

# Food Memory and Food Identity of Educated People Migrating from Turkey for Work or Higher Education

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study aims to understand the food memory and food identity of a group who emigrated from Turkey to North Carolina for education or for work 30-40 years ago. For this purpose, one-to-one in-depth interviews were conducted with 14 persons, 12 women and 2 men living in North Carolina using the Zoom application. In the interviews, participants said that they are connected to their roots with their homeland's food, that is Turkish food. They had not given up on cooking and eating Turkish dishes. The memories they described are so to say proving food memory and food identity concepts which are searched in migration studies. These are sub-topics of food anthropology. Also, they have a real effort to serve Turkish food to their non-Turkish friends, neighbours and this effort seems to be an attempt to show their identity with their food. Besides, it can also be said that they were influenced by other cuisines and experienced a cultural diffusion.

## 1. Introduction

For different reasons the number of people emigrating abroad from Turkey is increasing every year. Especially after graduating from university, people go for master's and doctorate programs abroad and the number of them is very high. According to the data given by the official statistics institution of Turkey, while 177,960 people emigrated in 2016, this number increased to 330,289 in 2019. The highest number of emigrants is the 25-29 age group with 13.3% in 2019 (URL-2).

This study was conducted to understand the changes in the eating habits of people who emigrated from Turkey to North Carolina. This group was graduated from university in the 1980s, immigrated to the United States for education, and could not return to their own country for different reasons.

A migrant is broadly defined as a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons (URL-1). The total number of international migrants at mid-year is 280.6 million for 2021. Countries with the highest values worldwide are the United States of America, Germany, Saudi Arabia, and the Russian Federation (URL-3).

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Migration may lead to changes in lifestyle, habits, or social life. There is a study to understand the post-migration lifestyle and weight changes of migrant women recruited in Modena, Italy. They conducted a cross-sectional study among 97 female migrants. It was concluded that understanding immigrant women's culture, beliefs, and traditions of their country of origin, as well as food acculturation, improves the efficiency of women for the company (Casali et al., 2015). Another study made by Burn (2004), aimed to evaluate the eating habit changes of migrants from Somali to Australia. The results of the study indicated that Somali women largely maintained their own traditional diet in Australia, and they kept the eating patterns of their own culture (Burns, 2004).

These studies show that migrants are resistant to changing their eating habits. Migration includes psychological and sociological variables, such as identity. In the article on identity, Lugosi says that eating and drinking are universal to all cultures, but the beliefs and traditions related to food reflect the characteristics of cultures and the identities of the people (Lugosi, 2013). Migrants are in a continuous process of creating and recreating a continuity of the home they have left behind. Carrying food from home to the new home connects migrants to the homeland. Nyamnjoh's (2018) ethnographic research was explored how Cameroonian migrants living in Cape Town, South Africa maintain their gastronomic culture. According to this study memory and emotions are basic concepts to bring them together and ensure their solidarity with a material culture like food. Among migrants, collective cooking and sharing keep the memories alive.

Identity and memory have a strong effect on eating habits, but acculturation seems inevitable when migrations occur. Acculturation was first described by American anthropologists as the process of cultural changes when two different cultural groups are involved in contact. Accommodation, adaptation, and assimilation are the alternative terms used instead of acculturation depending on the conditions of migration (Gurieva & Kinunen, 2019). There are many different studies related to acculturation and mobility. The following study is related to the impact of sociocultural interaction of education tourists on their host communities. North Cyprus is a host community for a significant number of educated tourists. A focus group study of North Cyprus indigenes was made to understand the effect of educational tourists on their eating behavior and culture. As a result, local students and people working in related jobs with foreign students due to the influence of international students begin to change their eating habits and food consumption choices and begin to acculturate themselves to these foreign behaviors (Eluwole et al., 2020). This process, acculturation, is a complex, multidimensional, and dynamic process in which members of one cultural group adopt the behaviors of a different cultural group (San Mauro Martín et al., 2021).

## **2. Material and Methods**

In this qualitative study, one-to-one in-depth interviews were conducted with a total of 14 Turkish people, 12 women and 2 men who immigrated to North Carolina, on Zoom. All these interviews completed in 40 days each took at least 60 min. In the interviews, 11 people were people who immigrated 30-40 years ago, but 3 people were the children of these families in their 20s, born in the United States.

At the beginning of the interview the informed consent form read to the participants. The participants informed; this was an anthropological study, audio recordings would be taken during the interviews; their names would be coded, and they could withdraw from the study whenever they wanted. Ethical rules of the American Anthropological Association were followed in the study and all details were reported to the participants. The manuscript is original and not published elsewhere in any form or language. All the data are obtained from the

conversations made with participants. There are permissions of each participant for the use of audio records. Appropriate and relevant literature in support of the claims is cited.

