

Review

The importance of wheat in teething celebration in Turkish culture

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Food is utterly essential to human existence and has an important role to play in social and cultural events as well. The study of food and eating has a long history in social sciences, specifically in folklore and anthropology, beginning in the nineteenth century. This article concentrates on a particular food, wheat and examines its significance in the Turkish culture. Since wheat has both cultural and social aspects in the Turkish culture, the study mainly focuses on the ritual called *diş buğdayı* or *diş hedigi*, thus, “teething ceremony”, an important biological development of a baby in the Turkish culture. It deals with how the wheat meal is prepared or presented; how the ritual is performed and celebrated; and what functions of the event in the Turkish culture are.

Key words: Wheat, tooth, teething, ritual, Turkish tradition.

INTRODUCTION

Food culture is an important research area within the discipline of folklife. The earliest studies about food culture concentrated mostly on tribal societies and were conducted by cultural anthropologists at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Those studies primarily focused on the significance of food in primitive rituals. To give an example, in his 1964 book *The Raw and The Cooked*, the anthropologist French Lévi-Strauss explored natural and cultural relationships on the culinary level. He furthermore maintained that culinary rites are not inborn but rather acquired phenomena (Lévi-Strauss, 1975, 586-595).¹ Moreover, in the early twentieth century, Freud investigated psychosexual aspects of consumption.

The vital role of food in folklore was first been recognized by European folklorists at the end of 19th century with the resulting folklife concentration. Today, however, studies on food are still limited and neglected by folklorists. Folklorists have touched food matters at a superficial level and mainly as “collectors” of miscellaneous recipes in collaboration with other researchers in different fields such as historians, home economists.²

Food culture or as Honigman's (1961) term “foodways”, which is the trend in food lore today, carry extra meanings compared to the term “food”.³ Don Yoder uses the term “folk cookery”, he defines it as “traditional domestic cookery marked by regional variation”. It stands “for the total cookery complex, including attitudes, taboos, and meal system- the whole range of cookery and food habits in a society” (Yoder, 1972, 325). Foodways are fine examples for one to understand cultural and historical values extricably intertwined in a society.

Turkish folklore scholarship has not focused on food from a folkloric perspective since no books on traditional Turkish food culture have been produced. The book *Yemek Kitabı* deals with how the old Turkish sources give us concrete information about the Turkish food tradition, such as *Divan-ü Lügati't -Türk* and *Kutadgu Bilig*. It also focuses on food and its relations with folklore, history and literature (Koz, 2002).

However, there are abundant incomprehensive studies in that field that studies on food culture have focused on a particular cuisine, ingredients as well as aspects of the production, preparation and consumption of specific foods.

¹ Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *The Raw and the Cooked*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1975.

² The similar statement is also made by Don Yoder for American folklorists. Yoder, Don. 1972. “Folk Cookery”, in *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, 326.

³ John, J.Honigman, *Foodways in A Muskeg Community: An Anthropological Report on the Attawapiskat Indians* (Ottawa, 1961), it is a model North American ethnography of food habits, based on fieldwork in a Canadian Indian community.

Moreover, every society uses food as a ritual even though it may not often be so obvious to understand its function in a ritual context. Food is used in daily practices, occasions, festivals and celebrations in every society as a ritual. The role of food, particularly in ritual and celebrations is still largely overlooked in the Turkish culture.

The current paper deals with a Turkish celebration which evolves around specific food, wheat, and its ritual context. The goal of the paper is to present and examine the Turkish “teething ceremony” called *diş buğdayı*, *diş bulguru* or *diş hediği* which is an important traditional Turkish celebration for a baby’s development.

Furthermore, this paper deals with the studies about wheat and its significance in ceremonial contexts in the Turkish culture. Even though Turkish folklorists have provided us with some information about teething as a tradition, there is not a single comprehensive study done on this subject. Information about it one draws from studies by Turkish folklorists that relate to birth traditions and beliefs.⁴ Even though such studies do provide an important arena for covering the subject and inspire food studies, they do not give enough information about the tradition and its ritual aspects, in particular.

