

MATERIAL CULTURE OF UZBEKS AND TAJIKS IN AFGHANISTAN: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF TRADITIONAL FOODS

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ABSTRACT	KEYWORDS
This article provides an ethnographic analysis of traditional foods that occupy an important place in the material culture of Uzbeks and Tajiks living in Afghanistan. The study is based on field research and oral sources and examines the regional and cultural characteristics of such dishes as osh (pilaf), shurpa, tandoor-based dishes, dough-based foods, and various types of bread. In addition, the role of food in social life, its connection with hospitality, rituals, and everyday practices is explored. The findings demonstrate that the traditional foods of Uzbeks and Tajiks in Afghanistan represent a significant cultural heritage reflecting their lifestyle and ethnic identity.	Afghanistan, Uzbeks, Tajiks, material culture, traditional foods, osh (pilaf), shurpa, tandoor dishes, types of bread.

Introduction

The concept of food manifests in various aspects of human life—language, customs, traditions, and culture. One of the means of presenting this inseparable part of culture is literature, where analyzing the studied culture of cuisine certainly requires an interdisciplinary approach.

Certain national dishes dominate the tables of Afghan Uzbeks, particularly osh (pilaf) and soups. In addition to these, there are dishes such as shirbirinj (a thick dish made by boiling rice in milk), moshova (made with mung beans), mastava, moshkichiri, shavla, dalda (a dish prepared by boiling and mixing wheat, corn, and chickpeas), qurutova (a dish where pieces of flatbread are placed on a plate, topped with qurut dissolved in hot water, then mixed with melted butter over heat), keskan osh (a liquid dish made by cutting dough into pieces resembling lagman and boiling them in water), birinjova (a liquid dish made by boiling rice in water), du piyoza (a thick dish prepared by first frying onions and then adding meat), and batta (a liquid dish made by boiling rice in water, crushing qurut, and pouring it over the rice) [1].

Results and Discussion

Meat – In Afghanistan, meat is relatively inexpensive; with the money for one kilogram of meat in our country, you can buy two kilograms there. For this reason, meat is mainly consumed fried, cooked in a tandoor or smoke as kebab (shashlik), and boiled.

The tandoor process involves slaughtering a sheep and dividing it into four parts. A fire is lit in the tandoor, and the embers are gathered in the center. Hardwoods like pistachio or similar types of wood are used as fuel. The meat is threaded onto skewers and hung inside the tandoor. To enhance the flavor, “boyimjoni rumiy” is also hung alongside the meat. Then the tandoor is sealed, and its top is covered with clay to prevent smoke from escaping. After half an hour to forty minutes, the meat is taken out, cut into portions, and served.

The preparation of the tandoor is very similar to how tandoor meat is cooked in our country. In this method, pieces of beef, horse, sheep, or goat meat are cut from the fleshy part, placed inside the heated tandoor, and covered in a bread-like shape. Once cooked, it is taken out and consumed.

Fish tandoor – Large fish are selected, the head and tail are removed, and the intestines are cleaned. The fish is then split from head to tail. After removing the central thick bone, the fish meat is shaped into a bread-like form and cooked in the tandoor.

In the mountainous regions of Badakhshan Province and the Farhor areas, deer and partridges are hunted, and their meat is prepared in the above-mentioned styles, either as kebab or tandoor [2].

Kabili (Osh, Pilaf) – Made with rice, meat, sesame, flaxseed or cottonseed oil, red raisins, cumin, and carrots (in some regions, carrots are also called zarjama or kashir). Some rice-based osh dishes are called sofi or chalav, in which carrots or raisins are not added. The meat for chalav is cooked separately by simmering in oil and water, then served alongside the chalav in separate dishes. Afghan and Pakistani rice is typically used to prepare pilaf and similar dishes. Pilaf may also be eaten with fried okra, eggplant, pumpkin, or potatoes [13].

Dolma – Bell peppers or tomatoes are filled with finely chopped meat and onions mixed with rice, then placed in broth and boiled [3].

