in Turkey and Europe often organise collective meals, dressed table (*sofra*) where food is usually made in large pots (*kazan*) and offered at the end of *cem* rituals. The charitable activities of these associations are often expressed in reference to this ethic of *lokma*.

Conclusion

Food is central to the Alevi experience of religion in that it anchors the body in both spiritual and material realities. It links mystical symbolic and poetic imaginings with social and economic realities. Between the different Alevi communities, there is a great diversity of recipes and ingredients in the dishes and drinks consumed during rituals or in the everyday life. Whether it is eaten or rejected, food is always also "food for thought", associated with oral traditions to produce narratives, values and hierarchies. Around these ritual meals, the repetition of gestures and words creates a sensory, olfactory, gustatory and sonorous universe that forms the atmosphere of Alevi communities.

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Endnotes

[1] [Footnote 1] One of the differences between Alevism and Bektachism is the absence of ritual consumption of alcohol, known as *dem* (instant, blood), during the *cem* ceremony. In this Muslim Sufi brotherhood, *dem* is considered the “key to man” (*dem insanın anahtarıdır*), valued to reveal the discipline one can exert over their self (*nefs*) and ego (*benlik*). According to the spiritual dialectic of the esoteric (*batin*) and the exoteric (*zahir*), alcohol may become licit (*halal*) when drunk by those whose *nefs* has been tamed (Elias 2020).

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