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## **Semiotics of traditional Kazakh food**

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### **Abstract**

In this article, the authors consider the symbolic aspects of one of the rituals of Kazakh food – the sybaga (share, portion), which is an important component of Kazakh household culture. The methodological basis was laid in the works of foreign researchers, as well as scientific works of Kazakhstani scientists. As a result, according to the custom, the hosts serve treatment in special dishes - tabak (tray). In conclusion, in modern conditions of standardization and unification of many cultural and everyday phenomena, the sphere of food prohibitions and priorities preserves the maximum number of ethnically significant features.

**Keywords:** Semiotics, Tradition, Kazakh food, Sybaga.

## Semiótica de la comida tradicional kazaja

### Resumen

En este artículo, los autores consideran los aspectos simbólicos de uno de los rituales de la comida kazaja: el sybaga (compartir, porción), que es un componente importante de la cultura doméstica kazaja. La base metodológica se estableció en los trabajos de investigadores extranjeros, así como en trabajos científicos de científicos kazajos. Como resultado, según la costumbre, los anfitriones sirven el tratamiento en platos especiales: tabak (bandeja). En conclusión, en las condiciones modernas de estandarización y unificación de muchos fenómenos culturales y cotidianos, el ámbito de las prohibiciones y prioridades alimentarias conserva el número máximo de características étnicamente significativas.

**Palabras clave:** Semiótica, Tradición, Comida Kazaja, Sybaga.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Until the present day in many parts of the world, food is invariably the main component of large and significant celebrations (weddings, anniversaries, birthday, New Year, etc.) and simple gatherings in a narrow circle of friends or family. Every single day is planned around food and everyday people plan breakfast, lunch and dinner. Even a date would be virtually unthinkable without any food component, which is associated with the ritual of courtship (ranging from popcorn, pizza and ice cream in theaters to exquisite dishes in fashionable restaurants) (DANESI, 2004). But the meaning of food is

much broader. Food is not only a means of subsistence, existence and survival of a human being. This is part of a sign system, filled with cultural-specific connotations. Food consumption is a very personal action. We communicate our beliefs, cultural and social experience to other people by means of our food. Thus, we symbolically advertise our identity through the choice of food and drink (CULTURE DECANTED, 2014).

The term is often used to refer to the system of connotations caused by food and its cuisine. Cuisine tells us what kind of food certain people eat, what and how they cook; thus it reveals the characteristics of their culture (DANESI, 2004). All cultures have a certain set of rituals and table manners, features of cooking, which are instilled from birth to members of the cultural community (DANESI, FOOD: SEMIOTICS, 2005). And the culture of the Kazakh people is not an exception.

Over the long history the Kazakh people, as the heir of the rich traditions of the Turkic peoples, developed an original ethnic culture, customs and traditions, an original cuisine. Kazakh cuisine is a part of the common culture of the people, which absorbed the features of the way of life, everyday behavior, conditioned by tribal relations, natural and geographical conditions. Like other nations, the Kazakhs created a diverse range of national dishes, more than 500 items, distinguished by a harmonious unity of color, smell and taste. Each dish has its own complex symbolism, which denotes the basic forms of relationships between people, tribal relations, traditions and customs, norms and

rules of people's behavior, complex cultural communication, aesthetic and ethical values of the Kazakh people (KOR ET AL., 2019).

## **2. METHODS**

Food as a part of the cultural-sign system is studied by anthropologists, sociologists, semioticians, culturologists and others, who reveal its different aspects. The work by Claude Levi-Strauss is a key reference to the analysis of food symbolism (STRAUSS, 1983). He defined that food can be understood as a language that expresses social structures and cultural systems. Barthes (BARTHES, 1997) argues that the need for food is the primary human need. This need is very structured. Substances, methods of cooking, habits - all this becomes part of the system of differences in meaning.

Thorstein Vablen (VEBLEN, 1902), Norbert Elias (Elias, 1994), Pierre Bourdieu (1984), Mary Douglas (DOUGLAS, 1972) singled out the symbolic meaning of food, which plays a significant role in determining social status, social class and power.

Sidney Mintz (MINTZ, 1996) showed that the symbolic values of food change with different cultural, ethnic and class considerations. WENYING XU (XU, 2007) believes that food is one of the ways to understand and interact with other cultures.

The aim of our research is to reveal the cultural importance and symbolic function of the traditional Kazakh food with the help of historical material, to show the semiotic feature of cooking a sybaga guest dish. Therefore, both foreign scholars' works (mentioned above) and domestic works are of special interest in terms of methodology for this study (KUNANBAEVA, 2008), (AKHMETOVA, 1993), (ARGYNBAYEV, 1959), (ZHUKOVSKAYA, 1979), (KATRAN, 2007).