In-depth interviews done, open-ended questions asked to inquire about their life stories. Their eating habits also included in these questions. The raw data obtained listened to again and again to catch the details. Then coding done to interpret these data. While coding, attention was been paid to the frequency of things told, the contents of the messages like positive or negative, and the symbols in messages. More than 30 terms as codes like communication, exclusion, foreign, or being proud recorded. After the coding, the categories created. These were more general topics like life in the North Carolina, the Turkish foods, world cuisine, longing, and self-explanatory efforts.

### **3. Results**

Migration includes individual's cultural transition (acculturation). This may involve changes in language, food habits and attitudes. All these require coping mechanisms against with the pressure exerted by the host society. In this study, these coping mechanisms, and food habit changes of people emigrating from Turkey to North Carolina were explored.

#### **3.1. Life in North Carolina**

Most of the participants or their husband/wife had graduated from universities in Turkey. All of them are successful people who went to the United States for education, when they completed their education, they continued to stay there with different reasons. Some because they received a very good job offer in the United States; some because they had children, and some because they could not provide the necessary conditions in Turkey despite their efforts.

Having gone to North Carolina with a scholarship 30 years ago, D.V. explained the reasons for staying there as follows:

I thought we'd be back when I finished my PhD. I was thinking that the culture is different, the people are different, the food is different, I cannot stay here. Five years, of course, we had our first child and then our second child, we stayed so they could learn English.

Having gone to the United States almost 40 years ago, B.L. explained the reasons for their stay as follows: We considered returning to Turkey but could not find a satisfactory job. It was difficult to return as the children grew up. Moreover, the political problems and tension did not end in Turkey either.

Most of the participants immigrated to the United States 30-40 years ago. It is understood from their stories that; when they first went, Turkey was less well known in the United States, spouses who did not speak English had difficulties in communication and had problems in finding the foods they were accustomed to. However, as time passed, the Turks in North Carolina lived almost like a colony; Turkish grocery stores opened, and they were not alien anymore. Speaking about their present conditions, B.R.:

Life is comfortable here. We already live like a colony, and we don't feel alone. In fact, I have never felt excluded. Everyone comes to the US from somewhere anyway, so no one treats anyone badly or excludes them.

This colony-like life seems meaningful for the second generation as well. Born in Florida in 1982, J.L. identified the children of Turkish family friends in North Carolina as "my cousins in North Carolina ". G.T., the mother of two children, described human relations in North Carolina as follows: Here, the relations are cooler, we cannot find warm relations such as

kinship and neighborliness here. Everyone lives a professional life. When they are done, they return home.

From the second generation, born in 1995, J.V. thinks alike. Since she studied at a university outside North Carolina and lived in other states, she has spoken more generally. According to her, concepts like helpfulness, respect for elders, and helping neighbors do not exist in the US. People are more nuclear in the US, there is no group feeling.

### 3.2. Turkish Foods

Turkish cuisine is a rich cuisine that comes from the cultural heritage and geography of Turkey. It is a mix of Ottoman Empire, Central Asian, Eastern European, and Middle Eastern cuisines.

In the interviews, many of the participants talked about different Turkish dishes, and they said they continued to cook and eat them. However, it is clear from the conversations that the rich Turkish breakfast is very important for everyone.

The Turkish word for breakfast is *kahvaltı*. It is derived from two words; *kahve* and *altı*, consecutively meaning 'coffee' and 'under.' It is the first meal in the morning before drinking the first coffee of the day. Breakfast is a significant part of Turks' daily life as a delicious meal. For breakfast there are certain food items; a variety of cheeses, meat products like *sucuk*, pastrami; raw vegetables like tomatoes, peppers, and cucumbers; fresh herbs like parsley, mint, dill, and rocket; butter, clotted cream, black and green olives, grape molasses and tahini mixture, a variety of jams, honey, and eggs cooked in various ways. A fresh pot of tea baked savory foods like bread, simit which is a kind of bagel, and different types of *börek*, always accompany breakfast (Özden, 2020).

Participants could not give up the breakfast, but they also introduced the Turkish breakfast to their non-Turkish guests and friends. For example, D.H., who did his undergraduate education in America 40 years ago, said that he felt good in America, but olives and cheese which are important part of the Turkish breakfast are still not missing in their breakfast. Another participant, B.L. described their breakfast habits as follows:

We can't have breakfast without cheese. When we first came 30 years ago, we used to go to a market 1.5 hours away and buy our feta cheese from there. Fortunately, now there are Turkish grocers, and we are finding it easier.

