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TRADITIONAL UZBEK DISHES PREPARED FOR FESTIVALS AND THE ETIQUETTE OF EATING THEM

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Abstract: *The article analyzes the traditional dishes prepared for Uzbek festivals and ceremonies, including Navruz, Ramadan and Eid al-Adha, family weddings and memorial gatherings, together with their symbolic meaning and the etiquette of eating them. The culture of the dastarkhan is described on the basis of historical sources and ethnographic literature, and some features of ceremonies in the Jizzakh oasis are noted. The article also discusses the problems of preserving table etiquette under modern conditions.*

Keywords: *festive dishes, table etiquette, Navruz, Eid, weddings and ceremonies, sumalak, plov, hospitality, Jizzakh oasis.*

For the Uzbek people the dastarkhan, the cloth on which food is served, is not only a place to eat but a cultural space in which social relations, respect and hospitality are expressed. The dishes prepared for festivals and ceremonies carry special meaning and are closely tied to the people's worldview, religious and national values and seasonal calendar [2; 3]. Studying festive dishes and the etiquette of eating them is therefore relevant not only for ethnography but also for moral education. The aim of this article is to reveal the function and symbolism of the main dishes of Uzbek festivals and to analyze the historical roots and modern form of table etiquette. The work uses historical-ethnographic, comparative and descriptive methods, and notes local features in the example of the Jizzakh oasis.

The Uzbek festive table is made up of several layers. At its centre stands bread. Wherever it is placed, bread goes at the head of the table, and throwing it on the ground or stepping on it is strongly condemned. Placing bread upside down or one piece on top of another is also considered improper. These beliefs show that Uzbeks see bread as a symbol of bounty, livelihood and blessing [2]. Usually dried fruits, sweets and bread are laid first, and hot dishes are brought afterwards. This order welcomes the guest, opens the conversation and prepares people for the meal. The festive table is also a means of strengthening social ties: when neighbours, relatives and members of the mahalla visit one another, the table is a sign of respect and closeness. In the Jizzakh oasis village weddings were often held with the whole community taking part and with kupkari (ulak), so the table also took on the meaning of a communal celebration [4].

Navruz is the oldest of the Uzbek festivals and celebrates the arrival of spring and the awakening of nature. Its dishes are mostly seasonal and symbolic. The main Navruz dish is sumalak, made from flour and wheat sprouts and cooked communally in a cauldron, often through a sleepless night accompanied by songs and prayers; women take turns stirring the pot, which shows the collective meaning of the dish [3]. The spring table is also decorated with halim, green samsa, green chuchvara and dishes made with fresh herbs. In some areas a seven-ingredient dish called Navruz kozha is prepared. These dishes combine the fresh greens of the season with grain left over from winter and express hope for a fruitful year, health and abundance. In the foothill villages of the Jizzakh oasis, for example in Zaamin and Bakhmal, dishes made from wild spring plants have their own place on the festive table.

The religious festivals, Ramadan Eid (Eid al-Fitr) and Eid al-Adha, hold a special place in Uzbek culture. The fast observed before Ramadan Eid shapes the iftar table, which usually begins

with dates or dried fruit, bread and soup. On the day of the holiday the table is set with sweets such as parvarda, nishalda, nabat and halva, with dried and fresh fruit, and guests are served plov or soup. Visiting relatives and neighbours, and the younger generation paying respects to their elders, are customary on this day. At Eid al-Adha the dishes made from the meat of the sacrificed animal take the main place. One part of the meat is distributed to the needy, one part to relatives, and the rest stays with the family. Fried meat, soup, kebab, kazan kebab, manti and plov are prepared from it. Here the social function of food, generosity and mutual help, is especially important.

At family weddings and ceremonies plov becomes the central dish of the Uzbek table. At nikah weddings, circumcision feasts, cradle feasts and other celebrations, it is customary to serve plov in the morning or before noon at a separate gathering. Salads, samsa, soup, kebab, sweets and fruit are served alongside it. In villages the head cook, the oshboshi, enjoys particular respect, and the quality of the plov is tied to his personal skill and reputation. Special foods are also served at the rituals of greeting the bride and of the nikah: sweet tea, qatlama, buttered bread and dried fruit, most of which express wishes of abundance for the newlyweds' families. A memorial gathering is different. The serving of food there is marked by restraint, remembrance and prayer, and the khudoyi meal offered to honour the deceased is modest and prepared with the intention of earning spiritual reward. In the Jizzakh oasis the communal character of weddings is visible in the dishes too: days before the feast neighbours and relatives gather to chop meat, cut carrots and gather firewood in a form of mutual help known as hashar, and cooking the plov over a large fire under a master cook becomes a ritual in which young men learn the craft from their elders.

Table etiquette among the Uzbeks has a long history. Medieval didactic works such as the Qabusnama devote separate chapters to inviting guests, laying the table and the manners of eating [1], and these ideas spread among the people and became the roots of present-day traditional etiquette. The first rule concerns seating. A guest greets the company first, and the host then invites him to the head of the table, the most honoured place, where elders and respected guests sit while younger people take lower places. The second rule is to wash the hands before eating, to begin with the word bismillah and to reach for food only after the elders have begun. Food is taken with the right hand from the part of the dish nearest to oneself, and reaching across a shared platter of plov is improper. Bread is broken into small pieces, and a bitten piece is not returned to the common cloth. The third rule concerns respect for the host. The host offers food repeatedly, and the guest may politely decline once or twice, but refusing to taste the food at all is regarded as disrespect. After the meal a blessing (fatiha) is recited: one of the elders prays, and the others say amen and draw their hands over their faces. Afterwards one should rise, thank the host and avoid leaving too much food uneaten. Etiquette also binds the host, who tidies the house before guests arrive, welcomes them at the door, offers tea first and serves the elderly guest before others; in meat dishes the best portions were traditionally set aside for the eldest or most honoured guest, and the host attends to the guests before eating himself.