Kazakh cuisine is a complex semiotic text, which presents not only the symbolism of space, conditioned by the nomadic way of life and signifying the specifics of structuring the boundless steppe spaces, but also the peculiarities of the communication of the steppe man.

The leading spatial image in traditional Kazakh culture is the infinite horizontal plane conventionally designated as steppe (SHAKENOVA, 1991; BAHRALINOVA, 2013). The semantics of the concept of space lies at the basis of the ethnic Kazakh worldview, the foundation of which is the spatial model of the universe (KODAR, 1998; KARAKUZOVA, 2001). It is embodied in myths, reflected in religious beliefs, reproduced in cultural customs and ceremonies, fixed in the language (KODAR, 1998), (NAURZBAEVA, 2005), and also represented in traditional daily culture, and indicated in the complex symbolism of traditional Kazakh cuisine.

The reaction of the ethnos to the invasion of space is also presented in the concept of the space of the steppe culture

(BAHRALINOVA, 2013). The reaction to such an invasion signifies a series of actions, ritual and communicative behavior of the Kazakhs, which has a symbolic character. For example, the other in the Kazakh steppe is a guest. Both a relative and an unfamiliar traveler, the poor and the wealthy, aksuyek (white bone) and kara suyek (black bone) could be a guest. In relation to guests, the Kazakhs developed a special communicative behavior.

In the vast expanses with difficult transitions, it was difficult to survive for a traveler if he could not stop at someone for the night. A guest is given an honorable place - a tour, the best meal, lodging for the night (BAHRALINOVA, 2013: 10).

The guest is given the gifts. A Kazakh is always waiting for a guest. In the tradition of hospitality, the rite of the guest's song performance to the host, the house is a sign of respect and gratitude (SHAKENOVA, 1991).

The guests were always welcomed and treated meal at the dastarkhan (a table covered with a tablecloth, a feast) in a smart yurt - an ethnic dwelling of the Kazakhs. Since ancient times the Kazakhs have had the custom to treat the guest abundantly, to cover the table so that it would burst from all sorts of food. Until recently, delicacies and rare sweets used to be hidden from children and family for a guest whether invited or unexpected.

For a Kazakh it is unacceptable not to help a person in a difficult moment, not to do him good, not to provide him an overnight

stop, not to treat him. Legends about Karynbai, stingy Shygaibai, Karakusbai, generous Atymtai, Asan Kaigy, Korkut, Aldar-Kose testify that miserliness, cruelty, greed was alien to the Kazakh people. In one of the Kazakh legends it is said about how greedy Karynbai was absorbed by land for not wanting to accept the guest, and his wealth disappeared without benefit for people. The desire for profit and avarice turned another folklore bai, Karakusbai, into a wolf as he was not accepted by people. In the end he was pecked by birds of prey.

Under the Kazakh tradition, the host must protect his guest, even if this person is completely alien to him. The host often protected lovers who left their land because of the persecution of parents and relatives. In the conditions of territorial disunity, a guest from a different clan or a representative of another nation was a messenger from the outside world, a kind of conductor of his culture. Any guest, regardless of his nationality and age, always enjoyed honor and respect. The Russian Researcher Victor von Guern draws the attention to this feature of the Kazakh tradition. He wrote: "... the Kazakhs ... in general and still are distinguished by the affability, good nature and hospitality that they have even built up in the cult" (LEVSHIN, 1832: 14).

Hospitality is an ethnic feature of the Kazakh people, the first and most important commandment of their daily culture, which was formed under the influence of the nomadic way of life. Moreover, it is also a sacred duty.

In our opinion, tolerance and respect in the Kazakhs' perception of the world were expressed in the fact that hospitality was viewed as a blessing, a virtue and an indispensable element of happiness. The Kazakhs thought if there was no hospitality, there was no happiness and joy. The main factor in the survival of the Kazakhs in the rather harsh conditions of territorial disunity is the establishment of friendly relations with neighboring peoples. In turn, such communication and openness are an indicator of natural human decency. This concept means hospitality, mutual assistance, non-civility, as well as responsiveness, openness to the whole world, and benevolence (LEVSHIN, 1832). At all times all these universal human positive norms of behavior and moral values have been formed as unwritten laws of life in the form of traditional customs and norms that were observed by all Kazakhs. Thus, hospitality and the characteristics of Kazakh cuisine influenced the psychological makeup of ethnos, its ethical credo, its cultural communication and its behavior.

