Cuisine Culture and Table Manners in XIX. Century Nestorian Society

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Abstract
Nestorian society bears great similarities to surrounding cultures in terms of cuisine culture and table manners in the 19th century. Hospitality is one of the most striking customs among these. On the other hand, it is noteworthy to cite it’s extraordinary resemblance to Islamic cultures in terms of the apprehensions such as prohibition of pork and that only meat of the animal which is cut from the throat letting blood is permissible. It is understood that economic conditions and means of living overrule in the formation of the named culture because main ingredients of the foods consist of grain and products of animal origin. Among these products, dairy has an overriding importance and it is clear that it has an outstanding place in 19th century table manner as a prevailing component.

Keywords: table manner, cuisine culture, nestorian, 19th century, livestock

1. Introduction
While considering both History of religions in general and History of Christianity in particular, it is seen that Nestorianism represents an unusual sample of an authentic view that turned into a sect. Its establishment as a sect and its historical experiences have become an interesting research subject as a different interpretation of Christianity. There has been an increase on the number of studies related to the issue in Turkey. This should be noted as an important development because it eliminates incompleteness of studies made about the minorities who lived hundreds of years in this region. This study deals with funeral, burial and inheritance procession among Nestori community who lived on the border regions of Ottoman-Iranian States in the 19th century. But the fact that there is shortage of written resources related to the burial issue and that the present resources are not directly connected to the issue cause some questions remain unanswered.

2. Nestorian Name and A Short Look Into Their History Until 19th Century
Nestori is the name given to Christians who settled down in Anatolia and northern Iran. This name was given to them since they believed and supported Constantinople’s Patrick Nestor’s views during the controversial religious discussions started with Ephesus Council in 431. Nestorianism, which came into existence as a sect in the first quarter of the fifth century, caused the greatest shock in the Christian world, followed by doctrines of Arius. Because after discussions of Iznik Council in 325 and Constantinople Council in 381 in which the doctrines of Arius were rejected, the trinity belief was grounded and the deity of Jesus Christ was accepted officially, the discussions were inevitably focused on personality of Virgin Mary. The phrase Theotokos (Mother of God) was used for Mary to glorify her during discussions. A monk named Anastasius, who was a friend of Constantinople Bishop Nastoryus, alleged that that view was sacrilege during a sermon. And he recommended that the phrase Hristokos (Mother of Christ) be used. Meanwhile Nastoryus supported his view. This situation caused a new discussion that shook Christian Church and Roman Empire. Nastoryus explained his view that would later be called as diofizit in those remarks: “Christ has two features and two essences. Mary gave birth to a pure human who had no links with deity. After Christ was baptized at the age of 30, God’s revelations were sent down to him. For this reason Mary cannot be called Theotokos, she is not mother of God. She is mother of Christ only.” Ephesus Council was held again upon the request of the emperor in 431-449. In these councils, it was agreed that Christ had the same essence of God and he was associated with God. Thus, Nastoryus’ views were rejected and the view that Mary was Thetokos was officially accepted. However, this development paved the way for the first big separation in Antakya Church, which was kept under the control of Suryanis. Nestor supporters, who were discharged during discussions started in Church, continued their activities in Urfa. Then after they were banished into Iran by Emperor Zenon, they carried on their activities here. Contentions between Eastern Church and Western Church, struggle for hegemony were important factors in these pressures. And they wanted to dissolve Nastur Church, giving diofizit view as an excuse. However, after Babay II. who was appointed as patriarch in 498 and whose patriarchate was approved by Iranian Emperor, the new sect which would later be called Nestorianism started to complete itself as an establishment. Thus Antakya Suryani Church was devided into two: Suryani Kadin/Yakubi Church which represented monofizit view and Eastern Assyria/Nasturi Church which represented diofizit view.
Even though, they were exposed to pressures in Iran, for they built their own independent churches (Nestorians or Nestorianism) and clergymen. Caliphs were tolerant of Christians. The bishop of Nestorians Adiabene states that Muslims are not as unfair as it is thought, that they are not indifferent to Christians, that they show respect for the clergy, and that they protect their churches. In this era when Emevis kept Mesopotamia under their rule, Nestorians were appointed as civil servants to important government agencies. For example, Saint Jean Damascene’s father Isnasyus/Sergius was the most important administrator held responsible for financial affairs in the time of Abdulmelik. During this period, Nestorians presented ancient Greek works to the service of Arabs by translating them. Thus, they prevented them from being lost. Huneyn bin Ishak was one of the Nestorians who was in the forefront of the translation effort. Nestorians, who benefited from freedom provided by Arabs, started missionary activities in Central Asia and Turkey.

