

Original article

Food as a marker for economy and part of identity: traditional vegetal food of Yezidis and Kurds in Armenia

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ABSTRACT

Background: The traditional food of the Yezidis and Kurds of Armenia has some particularities and differences compared with the traditional cuisine of Armenians.

Methods: Ethnobotanical data collected during fieldworks in 2013–2015 in Armenia via interviews, direct observations and sampling of used plants for identification of species.

Results: Traditional dishes of Yezidis and Kurds are simple. They are mostly made from or contain as a main component lamb and milk products (sometimes beef and chicken, but never pork). The main vegetal components of their traditional food are represented by cultivated cereals, grains, and herbs of wild plants. Edible plants gathered from the wild are used primarily for nutritional purposes, for flavoring prepared meals and milk products, and for tea.

Discussion: We correlate these distinctions with the transhumant pastoral lifestyle of the Yezidi and Kurdish people.

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1. Introduction

The largest ethnic minority of Armenia is *Kurmanji* (a language of northern Kurds) speaking people who confess Yezidism (or Sharfadin) [1–4]. The majority of these people call themselves Yezidi and believe that Yezidi is an ethnic group, while some of them call themselves Kurds and argue that Yezidism is just a religion¹. In Armenia, Yezidis live mainly in the region of Mount Aragats and in the Ararat Valley, a territory which falls into four administrative regions (*marzes* in Armenian): Aragatsotn, Armavir, Ararat, and Kotayk². Yezidis of Armenia, primarily descendants of refugees from the eastern parts of the Ottoman Empire, keep their memories about forced migration with their Armenian fellow villagers in the first quarter of the 20th century in the oral traditions through family stories. The lesser part of this population, mostly living in the

foothills and highland plains of the northern part of Mount Aragats (territories administratively included in the Aragats and Talin regions of Aragatsotn *marz*), are descendants of earlier migrants who came there in several waves throughout the last 2 centuries [1,5].

Yezidis and Kurds of Armenia are typically settled in rural or suburban areas, which are largely preconditioned by their economic activity [5–7]. Until recent decades the main occupation of Yezidis and Kurds in Armenia was sheep breeding [8]; other forms of agriculture including plant breeding were small scale and not obligatory [7]. Present public opinion as well as professional and media circles see Yezidis as “nomadic pastoralists”, devoid of any relation with plants. However, the ethnobotanical studies carried out in 2013–2015 suggest that the aforementioned opinion is rather a stereotype. Currently, many Yezidi families, primarily those living in the Ararat Valley, do not practice animal breeding or do it on a small scale. Regarding plant gathering, in fact, Yezidis and Kurds can be characterized by distinct gathering traditions along with associated culinary and folk medicine practices.

2. Materials and methods

This is documentative and descriptive work predominately aimed at uncovering the vegetal component of Armenian Yezidi and Kurdish people’s traditional food, which has remained generally in the shadows in scientific literature until now.

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¹ The ethnic identity of these people with identical ancestry, language, religion, and household culture is complicated and will not be discussed below as it is not issue of our current study. All *kurmanji* speaking people in Armenia accept Yezidi identification and there are no differences in traditional food.

² The results of the 2011 population census of the Republic of Armenia. National statistical service of RA. <http://armstat.am/file/doc/99486253.pdf> [cited 2015 Sep 20].