Manti – Prepared in the Uzbek style. It belongs to the category of dough-based dishes. The dough is rolled out and cut into rectangular shapes. They resemble a five-finger shape. Meat, beans, tomatoes, onions, potatoes, and okra are fried separately and added on top of the dish.

Tuppa – The dough is kneaded, rolled out, and cut into thick strips resembling lagman, wider and larger than keskanosh. This dish belongs to the category of liquid dishes; the dough pieces are boiled in water and eaten with yogurt.

Birinjova – Rice is boiled in water with onions and tomatoes, then strained into deep dishes or bowls and eaten with yogurt.

Kochi – Dough is kneaded with fingers into small round shapes, fried in heated oil with onions and tomatoes, then boiled with additional water. After cooking, it is strained into serving dishes. This is also considered a poor man’s meal [4].

Keskan Osh – In some regions, it is also called oshi buri. The dough is skillfully cut into long thin strips. Onions and tomatoes are first fried in oil, water is added, and once boiling, the thinly cut dough is added. Depending on the family’s means, in some cases, meat is finely chopped, mixed with onions, shaped into round balls, and added to the boiling pot to cook together with the dough. This type of meat is called kufta meat. However, in many cases, Keskan Osh is prepared without meat [5].

Shorva (Soup):

Osma-boiled soup – Water is poured into a pot, raw meat is washed and added. When it is half-cooked, onions, tomatoes, and potatoes are added and boiled until done. The soup is then strained into bowls for consumption.

Fried soup – Oil is heated in a pot, meat, onions, potatoes, and tomatoes are added and fried well. Then water is poured in, and the mixture is boiled until cooked.

Black soup – Meatless soup, considered a poor person's meal. Onions are fried in oil, tomatoes are fried, water is added, boiled, and consumed [6].

Atala – Oil is heated in a pot, flour is added and fried. Then water and salt are added and boiled. In some cases, black carrots are also added. Atala is mainly consumed by women who have recently given birth; this dish helps strengthen the waist and aids the body's recovery.

Pirinni – A thicker version of Atala. Walnut flour is fried first, then milk is used instead of water, and sugar is added. Additionally, coloring and aromatic flavoring (hil) used in pastries are also added [6].

Halva – Prepared in the style of Atala, with sugar added. It is firmer in consistency. Holvaytar – Also prepared in the Atala style, but more water is added compared to Halva, making it more liquid [7].

For Eastern peoples, including Uzbeks, life without tea is unimaginable, and similarly, green tea holds an important place in the daily diet of Afghan communities. Like us, they do not drink tea together with meals; instead, they pay attention to a certain interval between eating and drinking tea to aid digestion. When a guest arrives at the household before lunch or dinner, they are seated in the guest room in the courtyard, and tea and sweets are brought to them in lidded glasses and a thermos without laying out a tablecloth. About half an hour before the main meal, the tea and sweets are cleared away. During the meal, a tablecloth is spread in the center, and the guest is mainly served Osh (pilaf). Non-tea drinks or yogurt drinks (ayran) may also be served in hot seasons. This custom is observed in most Eastern countries, including Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan. While we cannot imagine lunch or dinner without tea, in Afghanistan, immigrant Uzbeks—descendants of Uzbeks who migrated from this region during the revolutionary years—tend to drink more tea than local Uzbeks. They themselves admit: “If we do not drink tea to the fullest, we cannot get anything done” [7].

The culinary traditions of Tajiks in Afghanistan are an integral part of their cultural heritage and lifestyle. These dishes are usually prepared using natural products, meat, grains such as wheat, and various aromatic spices. The most famous national dishes of Afghan Tajiks are presented below, with the main national dish being Osh (pilaf). It is one of the most popular and ancient dishes for Tajiks. It is made from wheat or rice, minced meat, carrots, and onions. In some places, zirvaq (a mixture of onions and meat prepared before frying the rice) is made separately. Qavurdoq is a national dish fried with meat, onions, and various spices; some people add potatoes and garlic. Shorbo (brothy meat soup) is prepared with meat and vegetables (potatoes, carrots, onions, tomatoes). In winter months, hot Shorbo is considered very beneficial for the nerves and body. Manta – Large steamed dumplings in the Bukhari style, filled with meat. The dough is sealed around the meat filling and cooked in a special pot (qazon or mantapar). Ashak – Dumplings stuffed with vegetables or meatless fillings; thick yogurt or meat sauce is poured over them [8].