Abraham Yohannan states ‘The clergymen who did not like working completely freely during the reign of Arab Caliphs, did better jobs among pagans in the unreclaimed regions of the east.’ Nestorians who benefited from freedom made great success in missionary activities in the 7th century in Turkey, they found lots of followers, especially in Semerkant, Buhara, Virkent, Migri and Talas. Also they built a metropolitan in Kaškar. Nestorian missionaries conveyed messages of Christianity among Tatars, Kerait, Ongur and Uygur tribes. And they played important role in converting into Christianity Mongol-Tatar tribe who lived south of China. After converting into Christianity, the leader of this tribe started to call himself ‘Prester John.’

This man was continuously remembered in subsequent years as an important proof for missionary activities in Central Asia. Nestorians reached not only Central Asia but also they went to China and India to help Christianity be spread and they became prominent representatives. Fort his reason, it is known that churches were built in China on behalf of Christian clergymen. Nestorians welcomed the invasion of Islamic countries by Mongols who appeared on the stage of History in the 13th century. They took Mongolians’ side in the war against Muslims under the hegemony of whom they lived hundreds of years. Since Hülâgu’s wife converted into Christianity and protected Christians, Mongols were very tolerant of Nestorians and treated them kindly. In this era Ilhans/Mongols were assigned as envoys in relations with Europeans. Nestorians built lots of churches and schools by getting the permission and help of one of the Mongolian rulers Abaka Han. Relationships between Nestorians and Mongols had already started during their missionary activities in Central Asia before Mongols appeared on the stage of History. Lots of Mongolian princess converted into Christianity thanks to Nestorians’ missionary activities.

In spite of their missionary activities and efforts for persuasions, Mongolian emperors never accepted Christianity and did not completely embrace Nestorian belief. For this reason Mongols did not hesitate to put pressure and treat Nestorians with brutality even if they once took their side in the war against Muslims.

Nestorians who narrowly escaped from Mongol’s recent pressure and violent policies were a bit harmed by the invasion and destruction of the Timur army in 1398. In subsequent to Timur’s reign, in order to continue their existence, they resided in the high mountainous areas of Hakkari under the hegemony of the Ottoman Empire. In addition to this development, another group of Nestorians stayed in Urmiyeh within the boundaries of Iran. They lived in the territories of the Ottoman and Iranian States. Nestorians led a life in two different ways. Those who lived with their moslem neighbours in Hakkari-Van, Amediye, Behdinan regions which were parts of the Ottoman territory led a nomadic life. Those who lived on the productive agricultural lands in northern Iran led a settled life.

