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Original Article

Traditional plant-based foods and beverages in Bahrain

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ABSTRACT

Traditional foods are an important part of Bahraini culture, identity, and heritage. The aim of this study was to document plant-based traditional foods and beverages consumed by local Bahrainis. Traditional knowledge of plants used as food and beverage was obtained through 76 personal interviews of knowledgeable informants using a semistructured questionnaire. A total of 52 common foods and beverages were reportedly documented by the respondents. Some traditional foods are not tied to specific seasons, but are consumed throughout the year, such as *harees*, *momowash*, *sambosa*, *halwa*, *assidah*, and *legaimaat* while others such as *madquq bisr*, *mattaai*, *khabees*, *gurs al-taabi*, and *khubez zinjibari* are common at family celebrations or other specific holidays. Boiling and frying are the most popular traditional cooking methods employed in Bahrain. To conclude, findings of this study could provide a knowledge basis for relating traditional food consumption and potential health status among Bahrainis.

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Q3 1. Introduction

Traditional foods are foods that were commonly consumed in ancient times by native people all over the world. As such, traditional foods and beverages derived from land and sea constitute an essential aspect of a country's cultural heritage, history, lifestyle, and local economy. These foods are accepted and highly consumed by the local populace for a long time, and the methods of preparation of such foods have been transmitted from generation to generation [1]. Moreover, traditional foods represent an important component of people's diet, health, and socioeconomic status. Traditional foods have been influenced by a number of factors, one of which is the availability of raw materials. In Arabian countries, for example, traditional foods in desert regions are more restricted to cereals, dates, and dairy products compared with villages where food resources are more diverse and plentiful [2].

The Kingdom of Bahrain is an archipelago of 33 low-lying islands, nestled between Saudi Arabia and Qatar in the south-western Arabian Gulf with a total area of 720 km². Owing to its strategic geographic location, Bahrain throughout its ancient and modern history has been a crossroads of different civilizations and cultures like Mesopotamia, Persian, and Indian. Since ancient times,

foodstuffs have contributed to the dynamic trade relations between Bahrain and its neighboring countries. As a result, the influence of these nations on all aspects of the local cuisine was significant. This is evident by the fact that several types of local dishes, food preparation methods, and particular food ingredients were incorporated and modified to suite the local Bahraini taste over many decades. The incorporation of spices and curry powder into the traditional local cuisine, for example, is an indicative of the influence of the Indian culture on food practices in Bahrain [3]. Indeed, the Bahraini traditional cuisine includes and reflects a collection of traditional foods and cultures from many different countries, such as India, Iraq, Iran, Egypt, and the Levant [4].

Archaeobotanical evidence from the early Dilmun period indicates that dates and their by-products, followed by cereals (mainly barley and wheat) were the major food items of the Bahraini diet [5]. Nowadays, cereals and legume-based foods, in addition to rice, which was introduced as a staple food, form an important part of the traditional diet of the local inhabitants. Bahraini society to this day embrace and preserve traditional foods and beverages, which are identified as being original, prepared from natural and fresh ingredients and characterized by their unique taste and excellent nutritional quality. The preparation of such foods is not only part of national tradition but it is a daily practice in most of the Bahraini households and is ritualistically performed according to Islamic values and Arab customs. Despite the addition of some modern touches and improvements, nonetheless, the names of these dishes and uniqueness remain

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unchanged [4]. Traditional meal patterns in Bahrain and other Arabian Gulf countries include three main meals and several in between snacks during the day. Breakfast is usually light consisting of white flat bread from the local traditional bakery, soft-boiled or hard-boiled egg, and tea with condensed milk. Chickpeas and broad beans are also popular breakfast foods. The midday meal is the main meal of the day for Bahrainis. Lunch is traditionally a big, hot meal consisting of polished rice and an animal-based protein, such as meat, chicken, or fish depending on local availability and economic status of households. The dinner consists of white bread, various legumes, and depending on the day of the week or the time of the year, might include grilled meat or chicken. Tea is usually served black shortly after the dinner meal. The eating habits of Bahrainis, like Arabs in general, include eating together, sharing foods, and having lively conversations over meals. The traditional style of eating is to sit on the floor around the *sufra*, which is a mat made from date palm leaves and used for serving food. Families of five or more members will share a pan and eat the food with their fingers except for the soup or stew. This tradition where families gather to eat, share stories, and enjoy each other's company has been followed for centuries.

