Political Power behind the Feasts: Food as a Symbol of Authority and Obedience in the History of Turks

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Thinking about food as a concept, power and authority are not the two words that immediately come to mind. However, these two words are a significant way of expressing what it means to have food, offer food, and accept food throughout history. Although power and authority do not mean the same thing, they are so intertwined that in the case of food and power, power reinforces authority and authority becomes one of the main sources of power.

People have evolved while simultaneously developing culture/s as an aspect of their social life. Since the beginning of time and the evolution of the human race, eating has gone beyond being a necessity to become a medium that determines social relationships, status and power relations. Essentially handling and distribution of food determines social relationships.

Food as a prominent means of power, and as a symbol of power, has been an obvious manifestation of prestige, authority, and vigor for Turkish societies throughout history. Since Turks' emergence from Central Asia, from the 8th century A.D. until the Ottoman Empire era, using food as a political power, in the form of dinners, feasts, and banquets, was a justification of the political authority and an indication of the status quo of the people.

All the Turkish rulers throughout history, including Old Turkic tribes' rulers, khans or kagans, and the sultans of the Ottoman Empire, use feasts or the dining table as a way to demonstrate their power, to justify and strengthen their political authority over their bureaucrats and their people.

Turkish Societies of Central Asia and Justification of Institutional Political Authority

Nourishment has been an integral part of the Turks's social life ever since their emergence in Central Asia. Therefore, nurturing the people is regarded as a sacred act and it is the most important job of the sovereign. Orkhon Inscriptions[1] clearly indicates that 'Kagan is assigned a job with the order of God, his sole responsibility is catering to his people's need to be nurtured.'

Food is not only a biological or physiological process. As Michael Dietler explains:

> Feasting may be defined as a form of ritual activity centred on the communal consumption of food and drink. Rituals of this kind have played many important social, economic, and political roles in the lives of peoples around the world. As with other types of ritual, feasts provide an arena for both the highly condensed symbolic representation and the active manipulation of social relations, and they have an inherent political dimension (Dietler 2011, p.180).

This summarizes the effect feasts had in Central Asian Turkish societies very well. These feasts were indeed a ritualistic activity that was performed to re-instate every participant's social and political status. In earlier Turkish societies the dinners organized by the kagan were an expression of his power and magnificence as well as re-establishing and re-approving the status of his guests. Attendance at such events was an indication that the guests had accepted the ruler's authority and would obey his laws. Food is also a compilation of political, religious, social, and economic symbols. The whole ritual of greeting the guests, seating them at the table, the quality of the food offered to each guest, and its acceptance by the guest is all a part of this symbolism that is associated with food. A dining table can establish equality or inequality, justification of a participant's status, generosity of the host, in this case the ruler, or gratitude shown by the participants. Therefore, declining to accept the food offered in such gatherings may be construed as direct disobedience of the ruler.

The first written examples of food being used as a means of power can be seen in Orkhon Transcriptions, as mentioned above. The famous Khan, Kül Tigin called out to his people and said;

> Turkish societies do not know the value of satiety. Once they are fed, they never think that hunger will strike again. Because of this heedlessness, they travel without obeying the rules of the Kagan who has fed them. In the places they have travelled to, they walked in hunger, some of them died. I have sat on my throne because I am a member of the ruling family and also God has ordered me to do so. I, as the Kagan, am sitting here, to take care of my poor citizens, enrich and nurture them. Encourage them to reproduce and increase our population (Ergin, 2000 p.13).

These words of the Kagan emphasize that he is responsible for feeding, providing shelter, safety and clothing for his people and in return he expects their obedience and loyalty. Symbolically speaking, food and clothing justify the power of the Kagan.

We understand that food as a political means has a very important connection to power. It was customary for the Kagan to hold feasts for his citizens, if he did not feed his people, he could face complaints and even rebellion from his people. Periodic meetings where state matters were

discussed were organized by the sovereign but served as a privilege and an obligation. These state meetings were followed by *toy*[2] and were not only simple dinner gatherings but a way to establish the power and the magnificence of the sovereign and a way to re-establish the status or the political level of the attendees. In this manner, these feasts were filled with symbolic meanings.

