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The Ritual Uzbek Food

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The ritual food represents a special layer of the traditional culture. Before analyzing the ritual Uzbek food, let's consider the definition of the term "ritual", "rite".

There can be found many definitions of ritual in the scientific literature. Thus, V. Turner marks that ritual is the most important means of a constant keeping of common norms and values for a nation as the complicated system of ritual is connected with the symbol, imitation and perception, i.e. based on predominating sides of a human psychic.¹⁾ K. Levy-Stross in his works pays attention to the role of ritual and mythological symbols as stimulators of feeling and desire and also connects ritual with the specific of thought.²⁾ Ionin L.G. also marks that "mythological symbolism mean connection of reality with mental side".³⁾ "Ritual" or "rite" according to Turner is a directed human behavior related to religious beliefs in mystic creatures and powers.

"Ritual", "rite" based on legends and myths realized the function of cultural filters and mechanisms of social memory: it picked out and kept an importance for social and cultural tradition information on traditional behavior, directing the person with the help of the programs-stereotypes. It is possible to assert that for people, living in the community, tradition in *mahallya*⁴⁾ was a

¹⁾ Turner V. Simvol i ritual. M., 1983. S.15.

²⁾ Levy-Stross. The Ritual Process: Structure and anti-Structure. 1974.

³⁾ Ionin L.G. Sociologiya kulturi. M., 1998, s.149.

⁴⁾ neighbour's territorial community in the city, town or village.

model of society for them. Symbols that represent elements of material culture play a significant role in the rites and rituals.

There were formed methods of research in ethnography concerning material culture, as a rule they didn't apply to the "spiritual" side of phenomena. In our opinion, it's impossible to get an integral conception about functioning of cultures' elements without studying their place in the world, without taking into account the matter ascribed to people. The ethnic consciousness can selectively legalize not only the character of this of those customs and rituals, but also the form of material culture.

That's why, though many researchers connected formation of material culture only with natural environment, one can mark its comparative independence from ecology. For instance, the vivid example can be attributed to material culture as "paranja", which could hardly give a comfort in summer. That's why, in our opinion, it's necessary to find an explaining system which would consider coincidence or non-coincidence of phenomena with ecological demands as a special case.

In our opinion, for solution of this problem, it would be better to judge from the position of the very bearers of culture, who have chosen the necessary decision out of a big variety of possible ones. It is obvious that selectivity of national culture influences in ethnographic phenomena which possess stability and a real limitation; not everything edible was considered as food; dwelling was not any kind of building and rites were not strictly canonized.

Thus, we can say that the elements of Uzbek material culture get their ethnic specific thanks to spiritual life.

Food, being included into the system of rite or ritual, as well as the other elements of material culture, get symbolic characteristics.

At the beginning of the 20th century ritual meal had not ordinary character. Usually it was connected with some kinds of events, and according to tradition, demanded a public treating (wedding meal, funeral, maternity, etc) or it was dedicated to some calendar date of a festive annual cycle.

Usually ritual meal consisted of several dishes which were considered desirable or strictly compulsory on that day. Their cooking and eating was accompanied by certain norms of traditional etiquette. There was kept a turn of dishes, especially during festive and ritual meal. Festive etiquette was strictly regulated, though it varied within rather wide limits determined by the form of meal, staff of participants, character of relationships in group connected with a situation.

The set of dishes or a certain dish in ritual meal was given a sign. Traditions of symbolism of ritual meal are very old, their sources originate in Zoroastrism. In spite of the ideas that Islam and Zoroastrism might contradict each other, the Moslem world absorbed many symbols and signs which today are accepted as a part of Islam. In other words, a religious syncretism (combination of pre-Islamic and Islamic conceptions) found its special reflection in the magic comprehension of food. In due course, a part of rites got other interpretations or was kept as a tradition taking into account the participants of meal did not always clearly realize its sense.

Ritual food, common meal, exchange of different kinds of food express certain relationships between people and their communities (social, religious, professional, age groups, etc.). Food symbolism in this or that form is characteristic to nourishment systems of all the people.

Wedding ritual, being one of the most complicated complexes of traditional daily life culture, is an example of it and includes a considerable layer of food symbolism.

During wedding feast a fiancé of Tashkent Uzbeks tastes *pilaw*⁵⁾ from *lyagan*⁶⁾ and leaves it for his bride and her girlfriends who eat it up. The fiancé treats his friends who are not married with the second dish and the *pilaw*⁷⁾. In this case *pilaw*

⁵⁾ National dish (rice and meat).