Kazakh cuisine is famous mainly for a wide variety of meat delicacies and delicious meat dishes, as well as useful drinks. To this day, the main role in the ration of the Kazakhs is given to meat. The most revered meat is horse meat and lamb. They are not only consumed more often, but also preferred when receiving guests, at weddings and funerals. Cows and goats are called *kara mal* - black cattle, they are considered second-rate animals. Although the Kazakhs themselves explain this differently, for example, the fact that the first cows among the Kazakhs were black (AKHMETOVA, 1993), (BRONNIKOVA, 1989), (TOMILOV, 1978). In fact, we are

confronted with the surviving traditional division of cattle by Central Asian nomads into cattle with hot breath - sheep and horses, whose meat was considered more useful to humans, and cattle with cold breath - camels, goats, cattle (ARGYNBAYEV, 1959).

The Kazakhs still continue to adhere to a whole complex of customs and rituals, the special significance of which is given to ritual food. It can be divided into four categories: actions of friendship or kinship; actions of establishing relations of friendship or kinship; actions that express gratitude and goodwill; actions that protect and preserve (AKHMETOVA, 1993). The Kazakhs include sybaga into the first category of ritual food. Sybaga (share, part) is a set of selected pieces of meat from certain parts of the carcass, intended for certain people, whether relatives or guests. Sybaga is not only a phenomenon of hospitality, but its composition determines the significance of the guest, the degree of respect for the person. Sybaga is the main element of Kazakh cuisine and every piece of meat in this treat (sybaga) has its own purpose and hidden meaning.

### **3. DISCUSSION**

Sybaga is accompanied by beshbarmaq. This is the main national dish of the Kazakhs, without which there is not a single celebration. The name of this meat dish comes from two words besh (bes) - five, and barmaq - finger. The literal translation is symbolic,

five fingers. During the nomadic times, our ancestors did not use cutlery. There was a strict ritual (it is still observed) to eat with hands. Before serving a dish a young man with a pitcher of warm water and with a basin and a clean towel approached each guest and gave the opportunity to wash their hands comfortably before eating. Then the host served beshbarmaq, or it is also called Kazakh meat (in Kazakh - et), which was eaten with hands. After the meal, the hygienic procedure was repeated.

Beshbarmaq includes boiled meat, which lies over the cooked dough. The dough is tight. It is kneaded either on water or on cooled broth (sorpa) with the addition of one or two eggs. Then it rolled thinly (the thinner, the tastier). The culminating component of beshbarmak is tuzdyk (tuz in Kazakh is salt) - a dressing consisting of onions, which are cut into thin half-rings, slightly boiled on broth with the addition of scented black pepper and salt. (tabak), Firstly, it is put the boiled dough into a large dish, then sliced pieces of meat and then it is poured with the sauce - tuzdyk. For the meal, every guest is served with a broth in a small tea bowl.

The choice of pieces of meat for beshbarmak depends on the guest, on the degree of relationship, age and sex, which was discussed in detail above.

The traditions of cooking beshbarmak and sybaga vary depending on the region of Kazakhstan. So, for example, in Central Kazakhstan, when cooking beshbarmaq dough is cooked in broth

entirely, and in the West, it is cut. Since the 1920s, boiled potatoes and carrots (in Southern Kazakhstan) have been added to beshbarmaq. They are laid out on the edges of the dish, over the dough. Also in some regions of Kazakhstan (in the West of Kazakhstan) rice is cooked instead of dough.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Thus, the Kazakhs treat their relatives, honored guests with sybaga on dishes specially designed for each person (tabak). These dishes, depending on who they are intended for, are called bas tabak (the main dish), syi tabak (a special dish), kuda tabak (for a father-in-law), kudagi tabak (for a mother-in-law), kurdas tabak (for peers), kalzha tabak (for a pregnant woman), kyz tabak (for girls), bala tabak (for children), betashar tabak (for a fiancée), etc. Each dish has a symbolic character, each element, the layout of meat also has a symbolic meaning. Each dish should include the meat that is traditionally intended for this person: for the honored guest - the head, matchmakers - fat and liver, a son-in-law - brisket, friends, comrades, peers - sirloin, for girls and daughters - heart with fat, children - kidneys. The meaning of these dishes: for an honored guest - to be the people's head, their eyes and ears, for matchmakers - to be close and inseparable, for friends and comrades - strong friendship, for the daughter-in-law - to be cordial and desired, for the little ones to be joyful and alive.

It is known that food refers to one of the most important elements of material culture and is a carrier of ethnic specificity. In modern conditions of standardization and unification of many cultural and everyday phenomena, the sphere of food prohibitions and priorities preserves the maximum number of ethnically significant features. Industrialization and urbanization affected traditional dairy food, many of which are not consumed anymore. The ancient methods of cooking meat and milk dishes in the abdomen of the lamb left the practice. The attitude to some guest parts of the carcass is being changed. But the most important symbolic nature of cooking, observance of the rules of table manners, the symbolic nature of the ritual food sybaga and beshbarmaq, are still among the Kazakhs, and are peculiar indicators of hospitality, cordiality, humanity, tolerance towards a guest or relative.

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