In this study, we have done personal interviews with women migrated to the city Balıkesir, located in the northwest part of Turkey. The interviews took place in a local bazaar called *Hanımeli* where women sell their handmade materials and regional foods. After interviewing a total of 70 women, we have realized that the women from different regions of Turkey reflect their cultural values, specifically on teething tradition. The women who are married with children and have experienced teething ceremony have shared their knowledge and experiences about this tradition in their lives. By taking folkloric approach, this study aims to explore the importance of wheat in teething celebration and the functions of the event in the Turkish culture.

The historical and cultural aspect of wheat

As the most consumed grain in the world, wheat has been known all over the world since antiquity. It may challenge only with rice but it is definitely one of the few dominant and important food grains in the Turkish culture. Wheat is proudly accepted at the homes and in the lives of the Turkish people because wheat is the

ingredient for flour that is essential for making bread, a valuable, basic, daily dietary meal for the whole Turkish nation. According to Turks, it symbolizes human existence and “human battle with life” as expressed in the Turkish proverb *ekmek kavgası*. Home in Turkish *yuva* representing the emotional meaning of the house gains meaning with existence of bread because as “foods, more than any other material item, evoke memories, feelings and identities that are both vast and individual” (Thursby, 2008, 164). The man of the home goes for bread to make a living for his family. It is always hard to gain bread because the man of the home has to “take his bread from stones” “*ekmeğini taştan çıkarmak*” the common Turkish proverb. Sometimes it is really hard to “earn the bread” “*ekmeğini kazanmak*”, another Turkish proverb because “the bread is in the mouth of lion” “*ekmek aslanın ağzında*” as it is described in the other common Turkish proverb.

Bread, in fact, is equal to salt that both have been important elements in the Turkish culture and Turkish folk literature. The proverb “*tuz ekmek hakkı*” which is translated as “the right of salt and bread” in Turkish symbolizes “the debt of fidelity.” The proverb is a “rich cliché that includes friendship, fidelity, sincerity, hospitality, chivalry, loyalty, honesty in the history of Turkish literature and folklore (Elçin, 1981, 74). Both bread and salt unite the Turkish people. The great Anatolian philosopher and the father of the Mevlevi sect Mevlana Celaladdin Rumi expresses “Did he not share bread and salt with us? Every hostility must have its cause; otherwise, our shared humanity would call for faithfulness in friendship”. Moreover, Rumi describes a journey that begins with death and ends in Love:

“Buried in the earth, a kernel of wheat is transformed into tall stalks of grain. Crushed in the mill, its value increases and it becomes bread, invigorating to the soul. Ground in the teeth, it becomes spirit, mind, and the understanding of reason; Lost in Love, that spirit delights the sowers after the sowing”.

Like salt and bread, wheat holds a significant value in the history of Turkish culture. The prominent Turkish history and culture scholar, Bahaeddin Ögel, mentions that wheat had always been grown among Turkish tribes who lived in harsh climate conditions in Middle East (Ögel, 1978, 158). Eberhard (1996), a folklore scholar, reports the importance of wheat and other grain crops in the lives of Turkish people in the past in a work entitled *Çin’in Şimal Komşuları*. This book inspired younger generation of Turkish folklore scholars. The study published in 2008, documented that, during the 1989 excavations, samples of wheat dated back to c.1759 B.C. were found at Karahöyük, a Hittite settlement in the city of Konya today. The study proceeds further and examines the cuneiform texts and the context in which wheat is used, so as to gather information about it and its general significance for that age (Erkut, 2008: 1-4).