Ancient Turkish societies did not have specific caste systems but in the cases of the feasts, it was a different situation. Based on moral laws, people were classified into different *orun*.[3] These ranks marked the place where they were supposed to sit, and their *ülüş,*[4] in this case, the part of the lamb that was distributed during the feasts. The ranks were inherited from elders in the family solely based on their service to the ruler and on valour. It was up to the children or grandchildren to keep their inherited share. Any misconduct was punished with the loss of *orun* and the right of *ülüş,* therefore their right to attend such feasts. It is clear that these feasts were not only given to feed the people but also to re-establish everyone's social status in accordance with the moral laws, in other words, symbolically restating order, discipline, and honour among the participants of the *toy.* 'Equation is simple: sovereign provides protection that also includes the provision of foodstuff, and in return receives obedience and loyalty' (Artun Ünsal 2000, p. 181).

Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach's saying '*Der Mensch ist, was er ißt*' which translates into English as 'man is what he eats' was meant to refer to the effects of the food one eats. However, if applied to Central Asian Turks' rituals, it refers to one's status. You are what you eat, meaning that the food that you eat determines your place in society.

Seljuk Empire Era

Central Asian Turks' custom of nurturing the people is an archaic custom that has been institutionalized and passed on from one society to another in the course of history. This tradition passed on to the Seljuks as well. During the Seljuk period, table manners and etiquette determined the power rank among the participants including who sat where and what part of the meat, in this case lamb, was offered to whom.

There is a very important source for this period, that gives information about the rules of serving food in order to establish power. *Kutatgu bilig*, a script from 1069 written by Yusuf Has Hacib, a poet, is an important source on politics, the economy, culture, military affairs, philosophy, religion, and morals. It was written as a guidebook for the sovereign. The name of the scripts translates as *The Wisdom which brings Happiness* or *The Wisdom that Conduces to State Hegemony and Authority*. Has Hacib advises the sovereign, about the importance of nurturing his people in order to control them. This source focuses more on the intangible aspect of the dining table, advising the sovereign about how the feasts should be held, who should be invited, table manners that need to be followed, how to behave towards the guests. Following these sets of rules enables the sovereign to regulate order among his people.

> Have plenty of salt and bread, feed the others with them. A sovereign's power is measured by the well-being of his people. Therefore, if the people are starved, a political disturbance will eventually follow (Yusuf Has Hacib 1947, p. 105).

Seljuks accepted Islam as their religion, therefore Islamic laws and regulations applied to social matters. A significant belief concerns left and right sides. In Islamic belief, the left side is associated with the devil, therefore the right side has always been superior to the left. Since the dinner gatherings were meant to feed a large group of people, in the manner of a feast, many lambs were cooked. The right sides of all the lambs were always offered to higher ranking participants and left sides were offered to lower ranks.

When taking Islamic regulations into consideration, Muslims are also known to use Prophet Mohammed's words of wisdom as a guide. One of his sayings is pertinent to the topic of food and power, that 'God grants a long life and prolonged power to the ruler, who provides bread and food for his people.' Bread is sometimes used interchangeably with food or sometimes together. As the most cherished foodstuff, bread always has a sacred place in Turkish societies regardless of the religion.

We rely on another source from this period, and that is the Sufi mystic, scholar, and poet Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi. In his writing, the Seljuk Palace cuisine is shown as very elite, consisting of delicacies and luxurious food served in fine earthenware and gold dishes. Also, we see from Mevlana's writings that certain types of birds (chicken,



Figure 1 Seljuk Empire's coat of arms.

pigeon, partridge, and quail) are only served at exclusive tables for special guests. The significance of eating birds becomes even more powerful in the Ottoman period. Hunting was one of the most significant forms of entertainment and a necessity for the Seljuk sovereigns. It was considered a power play and a preparation for war. Hunting symbolized being in power, having strength and capability. As the food arrives at the table, the sovereign looks at it, just like an avian predator looking down on his prey from above. In Seljuk belief, the avian predators are symbols of power and the clear indication of this power shows on the Seljuk coat of arms (Figure 1).