G.T.'s memories of breakfast are also alive today:

We were 4 siblings; Sunday breakfasts were very special for us. During these long breakfasts, my father would tell his memories, we had a lot of fun. Now I prepare breakfasts at big tables, and my American neighbors ask me for these breakfasts.

In another study made to see the food memory in different age groups in Turkey, the participants were asked about the meals they associated with their childhood; the 40-60 age group said soup and mantı (Durukan & Türker, 2021). Turkish *mantı*, a kind of ravioli, is prepared by adding a certain amount of minced meat to small pieces of dough. After boiling, it is served with garlic yogurt and oil with tomato paste. In this study, many of the participants said that they often prepare and consume mantı. Their children also love it but compare their mom's mantı with grandma's mantı and they say it's not as delicious as what they eat in Turkey.

Immigrated to North Carolina 40 years ago, B.L. said that she made mantı which is not as delicious as her mother's. However, her daughter said that when the mother made mantı, immediately feel in Turkey, around the big table, with her relatives. *Menemen*, an egg dish

prepared with butter, peppers, and tomatoes, is another Turkish dish that they continue to prepare and consume.

My father used to cook *menemen* when we were little. I also made it for my sons too. They cooked it for me when I went to their home. I liked it very much, I was very touched, I almost cried when they cooked first.

Apart from these, the participants said that they missed the meals prepared with offal, tripe soup, street foods, and ashura which is a dessert prepared with legumes and nuts. They said, they cook and consume most of these foods in the US.

### **3.3. World Cuisine**

World cuisine may be defined as an ancient process ongoing for millennia. World cuisine concept involves the use of plants and animals as food sources, foods, food ingredients, cooking techniques, traditions of different territories. As human mobility increased, the diffusion of this information may have accelerated, but it is obvious that each community has created its own cuisine. Therefore, there are different cuisines belonging to different cultures, countries.

Participants of this study seemed to consume their own country's foods but besides they also gave the names of other cuisines and foods during interviews. In fact, this is expected because after living abroad for 30-40 years, it is impossible not to be influenced by different cuisines.

B.L. who emigrated from Turkey 40 years ago said that: There are Mexicans, Indians and Chinese here. I also love their foods. D.Y., who has lived in North Carolina for 30 years explained that they mostly used spices and sauces: Here is something called sour cream that they use. We use it. We use sauces for pasta, but we use 85-90% Turkish spices. Having emigrated 34 years ago, E.F. explained that there could be all the world dishes on their tables: Sometimes there can be tacos, sushi, Indian spicy rice at the same time on the table. In fact, we also love the dishes of other cuisines.

D.H., who came to the United States after high school and started university in the United States in 1964, is also the founder of the Turkish-American Association in North Carolina. He explained that they mostly consume Turkish food, but he likes hamburgers: From American cuisine, I like hamburgers the most. Because it is flexible, you can put whatever you want in it.

60-year-old E.P. said that she loves tofu and Mexican food, but she no longer consumes donuts, waffles, and bagels, which are high calorie American foods. Engineer I.P., who emigrated from Turkey in 1981, said that she likes potato dishes and spices in America: When I go to Turkey, I prepare a southern (American) breakfast for my family. I put potatoes or something next to eggs. They like it.

G.T. gave a very good example of cultural diffusion:

When our American neighbors and friends come, I cook potato börek (pastry) for them, but I add their favorite flavors. I add things like Indian herbs and spices, and peas that are not found in the original recipe.

### **3.4. Effort**

It is realized that there is an effort of all participants to cook, consume and serve Turkish food to others; trying not to forget, trying to make others like it, trying to make their children like it, trying to introduce it to others. A few examples of what has been said about this effort could be; B.L. described her effort as follows: We are trying to connect with Turkey. The bond

established with food does not break. In addition, we have been trying hard for years to promote our dishes at international festivals. D.V. who made attempts to return to Turkey but could not do so, said:

Our effort to preserve our own culture is what enables us to survive here. Food is the most important part of our culture. When cooking in the kitchen, my daughter says, "It smells like Turkey in here.

DH, the founder of the Turkish-American Association in North Carolina,

We are trying to promote our cuisine. All nations have stands at international festivals. Every year there is a different theme. We'll go back there and make a *Burma* dessert. We want them to get to know the Turks with their positive aspects. We are proud as Turkish.

G.T. said that she feels very proud when they share a meal that belongs to them with foreigners and described her little memory with his father:

I was sitting on the balcony with my father. My American neighbor was coming towards us. My father said to get up and welcome her. I said never mind, they never get up to welcome. My father got angry with me and said, "This is your custom, if you lose your customs, you lose yourself." That's why we try not to lose our traditions. They are necessary to explain ourselves.