Regional differences exist alongside these general rules. In Jizzakh village weddings, customs such as men and women eating plov in separate places and members of the host family serving male guests have been preserved to a greater degree. Some of them survive in modern banquet halls while others have adapted to the requirements of modern gatherings. Today festive dishes and the rules of etiquette are changing. Receiving hundreds of guests in banquet halls, preparing food in advance and serving it buffet-style weaken the traditional meanings and the communal ritual of preparation, and wastefulness and excessive table decoration are linked to these changes. Calls for holding weddings and ceremonies more modestly have therefore grown. At the same time young people show growing interest in festive dishes such as sumalak, halim and cauldron cooking. Teaching table etiquette to young people in schools, the mahalla and the family, honouring elders at the table and respecting bread are important tasks for moral education. The dastarkhan is also a school of society: children learn by watching adults how to greet, how to keep

their place, to serve elders first and to treat bread with care, and on holidays they visit houses to congratulate their elders and receive sweets or small gifts in return.

The meaning of festive food is also symbolic. Bread signifies livelihood and blessing, plov brotherhood and solidarity, sumalak the abundance that comes from working together through the night, and sweets the wish for a sweet life. Colour carries meaning as well: white foods such as milk, yoghurt and rice are associated with purity and peace, while yellow and red foods coloured by carrots or cumin express abundance and joy. Blessings, good wishes and humorous stories told around the cloth are part of the meal itself. The elders' advice at the head of the table and the attention of the young listeners pass family values from generation to generation, which is why teaching table etiquette has both ethnographic and educational significance.

Hospitality does not end with the meal. At weddings the guests are given a share to take home, the so-called tarqatma, made up of bread and sweets, and at the door the host thanks each guest and sees him off. At circumcision and cradle feasts sweets are distributed to children and neighbours, and at memorial gatherings food is distributed to the poor as alms. Secular holidays such as Independence Day, observed on 1 September, have added a further occasion on which families, neighbours and colleagues gather around a table, and the dishes served are largely the traditional festive ones, plov, samsa and kebab, along with fruit, which shows how the old repertoire has been carried into new civic celebrations. In daily life proverbs about bread and hospitality remain common and continue to guide behaviour at the table.

Changes in tableware and service also affect etiquette. The traditional low table, the shared platter and the plates laid on the floor-level cloth are giving way in towns to high tables, individual plates and cutlery. Eating from one shared platter once expressed unity and trust, while individual servings are seen as more hygienic and convenient, and families are finding ways to combine both. Health considerations, such as awareness of fat and sugar intake, are also reshaping the festive menu, and lighter dishes and more vegetables appear alongside plov and fried meat. These developments need not contradict tradition if the underlying values, respect for bread, for elders and for the guest, are preserved.

Several smaller customs complete the picture. Before and after the meal the host offers water from a jug so that guests can wash their hands, and tea accompanies every stage of the gathering. It is customary to pour tea into the bowl only a little at a time, since a half-filled bowl that is refilled often shows the host's attention and respect for the guest, whereas a full bowl suggests that the guest is expected to leave soon. The division of labour is also traditional: at large gatherings men usually cook the plov and the meat, while women prepare the dough, salads and sweets and look after the house, and this shared work itself forms part of the celebration and of the relations between families. The young are expected to serve, to bring water and bread and to refrain from speaking before their elders, and in this way the table is where good manners are practised rather than merely taught.

Memorial gatherings have their own rules that are worth stating separately. Guests arrive quietly, greet the family of the deceased with words of condolence, and take the places offered to them without festive conversation; the food is simple, bread and tea come first, and the meal is followed by a prayer for the departed. It is considered improper to praise or criticize the food at such a gathering, and the family is not expected to display abundance. Sharing food in this setting is understood as an act of remembrance and charity rather than as hospitality in the festive sense, which is why the same dish, plov for instance, can carry very different meanings depending on the occasion at which it is served. Understanding these differences helps visitors and young people alike to behave appropriately in the variety of situations in which a meal is shared.

For visitors from abroad, a few simple points are useful: accept the bread and tea offered, wait for the eldest to begin, use the right hand, try a little of every dish, and thank the host sincerely at the end. Hosts, for their part, are generally glad to explain the meaning of a dish or a

custom, and a respectful question is usually received as a sign of interest. In this way the etiquette of the table can also serve as an introduction to Uzbek culture for people from elsewhere.

In conclusion, Uzbek festive dishes form a complex system tied to seasonal, religious and family ceremonies. Navruz dishes such as sumalak and halim express the awakening of nature and cooperation, the dishes of Eid express generosity and kindness, and wedding plov expresses the unity of the family and the mahalla. The etiquette of eating consists of respect for bread, honouring elders, esteeming the guest and gratitude, and its roots reach back to medieval ethical literature. Preserving these values, preventing waste and teaching young people the culture of the dastarkhan remain an important direction of moral education under modern conditions.

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