The public feasts that were given after the hunting proceedings were a continuation of this power play. Since it was considered as a preparation for war, offering the hunted animals as food in a way symbolized the enemy being hunted down. This emphasized the power of the sovereign in the eyes of his people.

The Significance of Kitchen and Dining in the Mevlevi Order

The Mevlevi order was established after the death of Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi. The order was established with strict rules and regulations about training to become a dervish, someone who is a member of the Sufi religious order who has taken a vow to purge themselves from all worldly pleasures and devote themselves to God.

The kitchen is considered as the heart and the most sacred place of the dervish lodge and it is the place of training for all the novice dervishes. The kitchen possesses the qualities to hold the utmost discipline, hierarchy, and obedience. A child who wishes to enter a Dervish lodge with the consent of his parents was taken to the kitchen for a three day observation period, where he sat at a post on the left side of the kitchen and observed the kitchen operations. Then if he wished to continue with the training process, for eighteen days he was sent around the kitchen to run tedious tasks in the same clothes that he initially arrived in. Once the novice successfully accomplished this task, he would receive traditional garments and start his actual training in the kitchen. This training lasted for 1001 days. During this time period, the novice, also known as nev-niyaz, was tested for endurance, obedience, and patience.

The Mevlevi order established strict rules, equivalent to laws, regarding table manners, organization and the workings of the kitchen. There were two meals eaten during the day, the first one a little before the noontime prayers and the second meal was served right after the evening prayers. The meal, where all the dervishes assemble, are eaten on low tables close to the ground and by sitting on the floor. The most senior dervish greets all the dervishes upon arrival into the kitchen and they all sit together at round tables. The meals start when the sheik arrives and begins by tasting the salt. Everyone follows by tasting the salt with their index finger and this marks the beginning of the meal. When a dervish stops eating to drink water everyone at the table stops, out of respect. Once he finishes drinking, everyone resumes eating together. Respect and discipline are the two most important notions among the dervishes, where the hierarchy within the lodge is respected, and life revolves around the kitchen in a certain discipline.

There is a very strict hierarchy in the Mevlevi lodge. However, this does not mean that as human beings, one person is superior to another based on seniority. The highest authority for Mevlevis is God. He is the one that has power. Therefore, gathering around the dinner table, in this instance, shows that everyone is eating the food as God's blessing and accepting his authority. As can be seen from this example, the power of these meals does not necessarily come from what is eaten, and who sits where. However, the power comes from dining together, obeying the rules established by the Mevlevi order and accepting God as the only authority.

The Mevlevi belief requires every follower to give up all worldly pleasures and commit themselves to God. However, eating is an important physical need, therefore it holds its importance as a basic need, but this basic need is kept very simple, and the food is received as God's blessing.

Ottoman Empire Era

Disruption of the Seljuk Empire marked the beginning of the 'period of principalities' in Anatolia. The most significant principality was the Ottomans, who had exerted power over the others and conquered Anatolia and parts of Europe and Africa. They became one of the largest and the most powerful empires in world history, especially after Fatih Sultan Mehmet (Mehmet II or Mehmet the Conqueror) conquered Istanbul and built the Topkapı Palace. According to Ahmed Cevdet Pasha, an Ottoman scholar and a historian 'Istanbul is in one of the ideal geographical locations of the world, and it was natural that whatever state owned it would also have power over other nations' (Yerasimos 2002, p. 13). Clearly, until their fall, the Ottoman Empire continued to hold this position of power.

One of the most important developments in the Mehmet II period was the '*kanunname*' the code of law, made of 35 laws dealing with state matters, as well as military affairs, administrative issues, official etiquette and manners concerning food and eating. In fact, one of the most important laws was that, starting with Mehmet II, all Ottoman Sultans were to dine alone under all circumstances. This was symbolic as it also meant that a sultan who does not share the table with anyone is a sultan who does not share the power with anyone.