⁶⁾ Big plate.

⁷⁾ Polevie zapisi. Alimov Kayum. 1912 g.r. mahallya Samarkand darvoza.

gets a “magic” energy which can give happiness in family life to unmarried friends of the bride and fiancé.

On the wedding feast of Fergana Uzbeks matchmakers steal cups or any other kind of tableware. It is not considered to be something blamable, whereas explained by the fact that one can get a piece of happiness and prosperity of that house. Maybe the roots of these customs are connected with the ancient ideas that with the help of food or an object it is possible to influence people.

During the rite “salom”⁸⁾ Tashkent Uzbeks put the bride’s hand into flour or oil in order to make the hands “yogli” va “unli” (i.e. a wish of wealth of being just married). A ritual besmearing with flour or oil on the wedding feasts was known in the past by other Turkic-speaking people. Thus, Uzbek-carluks, if bride’s parents were satisfied with the efforts of fiancé’s relatives, smeared their lips with flour, if not - with ashes.⁹⁾

Bread has an important meaning on the pre-wedding rite. During the “fotih” (blessing of fiancé and bride) bread (“non”) is a symbol of joining. As symbol of agreement on wedding matchmakers break flat cakes and give them to the guests, sitting at the table (the rite “non sindirish”).¹⁰⁾ Thus, on the wedding ceremony food is a part of ritual process, consolidating obligations of the both sides and one of the symbols of links between them.

Food symbolism, possessing certain communicative functions, being a part of ritual and getting a magic meaning gives rite a vivid emotional colour. If considering rite as a whole, emotional side seems to be very important.

It is not a mere chance that ethnologists and psychologists connect formation of ritualisation with reaction on indefinite situation that arouse fear, anxiety, uncertainly.

Emotional stress is relieved in rituals. Ritual food has the meaning not only in itself, but also the ways of its cooking, and

⁸⁾ Greeting.

⁹⁾ Shaniyazov K.Sh. Uzbeki-karluki. Tashkent, 1964. S.148.

¹⁰⁾ Shaniyazov K.Sh. K etnicheskoy istorii uzbekov. T., 1999 g. S.311.

the most important is that its preparation and consumption are connected with gathering a certain circle of people.

It is necessary to keep certain rituals while cooking food during a funeral cycle. One can not prepare food in a house of a dead man on the first days. Probably, it is connected with fire-worship and remains of Zoroastrism. According to a popular belief of paganism, fire shouldn't be profaned by the presence of a dead body. In the house of a dead man food can not be cooked during the first three days; it is prepared by close relatives and neighbors. *Halvaytar* (flour fried on oil) is a compulsory dish on the funeral day and other funeral repast days, as for it is considered to be a help for a dead man in releasing his sins. *Halvaytar* is considered as a sacred food. A porridge-like mass is served at a table in a hot condition.

A woman cooking this dish shouldn't talk to anybody (as it is considered that while she is cooking a process of "savol-javob" is taking place (answer of a dead man on questions of Allah).

No one can eat before the funeral. After a dead man is buried, it's allowed to drink tea and eat *halvaytar*, and pilaw is cooked. In Mindon Kishlak of Fergana region they cook "kora osh" (black pilaw).

Cooking pilaw for 20 days is surrounded by a special meaning, as according to superstition only pilaw-cooking relieves a dead body from sufferings. After pilaw is eaten, a copper is washed by 7 women and the most close one among them should pour out the water in the spring, arik,¹¹⁾ etc. as it is considered that the body of a dead man swells within 39 days and when water with odds and ends is carefully poured out into the water, the body is released from swelling through the thumb of a dead man. But if this water is not carefully poured, the body of a dead man will suffer from tortures and can burst.

¹¹⁾ Irrigation canal.

At the beginning of the 20th century pilaw was cooked on the “kor yegdi”,¹²⁾ “laylak keldi”.¹³⁾ People attached a great importance to pilaw and considered that rice was “tooth” of the Prophet; that’s why one could not throw out remains as it was a great sin. One should mark that at present as well as in the past Uzbeks treated any traditional food with great respect. Cooking pilaw is considered necessary in wedding rituals as well as during funeral cycle.