⁴ There are many folklorists who collected material about this tradition from different regions in Turkey. The tradition is usually included in birth traditions and celebrations. For example, Kadriye Ilgaz in her article named “İstanbul’da Doğum ve Çocukla ilgili Âdetler ve İnanmalar” talks about traditions and practices related birth in İstanbul. She includes her work teeth cutting ceremony that does not give much information. Another study focusing on birth traditions are done by Adil Özder titled “Doğum ve Çocuk Üstüne Gelenekler, İnançlar” The study focuses on birth, customs and beliefs about children. Mustafa Aça in his book “Balıkesir Yöresi Doğum Sonrası İnanış ve Uygulamalar” talk about traditions and rituals related with birth in Balıkesir.

Furthermore, in the afore-mentioned work, it is stated that wheat developed from a type of wild grass native to the arid lands of Asia Minor. It is believed that "cultivation of wheat is thought to have originated in the Euphrates Valley as early as 10,000 B.C., making it one of the world's oldest cereal crops. In the Mediterranean region, centuries before recorded history, wheat was an important food. Since wheat played a dominant role in the Roman Empire, the nation was often referred to as a "Wheat Empire" at that time.⁵ As within Greek antiquity, bread was an essential food, a wide variety of breads was available. The article which deals with the importance of bread and bread making in Greece states that the tradition of bread making by paying respect to bread as a major part of every meal continued into Hellenistic and Byzantine times. It sustained even during the period of the Ottoman occupation which lasted for approximately 400 hundred years (1453-1821).⁶

Even though wheat has always been an essential food in the history of Turkish culture, it is hard to trace back the origins of its ritual context. Studies on birth traditions and related celebrations have included it but only on a very superficial level.⁷ Thus, there has not been any exclusive study on the "teething" tradition and particularly its ritual context. A paper written by an undergraduate student deals with some ritual aspects of that but is mostly an account of possible sources (Gurbuz, 1995).⁸

Tooth wheat

In the Turkish culture when a child gets its first tooth, is an occasion for joy and excitement, especially for mothers. The food made of boiled, hulled wheat plays an important role toward the accomplishment of this event. Both the food and the ceremony are commonly named similarly: *diş buğdayı* or *diş hedîği* (tooth wheat).⁹ *Diş* means tooth and *wheat* means *buğday* in Turkish. *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.¹⁰ The favorite soup, the traditional Anatolian winter soup, called *tarhana*, which has variations from one region to another, is usually made with *bulgur* or wheat seed (*dövme*) in most regions in Turkey.¹¹ A detailed description of the preparations of *tarhana* in Greece is well described by Valamoti and Anastasaki (2007, 75-100).

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. The anonymous lines following 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."

Preparation and presentation

The preparation of the meal is a tiring task but definitely a joyful one. The mother of the baby is usually the one who prepares the meal with the help of her friends or relatives. The women who have a strong role and are the only authority in the Turkish kitchen, prepare the meal for guests. Since the occasion is an important event to be shared with others, the meal requires to be cooked in a big stewpot or even a cauldron. The main ingredient of the meal is the wheat which has to be boiled and remain a bit hard but not entirely cooed. The rest of the ingredients may be differentiated according to the traditions followed by the people living in different regions in Turkey as well as their personal tastes.

"Tooth wheat", *diş hedîği* is generally of two types, salty, and sweet, if granulated sugar is added to it (Figures 1 and 2). Apart from the wheat, other common ingredients are chickpeas and the dry beans. They are also boiled with wheat in the same stewpot. After they are cooked, they are drained and ready to be decorated.

The decoration of the wheat requires a *sini*, thus, a big, flat circular tray with no edges. The meal is garnished with nuts, grains, raisings, grapes, walnuts, pomegranate seeds and candies. Everything blends with the boiled wheat. The popular Turkish delight in various flavors may also be used for decorating the meal.

The visual presentation of the meal is important as Turkish women work on composing images and symbols

⁵ This information is retrieved from (http://www.ngfa.org/trygrains_wheat.asp).

⁶ Dr. Maria Hnaraki in her article "Baked Realities: Big Fat Greek Breads" talks about the significance of bread and bread making throughout the history of the Greek.