Bread and Dough-Based Dishes – Traditional Tajik bread in Afghanistan (tandir non) is baked in a tandoor. Sesame or black sesame is sprinkled on top. Fatir and qatlama are made from buttery dough. They are either fried or baked in a tandoor and are usually eaten with tea or honey [9].

Among meat and dough dishes, the most commonly prepared are Sambo'sa (Samsa), dough pastries filled with meat or potato. Afghan Tajiks sell these on the streets during the summer. Chalpak and Choshpira are dough dishes filled with meat or vegetables, similar to dumplings, often served with oil or churek on top [9].

From fruits and sweets, the sacred halva is made from wheat oil and sugar, traditionally prepared for holidays and weddings. Shirkora or sugar-based sweets are made using natural fruit sugars, juices, and dried fruits [6].

Spices and flavorings play an important role: cumin, turmeric, pepper, and aromatic herbs are widely used in pilaf, shorbo, and qavurdoq [10].

The cuisine of Tajiks in Afghanistan is not only tasty but also a symbol of hospitality. They take pride in serving their national dishes at weddings, holidays, and outings.

Afghan Tajiks have a long-standing tradition of bread-making, with various types of tasty and shaped bread forming an essential part of daily and festive meals. These breads are mostly baked in a tandoor, each with its unique name, shape, and taste.

The tandir bread (noni tandriy) is the most famous and widespread type of bread, usually curly in shape, sprinkled with sesame or black sesame, and baked against the tandoor walls, consumed as part of daily meals [11].

Fatir bread (Fatiri ravg'aniy) is made from buttery dough, layered and either fried dry or with a little oil. It is relatively soft and delicious, typically eaten with tea.

Qatlama bread (Qatlam) is a layered, buttery bread prepared mainly for peaceful occasions and holidays. The dough is folded multiple times with a thin layer of oil between layers. It is fried and can be either salty or sweet.

Rog'ani bread is widespread, made with plenty of oil in the dough. It is rich, soft, and festive, prepared for weddings and celebrations.

Kamcha bread (Noni kamchagiy) is a stuffed bread commonly eaten, filled with meat, vegetables, or cheese, fried or baked in a tandoor. Sometimes it contains fillings similar to manta or samsa.

Onion bread (Noni piyoziy) is made by adding finely chopped onions, cumin, pepper, and a little salt to the dough. It is fried and eaten with hot tea during winter or cold days.

Egg bread (Noni tuxmdorni) is prepared by adding eggs to the dough. It usually has a sweet taste and is favored by children and young people [12].

Water bread (Noni suv) is a simple, dry bread made from water and flour, sometimes mixed with salt. It should be noted that each tribe or clan values its own unique types of bread. Afghan Tajiks consider bread sacred—if it falls to the ground, it is always picked up. Bread-making is usually done by women, and in some regions, it is considered a specialized craft [13].

Conclusion

The traditional dishes of Uzbeks and Tajiks living in Afghanistan constitute an important component of their material culture, closely linked over centuries to historical experience, natural conditions, and social life. Research findings indicate that widely consumed dishes in the region—Osh (pilaf), Shorva (soups), dough-based foods, tandoor-cooked meals, and various types of bread—serve not only as daily sustenance but also as a significant cultural phenomenon reflecting hospitality, ceremonial practices, and communal relationships.

Based on field records presented in the article, it was found that while there are common features in the cooking methods of Uzbeks and Tajiks, there are also regional and ethnic specificities. The prevalence of meat and dough-based dishes, the diversity of tandoor-cooked foods, and the variety of bread types reflect these peoples' economic activities, living conditions, and traditional lifestyle.

Moreover, the culture of tea drinking and table-setting practices demonstrates an important aspect of social interactions and the customs of honoring guests.

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