Islamic rules and sayings of the Prophet Muhammed retained importance during this period as well. The Prophet's saying that, 'The ones who feed the poor are the masters of the table' gives a clear message for the Ottoman sultan about how to win his people through food. These



Figure 2. Ottoman Borders in sixteenth century.

words of wisdom played an important role in guiding the sultan to do things that would earn him the respect of his people. Sultans opened *imarethane* (hospice) to provide for the indigent. Although it may seem that the sultan did this for moral reasons, nurturing his people, in general it was performed to establish his authority as the giver, and gain the loyalty of the receivers, namely his people.

The Ottoman period is when culinary culture reached its peak. The map above shows the Ottoman Empire's borders in the 16th century. Spread over three continents, the Ottoman Sultan had the power to bring any type of foodstuff from anywhere within the borders of the empire (Figure 2). As the population of Istanbul increased, getting provisions into the palace kitchens became an even more important task. The palace kitchens cooked food for approximately 5000 people daily. However, this number increased two or threefold on the days when the Janissaries received their three-monthly salary, known as the *ulufe* ceremony, days when the Imperial council meetings took place or on the days any type of celebration such as circumcision or wedding ceremonies took place.

The food cooked in the Imperial kitchens did not only act as nourishment for the residents of the palace. The long smoking chimneys of the Topkapı Palace), that are visible from outside the palace, even from the Bosphorus Strait, symbolized that the kitchens were in use and food was being cooked to feed the people, but more importantly, the smoking chimneys were an obvious display of the sultan's generosity to allies and enemies (Figure 3.

The Symbolic Meaning of the Palace Dining

Dining tables at the palace also had a symbolic function. They were the most crucial indicator of the Sultan's generosity. The table etiquette, including who sat at which table, who ate before whom, and how one should sit at the dining table were all stated by the laws. Sitting at the table followed a specific hierarchy. The hierarchical order that food was consumed in was a symbol of obedience and loyalty to the sultan. After Mehmet II's code of law took effect, the Sultans were to dine alone, the only people allowed to dine with the Sultan were his close family members.

The members of the *Divan*[5] also followed a certain , *defterdar,*[6] and *nişancı*[7] shared a separate table. A third table was prepared for *Kazaskerler.*[8] When these high-ranking officials' meals were over, the rest of the council members would sit at the same tables and eat the leftovers.

A similar type of eating process took place within all departments of the palace, including residents of the Harem section of the palace, namely, the sultan, his mother, wives and children and the concubines. The sultan would be offered about 24 to 27 different types of dishes placed inside gold plates. These dishes were then placed on a large tray and sealed. He would choose what he wanted to eat first and then the rest of the food would be sent to his wives and children. This dining progression from the sultan to his family, even to minor civil servants was a symbolic way to display the generosity of the sultan but also this was a clear indication of the hierarchy that was followed.

Another difference between the ranks was portrayed with drinks. The high ranking officials received sherbet as drinks, which was made from sugar, a very expensive ingredient at the time, and various expensive spices. The lower rank drank only water or sherbets made with honey. Sugar has a symbolic meaning representing the sweet side of life, but at the same time, as an expensive ingredient, it also symbolizes power. In order to show this power, sugar was used plentifully in all the desserts, jams, sherbets as



Figure 3. The chimneys of Topkapı Palace kitchens.

well as savoury dishes like meat, rice, and even fish. Examples of extensive sugar usage can be seen at the special occasion feasts. The most significant example is the feast given at the circumcision ceremony of Süleyman the Magnificent's sons. Also, sugar was used for making candy sculptures to decorate the hall where the ceremony was taking place. After the sugar sculptures fulfilled their purpose as displayed decorations, then the public would plunder the sculptures to get a taste of this expensive ingredient.

Another symbolic food item was birds. Flying birds were seen as the symbol of elevation. Therefore, meals prepared with birds such as chicken, peacock, pheasant, partridge, and quail were considered fit for the sultan as well as higher ranking dignitaries, officials, and diplomats. Wild birds were especially seen as a symbol of wealth and respectability. Although all the palace residents regardless of rank, were allowed to consume meat during meals, birds were only served to the sultan, his family and officials of high rank. A similar principle applied to serving the parts of the lamb. The higher parts of the animal were reserved for the higher class people as these parts are away from the ground and any part that touched the ground went to the sub-level officials and servants.