⁷ For example the study titled "*Silvan'da Diş Hedîği*" by Mustafa Tatçı focuses on teeth cutting ceremony in a small district named Silvan in the city Diyarbakır, located eastern Turkey.

⁸ Gürbüz, Elif. 1995. "Diş Hedîği Geleneginin Ritüel Karakteri ve Fonksiyonları. *Milli Folklor*, cilt 4, sayı 28, Kış.

⁹ Sedat Veyis Örnek in his study *Geleneksel Kültürümüzde Çocuk*, (Child in Traditional Culture) lists the name of the tradition used in different regions in Turkey: *buğday dirlimesi* (Denizli/Acıpayam), *dirgit dökme* (Isparta), *diş aşu* (Burdur/Tefenni), *diş dilgiti* (Antalya/Serik), *diş dirgiti* (Antalya/Serik) *diş tohumu* (Çanakkale), *duzlama* (Afyon), *diş göllesi* (Ankara, Afyon, Isparta), *hedik dişi* (Van/Gürpınar), *dişemiş* (Konya/Karaman), *diş edi* (Ankara), *diş günü* (Tekirdağ/Sandıklı).

¹⁰ A detailed account of making *bulgur* is given Bayram M. (2000, 81-82).

¹¹ The history of *tarhana* is not well-known; however I know a story about where *tarhana* comes from. Many centuries ago, when the Sultan was guest at a poor peasant house, there was only one thing that the house of wife could offer to the Sultan. The wife boiled up the soup quickly and she was embarrassed and said this is a "*dar hane*" which means "poor house" and eventually the soup became "*tarhana*" soup.



Figure 1. An example of *diş buğdayı*. (The photo is from Meltem Ekin's blog. <http://idilsuozdemir.blogcu.com>).



Figure 2. An example of *diş buğdayı* with candies and sweet nuts. (The photo is from a "tooth wheat" ceremony in December, 2008).

that will impress the eye. The next step is to place various objects which symbolize different occupations at the edges of a tray. Such items may be scissors, mirrors, pencils, books, moneys, combs, watches, gold, rulers or even the holy book of the Quran (*Kuran-ı Kerim*). Bread is considered as sacred in the Turkish culture that is also oftentimes placed in the tray during the celebration.

In the Turkish culture, there are objects and herbs which bring fortune and happiness. People believe that they have powers to be protected from evil. Those objects include garlic, evil eye and the herb *peganum harmala* known *üzerlik otu* (*nazar otu*) or "herbal evil" in Turkish. The "tooth wheat" plate, surrounded by all the selected objects, is placed in the middle of the tray. The

mother of the baby throws a piece of cloth and makes sit the baby sit on it. The baby may also put in a similar type of tray. In some regions it is common to have the baby sit on a prayer rug.

Ritual and celebration

The information that the bay has gotten the first teeth is so important that it has to be celebrated with relatives and friends by inviting them home. The sources talking about this celebration do not give information about gender of the guests. However, all of the women interviewed stated that the celebration of teething has been taking place among only females today. In fact, the celebration is similar to “*gün*” day or *kabul günü*, a very common party all over Turkey among the Turkish women today. In this specific day, Turkish women do not only gossip but also eat various foods prepared, such as cakes, croissants and pies. They a great deal of time, effort and money to prepare the party. One of the most common foods prepared on that day is called *kısır* which is a kind of *bulgur* (boiled and pounded wheat). As a kind of salad, *kısır* tastes like tabuleh. Thus, eating food with either wheat or *bulgur* is necessary for socializing and celebration for the Turkish women.