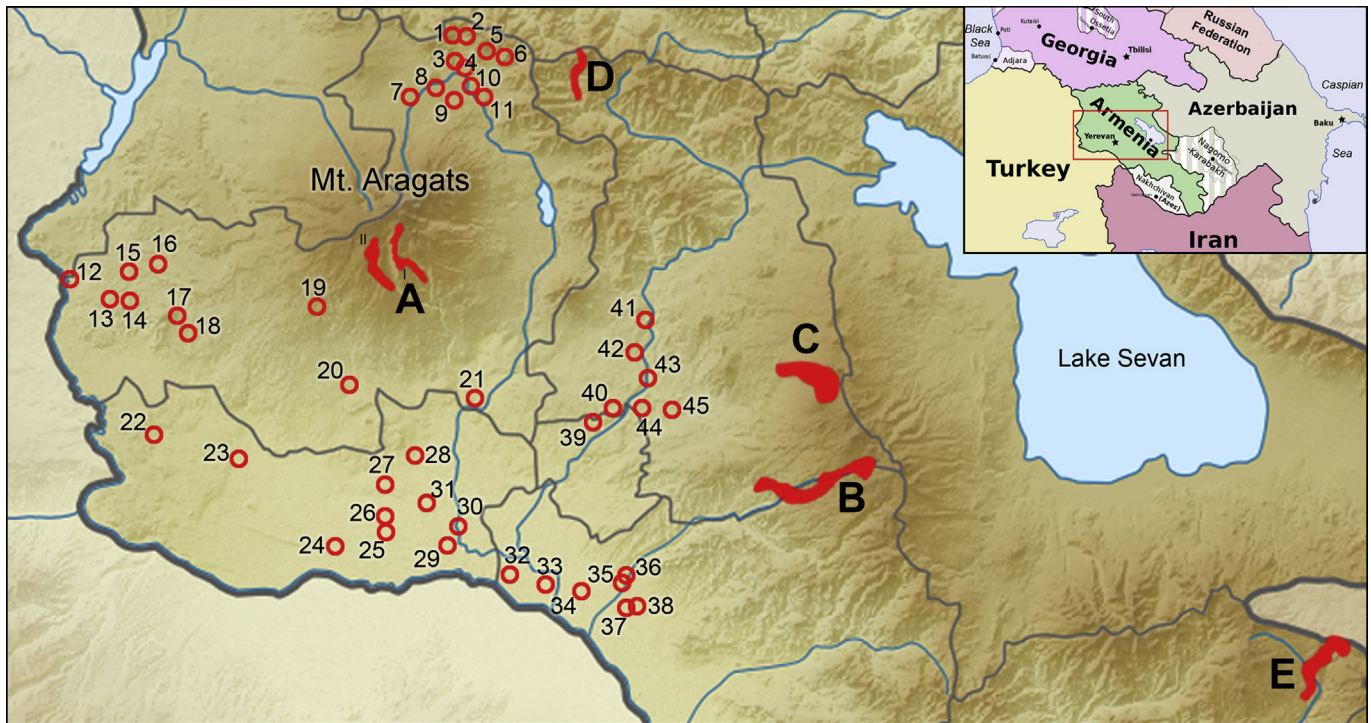


Fig. 1. Map showing studied settlements (circles with numbers) and areas with temporary pasture stations in the mountains (red colored with letters). Village 1: Sipan; 2: Avshen; 3: Jamshlu; 4: Alagyaz; 5: Charchakis (Derek); 6: Mijnatun (Ortachia); 7: Sadunts; 8: Kaniashir; 9: Shenkani; 10: Rya Taza; 11: Mirak; 12: Tlik; 13: Hakko; 14: Kanch (Gyalto); 15: Sorik; 16: Hatsashen (Sabunchi); 17: Arevut (Barozh); 18: Ddmasar (Ghapaghtapa); 19: Metsadzor (Avtola); 20: Shamiram; 21: Oshakan (Aragatsotn marz); 22: Shenik; 23: Myasnikian; 24: Tandzut; 25: Yeghegnut (Badal); 26: Zartok (Ghamshlu); 27: Aknalich; 28: Ferik; 29: Jrrarat; 30: Aknashen; 31: Aratashen (Armavir marz); 32: Ranchpar; 33: Noramarg; 34: Mkhchyan; 35: Mrganush; 36: Getazat; 37: Berdik; 38: Verin Artashat (Ararat marz); 39: Zovuni; 40: Kanakeravan; 41: Banavan; 42: Nor Geghi; 43: Arzni; 44: Balahovit; 45: Mayakovskiy (Kotayk marz). High mountainous temporary pastoral stations: A: Mount Aragats; B: Mount Ajdahak; C: Sevaberd; D: Hankavan; and E: Jermuk.

The primary data of the current study—information about traditional food—was collected via direct observations and oral histories recorded in interviews in more than 40 villages and approximately 20 high mountainous temporary pastoral stations (Fig. 1). Yezidi villages, Kurdish villages, and villages with mixed populations (with Armenians) were investigated: Banavan, Nor Geghi, Arzni, Mayakovskiy, Balahovit, Zovuni, Kanakeravan (Kotayk marz), Ranchpar, Noramarg, Mkhchyan, Verin Artashat, Berdik, Mrganush, Getazat (Ararat marz), Ferik, Aknalich, Aratashen, Aknashen, Tandzut, Zartok (Ghamshlu), Yeghegnut (Badal), Jrrarat, Shenik, Myasnikian (Armavir marz), Tlik, Arevut (Barozh), Ddmasar (Ghapaghtapa), Sorik, Hatsashen (Sabunchi), Metsadzor (Avtola), Kanch (Gyalto), Hakko, Shamiram, Oshakan, Mirak, Rya Taza, Charchakis (Derek), Alagyaz, Shenkani, Jamshlu, Sipan, Avshen, Mijnatun (Ortachia), Sadunts, Kaniashir (Aragatsotn marz), as well as high mountainous temporary pastoral stations of Mount Aragats, Mount Ajdahak, and surroundings of Sevaberd, Hankavan, and Jermuk (Fig. 1).

We used a semiquantitative method to describe types of gathered plants used for particular goals (Table 1). Plants gathered and used for dietary purposes were sampled and later identified [21] and stored (selected samples) in the herbarium of the Institute of Botany NAS, Armenia.

3. Results and discussion

Although for many Yezidis and Kurds animal breeding is no longer a primary occupation in Armenia³, animal products and food prepared using meat and milk products are still most preferred and

in higher demand⁴. Local Yezidis and Kurds from older generations often refer to the taste of cooked meat when they want to qualify other dishes. We connect these strong connections with animal food products with sheep breeding and the transhumant pastoral lifestyle which predominated among Yezidis and Kurds in Armenia [7].

Due to a seminomadic pastoral economy plant cultivation among the Yezidis and the Kurds was not diverse until recent decades and was often limited to the cultivation of cereals to satisfy only family needs [5,22,23]. Consequently the majority of traditional dishes prepared using cultivated plants are based on cereals [5]. Presently the plant cultivation practices of this “sun-worshipping” people closely replicate those of the Christians living in the same region, specifically the Armenians, and their food is very similar [9,10,24]. There are a few peculiarities in the traditional food of the Yezidis that stem from their beliefs and caste system (avoiding pork, cabbage, and some other products, see below) but these are not widespread.

According to our observations and interviews as well as notes in some publications [5,6,22], traditional dishes prepared and preferred by Yezidis and Kurds in Armenia can be grouped by main components and according to preference: meat, milk products, cereals/grains, and herbs. When grouped according to use, these foods are (from most used to least used): cereal products, milk products, herbs (depends from the season), and meat. Usually dishes are made from a combination of two or more components. Vegetable components are traditionally represented by cereals and wild herbs, occasionally adding grain pulses, and in recent years vegetables and fruit. Traditional vegetal components of food often

³ H. Melkumyan, R. Hovsepyan. On the Agriculture of Yezidis and Kurds in Soviet and Post-Soviet Armenia (in preparation).

⁴ T.F. Aristova [5] observed the same. She also wrote (p. 154) that meat and milk products are the main goods traded by Yezidis and Kurds in markets.

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