Pilaw is one of the ancient dishes. Since olden days Uzbeks-sarts attached to pilaw a role of a central dish in ritual prestigious meals on all levels, especially in festival. Invitation to pilaw became a synonym of invitation to the guests; it was accepted as a symbol, as an indispensable attribute of a big festive table. That’s why we can say that situationally pilaw gets the role of this or that sign. Ritual food can be divided into two types. The dishes of the first type are cooked only in a certain situation. They are precisely connected with a certain feast or rite and considered as its compulsory part. That’s why these dishes in ordinary time can not be presented (halvaytar, bugursak). At the same time some dishes of daily nourishment, which are not accepted like ritual in ordinary cases, can become situational or get some extraordinary features, because in some cases their presence at a feast is welcome and sometimes compulsory (pilaw, katlama).

Talking about ritual food, one can not mark such a phenomenon as the rite of sacrifice. Duality characteristic to early religious belief was reflected in the main aim of sacrifice : to obtain help and at the same time to protect oneself from a possible harmful impact of deity or spirit. This ambivalency reveals especially clear in relation to dead men. They are “treated” with home food, people make a sacrifice, trying to propitiate them and accustom them to family problems. In the 20th century family

¹²⁾ Prazdnik pervogo snega, a takje chast’ poxoronno-pominal’nogo cikla. Polevie zapisi, Alimov Kayum 1912 g.r. Mahallya “Samarkand darvoza”.

¹³⁾ Chast’ poxoronno-pominal’nogo cikla. Polevie zapisi, Alimov Kayum 1912 g.r. Mahallya “Samarkand darvoza”

became the main donor. With the help of offerings, it wants to regulate its position not only in the society, for example, in the territorial community (mahallia), but also in the other world. Offering to souls¹⁴⁾ or spirits of dead members of the family (or in their honour) made in order to consolidate family traditions are very significant: the dead men were called to protect the prosperity of alive relatives.

Ethnologist R. Smith marked that offering was a form of communication between the family members and family's deity. Killing and eating of sacrificial animal is a joint family meal which is the sign declaring partnership.¹⁵⁾

At the beginning of the 20th century in Tashkent "hudoya" was organized connecting with the process of wedding preparation or housewarming. In this connection, rich families sacrificed a horse, families that were fairly well off – a ram and also a cock (mainly black in Tashkent) the main idea of this rite was a bloodshed of sacrificial animal ("kon chikarish"). All the meat of an animal or bird was used without remains during the rite. The rite "hudoya" is currently organized among Uzbeks.

The food taken from certain rites, dedicated to dead ancestors becomes sacred. For example, the rite "Movlyud" is the one devoted to dead forefathers. Though initial sense of the rite "Movlyud" is birthday of Muhammed the Prophet.

In Tashkent today it has mainly become part of a funeral cycle. During this rite they put a tray with different sweet meats and fruits on "dastarhan" (a table-cloth). Sugar is compulsorily attributed as well as sweet water ("shartat") which is poured out into two kosa (a special national cone-shaped vessel for hot dishes).

At the end of the rite women drink this water by turns. During the rite otin-oyi (a female minister of Islam religion organizing religious rites among women) reads a prayer from the Koran, to thank for all the treatment becomes sacred. In

¹⁴⁾ Dreid Z. Totem i tabu. M: Pg., b.g., s.90, 92, 93.

¹⁵⁾ Tokarev C.A. "O jertvoprinosheniyax", // EO., 1999, №5, S.25.

comparison, we will mark that in Mindon Kishlak of Fergana region, boiled rice is considered as a compulsory dish for guests treatment during this rite (according to infant, it is a favorite dish of Muhammed the Prophet) as well as sweet milk which is drunk in turns during the rite by its participants. In this case sweet water or sweet milk symbolizes sweet milky rivers which would flow towards dead man with bigger stream after the rite realization.

With the help of prayers and food, one can perform the rite of consecrating into *otinoyi*, which exists today. The offering of a ram or a cock is compulsory in this rite. Besides 11 flat cakes, 11 kinds of fruits and vegetables, 11 *somsa*, 11 raviolies (*chuchvara*), 11 kinds of pastries (*kottirma*, *yupka*), boiled rice and *halvaytar* in two plates.

After consecrating the rice in *otinoyi* all the cooked food was given to the orphans.

There is a synthesis of two principles in the described rite. On the one hand the offering (“*kon chikarish*”) is obligatory in it and symbolizes appeal to Allah, on the other hand eating of the food becomes sacred after reading a prayer. Thus, it consolidates twice the power of this rite.