In the ceremony “tooth wheat”, there are number of traditional practices which take place in order to ensure the celebratory atmosphere. Usually, the oldest or the most popular guest initiates the ceremony. The baby, on its best clothes, may be covered by a piece of cloth, a scarf or a veil. A verse that reads like the “baby shall have teeth like wheat” is recited by the honorable guest who is taking piece of wheat on her palm, and who then throws it on top of the baby. I believe that throwing wheat is related with the old Turkish religion Shamanism. Every tribe had its own sacred objects to sacrifice God in Shamanism. For example, milk, butter and “*kımız*” (horse milk) were considered sacred among the nomadic Turks, whereas wheat, grain and corn were considered sacred among the farmer Turkish tribes (Gomec, 1998).¹²

Furthermore, throwing wheat on top of the baby recalls the wedding customs in Turkey. In Shamanism the ritual is called *saçı* which is to sacrifice wheat, grain and corn to God, is the same word used for throwing grains and nuts from the head of the bride for fertility. It also means gifts and money given to the bride by relatives and neighbors (Örnek, 1995, 1979). Grains such as wheat and rice are thrown over the newlyweds in the hopes that the couple would be prosperous.

At the “tooth wheat” celebration, occasionally, a small

¹² Saadetin Gömeç states that there are two types of sacrificial ceremonies held in Shamanism.

The first is to serve or donate living or bloody animals to God. People usually served horse. The second type of ceremony is related with non-living objects. One of the ceremonies with objects is called *saçı* meaning the most sacred and valuable earned by tribes (Gömeç, Saadetin. 1998. “Şamanizm ve Eski Türk Dini”, *Pamukkale Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi Dergisi*, sayı 4, 44.

portion of wheat may be placed in the baby’s mouth. The Turkish women believe that putting wheat on the gums of the baby will make it feel better. The baby, who goes through lots of pain while teething, physical and emotional, as it was trying to chew the wheat. The women think that the wheat helps to soothe the baby’s pain. Wheat thus functions as a type herb. I think the healing issue of wheat needs to be examined further and determined its place and importance in folk medicine.

Piece of wheat, usually seven in number, are placed to the left of the baby’s head, looking like a necklace. That “necklace” is kept till it dries out and then given to birds. People “make birds happy”, Özer quotes (1935, 15), as a Turkish belief wants the baby to love nature in the future. The ceremony goes on. The mother props the baby up on the table or on the floor. The objects placed on the edges of the tray are now placed in front of the baby (Figure 3). Whatever the objects the baby picks up from the tray it is believed they predict what occupation the baby will practice. For example, if the baby picks up scissors, it means that it will become a tailor; if it takes the ruler, it will become an engineer; if baby takes mirror, it will have happiness and richness; if the bread is picked, the baby will take care of the family; if the holy book is picked, the baby will have belief in God and religion in general. Thus, the objects not only symbolize what occupation the baby will have but also what kind of a person it will be in the future. Most of the time baby is baffled and confused that it may end up picking up nothing.

After the ceremony, time comes for the meal to be consumed. The teething baby gets excited to taste the meal with his “new tooth” (Figure 4). All the guests taste the meal with some other food prepared especially for the occasion such as cakes, salads, croissants, *dolma*(s) made of grape leaves stuffed with cooked rice, lamb, and onion. The *dolma* is marinated with olive oil and lemon. The famous dessert *baklava*, which is made with phyllo dough, nuts, butter, and sugar, is also prepared for this important occasion. One of the guests who must have healthy teeth takes the first piece of the wheat so as to taste the meal: this way the baby will similarly acquire strong teeth.

The leftovers are placed in small plates, prepared in the same way in big trays, and in order to be distributed to neighbors and friends who are not present at the ceremony: the more “tooth wheat” is distributed, the healthier teeth the baby will have. Giving the remaining food to people is important in the Turkish culture, especially the ones who are not wealthy. It is a way for the Turkish society to balance inequality and make everyone feel secure as a member of the society. It brings to people solidarity.

The mystic number “seven” defines the minimum number of neighbors to distribute the meal. The rule is not to wash the empty plates otherwise the baby will acquire carious teeth. Usually neighbors do not return the plates empty but place a small baby gift on them. The one day



Figure 3. The objects such as scissors, pencil, money, knife comb are put on a tray for the baby to pick of one of those. They are used for divinatory purpose for baby's future occupations and identities (The photo is from Meltem Ekin's blog. <http://idilsuozdemir.blogcu.com>).