During the past four decades, however, the rapid rate of urbanization and increased labor migration in Bahrain as well as other Arabian Gulf countries, fueled by oil revenues, has dramatically changed the lifestyle of the native inhabitants including their food consumption patterns [6]. This led to the replacement of traditional foods and beverages with energy-dense fast foods and soft drinks with high sugar content. The decrease in the use of traditional foods has been documented for the local inhabitants in Bahrain [7,8] and along with this change are concerns for loss of traditional knowledge and culture. This necessitates the urgent need to explore, analyze, and document traditional foods consumed by Bahrainis. These efforts can include creating additional food composition data for traditional foods [8] and protecting and promoting such foods as one of the most important elements of cultural expression, for instance, in form of organizing food fairs and festivals in addition to the spatial spread of restaurants serving traditional dishes in Bahrain. The purpose of the present study was, therefore, to document traditional plant-based foods and beverages commonly consumed in Bahrain and identify their uses. Such a knowledge base would help preserve traditional food practices and improve the health and nutritional well-being of the local community.

2. Materials and methods

The interviews were conducted regarding plants used as food and beverages among Bahraini people in the Kingdom of Bahrain. Interviewees who were locally recognized as well experienced, knowledgeable, and trustworthy source of information on traditional foods and beverages were selected with the help of elderly people, reputation, and by personnel communication.

The interviews using the questionnaire were conducted by random sampling due to the nature of the study. A total of 76 respondents were interviewed face-to-face using a written semi-structured questionnaire consisting of simple open-ended questions. Preliminary pretesting of the semistructured questionnaire was previously conducted on more than 10 key informants not included in the current study. Information was collected on different types of ethnic traditional local Bahraini plant-based foods and beverages commonly consumed by Bahraini people. The survey questions focused mainly on traditional knowledge of preparation, mode and frequency of consumption, plant source, sociocultural practice, and the ethnic value.

Since the aim of this study was to document the most commonly consumed foods and beverages among native Bahraini people, care was taken to exclude the influence of other country's cultures and traditions on foods and beverages among Bahrainis. Therefore, the accumulated data represent, as far as possible, the frequently used items native to Bahrainis.

None of the documented information was obtained from the literature or historical documents. Moreover, the informants were selected on the basis of vast knowledge in the indigenous Bahraini culture and heritage, especially which relates to plant uses in traditional Bahraini culture. The interviews were conducted in a local Arabic Bahraini dialect, and the answers were handwritten or recorded. All the questions presented were answered in a friendly manner. The respondent age, gender, experience, address, and place of living were also documented. The recorded plant species in the present study were at least stated by five or more informants to increase the consistency of the obtained data. In many instances, samples of the discussed plant were generously gifted by the respondents and/or photographed. The plants used as foods and beverages were visually identified and recorded.

3. Results and discussion

Of the 76 respondents, 40 were females and the remaining 36 were males. The majority of respondents were aged 60 and over (Fig. 1). The respondents in this study represented the four official governorates of the Kingdom of Bahrain, with the largest numbers residing in the Capital governorate followed by the Northern governorate (Fig. 2). This reflects the population distribution of the country where the population is mostly concentrated in the Capital and Northern governorates [9]. In addition, the majority of respondents were educated up to secondary school level (71.1%; $n = 54/76$) with the rest being illiterate. The respondents were mostly from rural areas, with the majority being retired (53.9%; $n = 54/76$). The focus on older people from rural areas in this study is justified by the fact that older individuals and people in villages tend to consume more traditional foods than younger individuals, who tend to adopt a more modernized lifestyle [10]. It is worthwhile to mention that small agricultural villages in Bahrain exist in close proximity to each other and as a result share many traditional and cultural similarities. Undoubtedly, people living in these areas continue to maintain the traditional food patterns and practices of their ancestors.

Historically, in Bahrain, dates, grains, and vegetables as well as a relatively small amount of meat have contributed greatly to the

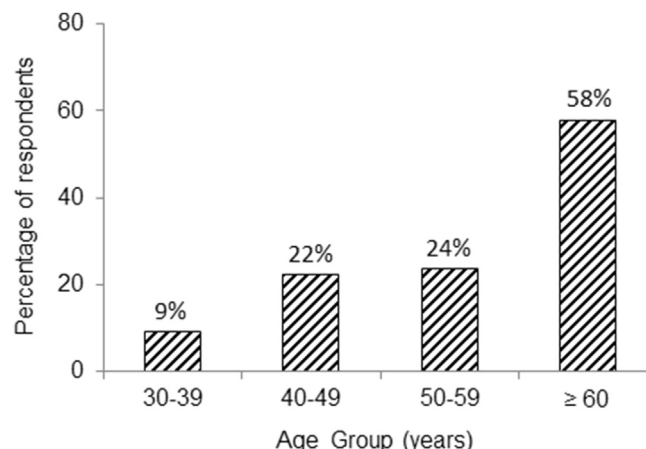


Fig. 1. Age group of respondents.

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