3. Table Manners

According to traditions of patriarchal Nestorian society, housefather as the head of the family used to have the dinner firstly. In the meantime housewife would stand by so as to serve, then would take the rest of the food downstairs of the house and have it with children. In 19th century Nestorian society tabacco, if it exists, used to be served to the guest firstly. Then at the dinner time generally a board table was laid down in the middle of the room and on it was a large dinning tray put with the dishes in various plates and clays and some bread for everyone. These breads special to Urmiye district were approximately one footpace length, half footpace width, slim and brown. If an ecclesiastic such as a clergymen or monk existed among the guests, before the dinner everybody would expect the meal to be blessed by him. According to table manners’ rules, the guest used to sit on the first place and host would sit a lower place due to the respect towards the guest. In the course of dinner, if existed, son of the host would not attend the dinner and wait upon for the guest. If the cross-sitters ate from the dishes of each other, that meant mutual amity and respect. Custom of using fork and knife was firstly introduced by missionaries and foreigners’ arrival in 19th century.
Thus far, fingers had been used for the foods eaten in pieces. According to Heazell, an English missionary, Nestorian spoons used to be as large as the European dipper. By that reason, especially foreigners had to be careful in order not to dump the juicy meals on their clothes and beards. while the meal’s juice was drunk by means of spoon, the meal in the plate was broken into pieces; firstly the bread and then the meat was eaten in turn. Ecclesiastics were barred from eating meat due to the diet concept. Guest of the host could not refuse the gift because it would be seen by host as insulting and hostile. However, he could leave an object or some money more valuable than the gift presented by the host seen to have limited financial facilities. After dinner it was a common habit to drink coffee while smoking cigarette and pipe by the guest and host. However this was seen among more affluent Nestorians. After meal, guests prayed and thanked to householder for being hosted while leaving house. Generally, there was a big similarity between food culture of Nestorians and that of their muslim neighbors. 

4. Drinks At Meals Culture Etiquette

Alcohol consumption was quite common in nestorian community. They used to recess drinking alcohol only for the religious abstinence. Some of the produced grapes were used in winemaking. With the simplest expression, wine used to be produced from fermentation of grape juice. By compressing new crops in crop machinery, juice was removed from crops’ sediments; and this grape juice was put in pots their mouths covered with wooden lids. After this process the pots around and bodies were covered with mud. The entire period of fermentation of grape juice was completed over a month and wine was ready for consumption. Because especially the white and purple grapes were preffered in wine making process generally two kinds were produced as white and red wines. Red wine usually in winter, white wine was usually consumed in the spring. Because this wine could not be preserved in a good way, it would be vinegar or go bad at the end of the year. Therefore it needed to be consumed before the spring.

The missionaries found Nestorian wine production technology low and also found the product quality quite poor. Nevertheless some of this wine was consumed by themselves and they would sell the rest secretly to their muslim neighbours in Urmia. Another sort of drink that nestorians also consumed widely was raki in the nature of national drink which used to be consumed with small liquor glasses. Their relatives particularly living in Iran territory, thanks to the grapes they obtained abundantly from the vineyards of Urmia’s fertile land, produced a lot of wines and other drinks at low cost and consumed in very large quantities up to the priests. Thus wine and raki were consumed in a banquet held by Urmia’s bishop Purple Gavriel in honor of British missionaries. These drinks would be consumed with various foods and fruits in honor of their fathers and their health. Their consumption of so much alcohol was often resented by the protestant missionaries.

5. Banned Products

Consumption of certain foods in Nestorian public was not tolerated by society and punished those who eat. For instance, in spite of the wild boars abundant life in XIX. Century Eastern Anatolian Region, Nestorians would not eat pork except for some members of Thuma tribe. Their choice quite puzzled the Europeans and missionaries came to this area. This situation was stated in the words of British missionary, Wigram, as ‘Wild boars were quite common in the lower slopes covered with forests. However, for hunters to shoot the pig must firstly convince himself. Because of the strong aversion against pig and pork products, a lady belonging to Tyari tribe began to afaired by thinking her children would start to eat pork in Otoman army and had to stated that she would not tolerate such a mistake when she heard Chiristians would be written into the army. Wigram tried to explain this approach either their living together with their Muslim neighbours or their keping alive the ancient laws of Levi. The negative feeling among the Nestorians against pig and pork products even led them to accusation and disdaining of Armenians consuming pork. The other animal whose meat was not eaten was rabbit. In this sense, while some people from Thuma tribe were learning about outside world through British missionaries, they were quite suprised to learn about frog eating habit of French people and stated that they would tolerate none of the tribe’s member eating frog meat and they would be forced to kill him. In addition, the meat of turtles, crustaceans seafoods such as lobsters, mussels and predators such as woodpeckers were not consumed. Cattle, sheep and poultry animals such as chicken always had to be cut from throat in order to be eaten. They would not eat the meat of the chickens killed by squeezing the throat like their Chiristian brothers in Europe. As shown, their understanding in this matter shows a great similarity especially with islamic Hanafi comment.