Figure 4. Teething baby is ready to taste his *diş buğdayı* (The photo is from a "tooth wheat" ceremony in December, 2008).

ceremony and the celebration end by congratulating mother and the baby. The guests deliver good wishes and present gifts to the baby before they depart.

Function and future

The appearance of the first tooth is obvious sign for the biological development of a baby. The "tooth wheat" ritual

and celebration wish to reassurance this development. Its purpose is to confirm a baby of good breeding, underline the importance of fertility to the community, and wish the baby good health and progress. The ritual blesses the baby and assigns it good health and fortune. It emphasizes the concern for the future well-being of a child. Like the wheat, which boils in the pan and needs only a short period of time to get ready, similarly the baby's teeth will appear and grow fast: the meal will

confirm that the baby's teeth will painlessly and healthy grow.

The "wheat and teeth" Turkish rite embodies cultural values that have been at the core of the Turkish food culture. The objects used at the ceremony are important means to understand these values. The objects used for divinatory purpose reflect not only the viewpoints of Turkish people about their own culture but also their worldviews. They give insights to what is accepted and is considered important in human life.

Apart from the ceremony and festivity, the relationship between wheat and tooth underline the importance of tradition in Turkish daily life. Furthermore, wheat considered sacred in Turkish culture has symbolic meaning related with first tooth. It symbolizes continuity of life. Wheat which is being ground, pounded and milled is considered a metaphorical food. It is the first food for humans, thus, it is important in human life because it is first food to be processed. Wheat will be processed into other foods and human life will flourish. All in all, wheat symbolizes human life.

Wheat also stands for fertility in the Turkish culture. When cooked and then consumed, it will help the gums open and allow the teeth to come out and thus prepare the food process, an essential matter for survival. Thus, the appearance of the first food functions like a piece of wheat and symbolizes human life. As wheat multiplies and improves human life, similarly the first food will also assist the human being flourish. Without teeth, human beings can not process (food) and thus cannot evolve. All in all, the first tooth growth is a symbolization of human life ready to start processing food and, therefore, life.

The ritual is not only a way to bless the food but also life, because the baby is accepted as an individual as well as a valid member of a family. The celebration and the ceremony initiate the baby's socialization process. The traditions followed show how significant it is to have a baby and thus underline the whole notion of family in the Turkish culture. They are also about blessing the baby and its family as well as understanding the importance of sharing such occasion with friends and relatives.

Since teething celebration is a way of honoring the baby as an individual, it plays a very significant role in the Turkish culture today. Even though every region has its own variations in teething ceremony, people still ascribe great appreciation and keep the same meanings about the tradition in the society. However, change is an important term to be discussed on this tradition that there are some concepts has been altering in the society today. It is stated that the celebration has become a party center on gift-giving and has been hosted by a close friend or a neighbor rather than the woman who has a first teething baby. Hosting by a friend or a neighbor and becoming gift

giving party, the teething celebration conjures up the tradition of baby shower, a party given women friends of somebody who is pregnant and popular all around the world, such as in the United States, China and India. Whether hosted by a friend or the woman who has a first teething baby, the celebration has become a costly event nowadays because addition to the main food, the women prepare various foods for the event, just like the very common party, "*gün*" day or *kabul günü*" among the Turkish women nowadays. In addition, similar to a baby shower, there is another transition of opening the gifts during the celebration rather than after all the guests leave the house since opening the gifts in front of the guests was considered as rude in the Turkish culture in the past.

In short, Turkish people attribute great value to wheat and its usage is tied to rites and passages of human life such as wedding as well as social activities and cultural activities. "Tooth wheat", as a type of food celebration and symbolizing human progress in life, represents socio-cultural and religious identity of the Turkish people.

It stands for love and charity in the Turkish culture and carries many significant values, such as family, solidarity, friendship, fidelity, sincerity, hospitality, chivalry, honesty. Thus, it seems that as a tradition it continues to be cherished.

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