Janissary Army and Dish Plunder

Just like in earlier Turkish societies, Ottoman Sultans's feasts were clear demonstrations of Sultans's power to allies and enemies as well as to his people. The feasts that lasted for several days were organized to celebrate special occasions such as the sultan's son's circumcision ceremonies and his daughter's weddings. The guests, including the palace officials, Imperial Council members, foreign diplomats, high-ranking visitors, and the public were presented with an opulent feast that showcased the power and wealth of the Ottoman sultan.

Another important ceremony that took place at the Topkapı Palace was the *ulufe* ceremonies, where the Janissary army received their three monthly salaries, which was followed by a feast. For this occasion, the newly assigned foreign diplomats were invited. The reality was that if such guests were invited these ceremonies would be more magnificent, and show the power of the Sultan over his army. After the ceremony, the foreign diplomats were received by the Sultan. On the days of the *ulufe* ceremony, the Imperial council would convene, the grand vizier and high-ranking statesmen gather at *Kubbealtı,* the council chambers, accompanying the sultan who sat at his throne to watch the ceremony.

For this occasion, the palace kitchens prepared soup, rice pilaf, lamb kebabs (grilled lamb) and *zerde.*[9] Plates of this prepared food would be placed on the ground in front of the *Babüsselam*[10] gates of Topkapı Palace. First, the head bailiff hands out *akide*[11] candy to the grand vizier and other dignitaries of the Imperial council to symbolize the janissary's goodwill and loyalty to the sultan and the state.



Figure 4. Dish Plunder.

After the distribution of *ulufe*, the three-monthly-salary, the Chamberlain gives a signal, the janissaries run like the wind and try to grab the first plate they can get their hands on. This event is known as *çanak yağması* (Figure 4).[12]

After the meal was over, lambs would be sacrificed in the palace gardens and the Janissaries were sent back to their barracks with some provisions from the palace. The foreign diplomats who watched this whole scene in admiration were invited to such events for the sole purpose of witnessing the power of the sultan through the behaviour of the Janissary soldiers. First waiting quietly and patiently to receive their salary and then aggressively grabbing the dishes. This event displayed two of the most important qualities' of a soldier; discipline and an aggressive nature. To sum up, the Sultan paid and nurtured his soldiers and in return by accepting the salary and the food the soldiers obeyed and accepted the sultan's authority.

Circumcision Ceremonies and Public Feasts

A significant ceremony celebrated at the Ottoman palace was the circumcision ceremonies of the sultan's sons and the wedding ceremonies of their daughters. These events

would last for days, sometimes weeks. The significance of these celebrations lay in the sultan's presence. These were one of the few occasions where the sultan would appear to his public and they would be able to pay homage to him. For this occasion, many people travelled from all over the empire to the Hippodrome area located nearby the Topkapı Palace, including Ottoman military dignitaries and religious leaders of other regions.

In return, the sultan offered all of them a sumptuous feast, which was a way to show his power through his generosity and to establish that he was the only person who had the power to distribute foodstuff. The food was offered to the dignitaries on low tables inside the palace and to the public in the manner of çanak yağması. These ceremonies were also an occasion to show the power of the sultan. The foreign diplomats and visitors would be invited to witness the whole event. Impressions of a Venetian ambassador where he explains the event and adds how interesting it was to see the public run for the food and grab the dishes that were placed on the ground for them (Közleme 2017, p. 60).

The most significant celebration that has been marked in history is the circumcision ceremony that was given in the honour of Süleyman the Magnificent's sons Beyazıd and Cihangir in 1539. For this occasion, a total of 2,400 tables were set for 14,000 people. Feast books were kept that list all the food that was offered. There was a total of 42 different types of dishes, including soup, rice pilaf and meat dishes and 53 different types of desserts. Desserts outnumbering the savoury dishes was also a way to show generous usage of sugar symbolizing wealth and power.