6. Grain Products Consumed in the Nestorians

Among the agricultural products consumed by Nestorians in 19th century, wheat, rice, corn, barley, rye and bean were outstanding. The majority of these products, because of the expediancy of the landscape, were obtained from the locations outside of where they live in exchange for dairy products and live animals.
In this context, because the agricultural area of Lizan village in which Zap river pass through was limited to grow wheat, the villager would go to nearest market Amediye and here get the wheat which was luxury for them in return honey and butter they brought with them. But here was a secondary market and especially members of Cilo and Tyari tribes would sell their products in trade centers Mosul and Revanduz and return their houses after meeting the needs for the winter.. Crops such as potatoes, Indian corn and bean would constitute the other parts of Nestorian food culture. All these cultivated cereals were also used in making bread. However The rice, without a significant place among manufactured products, would be grown in the area between Amediye and Bervari. In Nestorian society ensuring their livelihood from livestock productions, production and consumption of milk and dairy products were in an important place. Women would immediately make yogurt and butter from the milk obtained from goats, sheep and cattle. Yogurt was also used in the manufacture of various food types and consumed as dewi/buttermilk.

On the other hand, the prevalence of it’s consumption reflected to the proverb as ‘Nobody says that her/his buttermilk is sour.’ It is interesting that the same expression is involved in Turkish proverbs. The word ‘dewi’, except for buttermilk (a drink made of yogurt) was also used for the buttermilk soup cooked by mixing boiled wheat with yogurt and was one of the the major soups of Nestorian society. The Nestorians of Urmia region would prefer buffalo milk for making butter due to its abundance and eat this especially with honey according to the style stated in their sacred book. Then, cheese production was most prevalent among the Nestorians dealing with sheep farming in Hakkarı mountains and they would take the cheese from here to the brothers and sisters in Urmia region. Production began in the early days of summer. After getting the milk sour in order to obtain cheese, the cheese was crumbled, salt was added and attended by various plants as condiment. Following this process the cheese was pressed into a jar or pot and buried into the soil to be used in winter after closing the mouth carefully. These cheese was taken out and eaten mostly in the middle of winter months.

7. Types of Food

Among the main foods consumed by nestorian, “harissa/harrissa”, a kind of dish made of pounded meat and wheat, which was prepared by boiling meat and wheat until their extracts were mixed had an important place. This dish flavored with various spices such as cumin used to be served with plentiful oil on it. Besides, a braised meat meal “kiptes” prepared by flavoring the cubed meat with various spices in a bowl was very popular among the Nestorians in 19th century. In addition various pickles made from lots of ingredients were served by the side of some dishes. As an example, the pickles served during the banquet given in March Gauriel’s house, consisted red pepper, cabbage, sliced onion and celery. The dishes called as “Garis” made up of millet in butter and “Danuk” a different version of “Garis” consisting wheat had important places among the dishes prepared by Nestorians in Hakkari.

In the preparation of this meal millet or wheat was boiled and it was served in a cup with plenty of butter to guests. Nestorians lived in Urmia used to make and eat a bread baked in a very thin sheets (bread dough), various garnitures, vegetables and cheeses, yogurt, purple, pink and saffron-colored persian rice for the dinner. They also made orange rice cooking the mixture of raisin, almond, orange peel, various spices, butter and onion. In addition, depending on the season they made various wraps from the leaves of cabbage in winters and leaves of grape in summers. This dish prepared from the ingredients such as rice, onion and so on was called as “dolma” by Nestorians in Urmia. Scrambled eggs, boliled eggs and dishes prepared from the vegetables such as spinach, potatoes and cabbage kept important places among the other parts of food culture. Nestorians had an other dish called as “acolsumsha” which we have not determined it’s Turkish name yet, used to be served to the high level guests. Bishop of Urmia, Purple Gavriel had also served this meal to British missionaries.