EP, who cares a lot about drinking tea with friends, said that she couldn't get used to paper or plastic plates and cups. She also said that she, like G.T., finds it very strange that people in North Carolina do not greet guests at the door.

My daughter asked me to cook Turkish food for her friends. I was also very attentive to the table setting. I showed them Turkish traditions and table. Thus, I said that we live in America, but we are Turkish, we are different.

JL, who was born in Florida, from the second generation, is trying to learn how to cook Turkish food:

I worry that if I don't learn how the food is made, it will disappear after me. That's why I want to write a cookbook and save the recipes. I think if it disappears, something that adds color to people's lives is lost.

Another participant is a new immigrant, N.P. who has been living in North Carolina for 5 years said that she understood the value of her country, Turkey, while explaining it to foreigners.

When I first came, I made halva and cookies and brought them to my neighbors. We have a saying in Turkey "let's eat sweet, talk sweet". I guess I always brought sweet food because of this saying. My intention was to introduce us to them, and to teach them Turkish cuisine.

#### **4. Discussion**

In this study, it was understood that Turkish food remained in the memory of people who emigrated from Turkey to North Carolina. Despite a long time has passed since they had left their country, these foods are a part of their identity. In the meantime, since they lived in a foreign country for many years, the food cultures are affected by different cultures; this is an obvious cultural diffusion.

Identity is the characteristics that a person defines himself/herself and distinguishes him/herself from others. Individuals or communities may not have a single identity. We can be recognized

with different identities in different contexts and introduce ourselves differently. In other words, it can be said that identity is our culturally constructed state.

In this study, we looked at the efforts of migrated people to preserve their cultures through their meals. This effort shows the power of food. Food culture, which is an important sub-branch of culture, seems to help people to preserve their identity. The participants said that they feel unique while cooking and eating Turkish meals. Food is a means for them to bond to their own culture, and the effort to preserve the food culture made them feel strong and kept them alive. In addition, while offering Turkish food to the people around them, there are efforts to explain and promote the Turkish identity and Turkey. Performance of the Turkish cuisine in festivals also seems crucial for them in informing Americans about the identities of Turkish immigrants in the United States.

Holtzman (2006), a cultural anthropologist working on food and memory, defines the term memory as the meaning in reference to the past. This definition includes events that subjects recall or emotionally reexperience; the unconscious memories of subjects, nostalgia for a real or imagined past. Food is a rich arena in which to explore the complexities of memory (Holtzman, 2006). The participants said that they returned to different time periods while cooking the dishes that remained in their memories and that they almost communicated with the elders of the family, even if they were deceased.

Mary Douglas, a British anthropologist, is known for her writings on symbolism and human culture, treats food as a code, and described the messages of foods in her article, *Deciphering a Meal*. According to her, codes can be used for sending messages. If food is accepted as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. Consuming food has social components, and foods, therefore, encode social events (Douglas, 1972). Describing the situation when they immigrated to North Carolina with their suitcases as "no house, no furniture", the participants explain that the only thing that symbolizes their hometown is local food. One of them said that Turkish food symbolizes the women in the family who keep all the recipes in mind. Levi-Strauss explains the human mind in detail and says that since "men communicate by means of symbols and signs," all cultural domains are "pregnant with meaning," and the anthropologist must work with meaning (Rossi, 1973).

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has three important theoretical concepts: cultural capital, cultural field, and habitus. He categorizes capital into four forms: economic capital, cultural capital, and symbolic capital. Cultural capital is gained mainly through an individual's initial learning and is unconsciously influenced by the surroundings. For example, the development of 'taste' depends, to a large extent, on family background. It is a concept that expresses the way in which individuals become themselves, develop attitudes and dispositions. Bourdieu's concept of habitus relates to the resource of knowledge. Knowledge is gained from a specific culture that an individual lives in (Huang, 2019).

In this study, the effective power of culture that is learned from the family is clearly seen. Table manners, breakfast tables, street foods consumed as a child were told by almost all the participants. It is seen that these strong memories affected their eating habits all their life. It can be concluded that foods are the main material for them to exist after the migration, to preserve their identity and not to feel far from their roots.

Therefore, as a result, it can be said that the effort not to remain rootless, which is mentioned in most of the migration studies, is also valid for this educated and high socio-economic group.

## 5. Conclusion

This study, which includes food anthropology and migration, is based on the eating habits of highly educated Turkish people in the USA, where they went to do their doctorate, as well as many migration studies. The concepts sought are memory of food and identity acquired through food. In addition to the studies involving forced migrations and migrations with job anxiety, this study shows that the concepts sought to be conducted with a highly educated group are not formed by education, but by information learned from the family. Therefore, it is hoped that this study will both contribute to the literature and show that food memory and food identity can be examined with different variables in future studies.

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## Electronic Resources

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