The largest and the longest ceremony, that lasted for 55 days, was given during the reign of Sultan Murat III, for his son's circumcision. For this event, kings and rulers from all over the world were invited, and those who could not come sent their ambassadors on their behalf. This event is known to be the largest celebration and feast in the world in the 16th century (Ünsal 2011, p. 45). The event carried on in three parts, morning, afternoon and night and all the invitees and the public was given meals twice a day. The meals were all eaten at tables prepared based on the status of the guests. There was a great difference between the tables prepared for the high-ranking statesmen and guests and minor officials. For the high ranks, the food arrived one by one. After two or three mouthfuls of food was eaten the dish was removed and the next one arrived. This was done in order to follow a specific taste sequence, and also to test the manners of the guests. If the guest ate more than he should from the first dish, he would not have room to eat from the rest of the dishes. Since the manners of the low-ranking officials did not need to be tested, all the food arrived at the same time for them.

The Imperial Palace Cooks at War

In wartime the sultan accompanied his military personnel and army at the battlefield as their commander. During such times the imperial treasury and personnel from the imperial kitchens also travelled with the sultan. During the Mohaç War[13] in 1596, the Ottoman lines were breached. The cooks noticed the enemy approaching the imperial treasury tent. They grabbed their most dangerous kitchen tools, namely cleavers, knives, ladles and wood and attacked the enemy who were trying to pillage the treasury and thereby saved the imperial treasure. This incident showed the physical power that was exerted by the imperial kitchen staff to protect their sultan's treasures.

Conclusion

Examples of food being used as a symbol of authority and obedience can be seen in all Turkish societies throughout history. As stated in the Orkhon transcriptions, in Has Hacib's *Kutatgu Bilig* and in Prophet Mohammed's sayings, the most important mission of the sovereign is to nurture his people. This was the key to become a successful ruler in order to command a nation.

The examples of political power displayed through feasts and other food-related events in Central Asian Turks, Seljuks and the Ottomans were all great displays of authority and they were displayed in a way to show the generosity of the highest authority figure whether he was the khan, kagan or the sultan. Likewise, we have seen an example of the power of God as the highest authority in the Mevlevi belief. Although it may display lack of power in terms of an authority figure, there is a much greater force to be grateful to for the provisions or blessings provided.

Food as the most basic need of humankind has been one of the most important focal points of the powerplay, and all the rulers of the Turkish societies have used this power in the best way possible to create authority over their people and gain their trust and loyalty.

About the author

Banu Özden is a graduate of *Clark University* in Worcester, MA (2001). She started her career at *Bertucci's Brick Oven Ristorante* in Boston, as the kitchen manager. She returned to Turkey in 2007 and started working at Istanbul Culinary Institute as Director of Educational Programs. She continued her work at *The Culinary Arts Center*, where she worked on several projects promoting Turkish cuisine including a website, lectures and trips. She has participated in several symposiums in New York, Oxford, Tours and Mexico City where she talked about different aspects of Turkish cuisine. Currently she is an instructor at *İstanbul Medipol University* and *İzmir Economy University*, teaching history of Turkish cuisine, as well as running her own tour company *Spoon in My Pocket* where organizes walking food tours around İstanbul and writes a bimonthly column for a local food magazine.

Notes

1. Orkhon Inscriptions are two memorial installations erected by the Göktürks written in Old Turkic alphabet in the early 8th century in the Orkhon Valley in Mongolia. They were erected in honor of two Turkic princes, Kul Tigin and Bilge Khagan.
2. The feast given to the participants.
3. Ranks.
4. Share of the food.
5. Imperial Council.
6. The Grand Vizier.
7. The Head of the Treasury.
8. Treasurer.
9. The officer in charge of affixing the monogram of the Sultan on decrees and other official documents.
10. Supreme military judges of Anatolia and Rumelia.
11. Saffron pudding.
12. Gate of Salutation at the Topkapı Palace
13. A type of hard candy.
14. Dish plunder.
15. Named after the town of Mohaç, now in Hungary.

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