In the eve of winter, Nestorians used to make roasted meet cutting fat and oily sheep in order to meet the need of meat for winter. After this process, they pressed the meat into the jars and closed the mouths of jars with melted butter. By this process they provided a natural way to preserve the meat through the winter. One of the important meet product is fish. Fishing has been done rivers and stream at their regions. Nestorians, especially in the mountains of Hakkarı, used to make meals of the herbs gathered from the mountains of their region when they lost their sheep or were lack of food due to long winters, and above all during the months of spring. Some of these herbs were cooked, some were peeled and eaten as raw and some of the rest was taken to Mosul and sold there. The fruits and roots of the herbs called as “goatee” and “carob” were eaten. One of the basic food of poor Nestorians in Urmia was musk melons since it was matured quickly and cheap until the end of summer.
8. Bread in Nestorians

Nestorians usually used the wheat in bread making. Poor Nestorians however, made the bread mixing the grains such as millet, corn cob powder and wheat due to the lack of wheat. Furthermore, in hakkari region where the land was not suitable for wheat and barley production bread sometimes was made of millet.

9. Conclusion

In XIX. Century Nestorian community meals used to be eaten at a table placed on the ground and everyone seated according to specific status ate from the same pot. Priority was given to men at the table. Since the food and materials consumed entirely depended on economic conditions, Nestorians occasionally had to feed with herbs. The use of table cutlery was a custom introduced by especially missionaries and foreigners got contact with Nestorians. In this respect, it is obvious that great importance has to be given to honor the guests. The custom of having coffee and cigarette after dinner was continued during this century. Customs such as sitting at ground table and eating with fingers from the same plates give to Nestorians a typical image of Middle Eastern people. On the other hand, the great similarities between Islamic culture and the customs such as restraining of pork and cutting the throat of animals by streaming the blood by all means also draw attention on the investigation as a matter of value.

Notes


8. James Cowles Prichard, Research in to Physical History of Mankind, Vol.IV., (London 1844), pp. 289, 298, 334; Gordon Latham, The Native Races of The Russia Empire, (London 1854), p.281; Journal of A Deputation Sent to The East by The Comittee of The Malta Protestan College, in 1849, pp. 706, 707-709; L. Ligeti, Bilinmeyen Iç Asya c.II, Sadettin Karatay, I.Baskı, M.E.B Yay., (İstanbul 1970), pp. 149-170; Abraham Yohannan, op.cit., p.70. Nestorians have a legend about Karait’s tribe converting into Christianity. According to Yohannan” II.King of Karayat who lived in the northeastern of Turkistan lost his way in the high mountains of his country. A Saint appeared in front of him when he was completely desperate and lost hopes of living. The Saint said: ‘If you believe in Jesus Christ, I will help you find your way.’ The king promised that he would take refuge in Christ and he was directed to an open place. When he arrived in his camp, he called for a few Christian merchants and received knowledge about Christianity. The merchants told him that he had to be baptized. They gave him The Bible. He wanted one of the saints to baptize him wanted a ceremony to be held”.


10. John Francis Davis, The Chinese; A General Description Of That Empire And Its Inhabitants; With The History of Foreign Intercourse Down to The Events Which Produced The Dissolution Vol.I, London 1857, pp. 2-3; Hollis Read, The Hand Of God in History; Or, Divine Providence Historically Illustrated In The Extension And Establishment Of Christianity, Published by Huntington, (Hartford, 1849), pp. 355-356.
32. W.A.Wigram-Edgar T.A.Wigram, İnsanlığın Beşilli Kürtistan'da Yaşam, Çev. Ibrahim Bingöl, Avesta Yayınları, I.Baskı (İstanbul 2004), pp.343-344. Thuma tribe members used to hunt wild boar occasionally and they both eat this meat and do unpleasant jokes putting this meat in front of their Muslim guest disguising it’s origin. See same work.
34. Asahal Grant, op.cit., p.70.
42. George Percy Badger, op.cit. vol.1., p.199.
56. F.I. I., “An Episcopal Dinner” pp. 24-27. Lunch was called as “Kawitha” among the Nestorians. see. A Day Work At The Sisters’s School”, pp.34-35
57. Frederick G. Coan, op.cit., p.125.
64. Austen Henry Layard, op.cit., pp.132-133.