There were kept relevant rituals and rites. During the *Kurban Hait* prosperous people sacrificed a ram to Allah and cooked a ritual dish *halisa* (*halim*). Thus in the preparation of *halim* the ram should be kept in domestic conditions. The ram was considered to be sacred (*hald*) in good condition of health and his ear must be pierced.¹⁶⁾

At the beginning of the century there existed a custom that when taking care of an ill man one had to cook *shavlya* (boiled rice with meat) and left it near *aryk* for the spirits (*arvohlar*) trying to get their favour in order to make the ill man recovered. This custom is still kept among the people of older generation of Samarkand darvaza.¹⁷⁾

¹⁶⁾ Polevie zapisi. Karimov Ikbol. 1924 g.r. Mahallya “Ilgari”.

¹⁷⁾ Polevie zapisi. Hodjimuhamedov Cadulla. 1912 g.r. Mahallya Samarkand darvaza.

In holidays as well as in the past among the mahallya's people there exists such a custom as "is chikarish". On Thursday's or Sunday's evening one cooks pilaw and the smell of roast meat is considered to be the treatment for forefathers' spirits who, according to a superstition, visit home on these days.¹⁸⁾

Thus, the one who has fed the spirits with the food and its smell, and often sacrifices some animals and shedding blood, can get the spirits' favour and reach his aim (averting troubles, illness, solution of problems).

The part of religious-magic customs connected with food reflects an echo of demonological religious beliefs. The very eating of food and also different manipulations with it were considered as the way to contact with supernatural beings. For example, wheat ("don") was used in funeral rituals. There existed such rite as "dovra". When a grave-digger rode on a horse for one lap around the house of a dead man, he was given 32 Kg of corn besides their reward. It was considered that sins of the dead man were washed off or paid off by that way.¹⁹⁾ It is interesting that such a custom existed till the middle of the 30th years. According to informants it was substituted for another one in the beginning of the 40th years. In the yard where there was a dead man, a small parcel with rice was hung on the fruit tree, i.e. wheat corns were replaced for rice. Today the rite "dovra" is kept only in the memory of elder generation.

Thus, we see that food not only performed vital demand of a person, but reflected his way of thinking. The objects of material culture, being included into a certain ethnocultural system, get a specific meaning, not characteristic to the nature of these objects, but obtained because of their participation in the certain ethnic system.

Meaning exactly this specific semantic load of universal elements, we can speak about them as components of a unique ethnic culture and also as stability and succession of ethnic culture

¹⁸⁾ Polevie zapisi. Sultonov Muborhon. 1917 g.r. Mahallya "Zingi ota".

¹⁹⁾ Polevie zapisi. Salimov Nadjmiddin 1917 g.r. Mahallya "Sogbon".

in the course of history.²⁰⁾ Symbolic ideas about food are one of the main components of ethnic Uzbek etiquette. Besides symbolic functions, the food performed a social role in various rituals and ceremonies, the common sense by which it hadn't yet been connected with nourishment. It must be said that all rites performed in mahallya had a social ideological load. Although the majority of rites were directed to some kind of connection of mahallya's people with ancestors' spirits, the motives of helping poor people, widows and orphans can be clearly recognized in them, and the food does play a very important role in every rite.

"Rites", "rituals" altered in due course getting new details or vice versa, were reduced. In spite of the existing of a conception of traditional society as being static and immovable²¹⁾, the author of the article agrees with L.G. Ionin²²⁾ who asserts that the tradition proposes not only research, but changes. Traditions do not always block modernization, but somehow can promote it. The comparison of ritual meal as well as the methods of cooking stayed invariable within a long period of time. But during the 20th century a transformation of composition in ritual meal happened. First of all changes were connected having new dishes in the festival, by two ways: 1) on complete absence of their ritual role (for example, cakes, oranges, bananas became the components of a ritual meal). 2) by transformation of magic features (for example, substitution of wheat for rice in the funeral rite).

In conclusion, we want to mark that the notion "rite" in a broad sense and more narrow – "ritual meal" represents an effective mean of social-psychological impact on people of mahallya.

²⁰⁾ Kuznecov I.M. Adaptivnost' etnicheskikh kultur i etnokulturnie tipi samoopredeleniya lichnosti. // SE. №1, 1988, S.15.

²¹⁾ Polyakov S.P. Tradicionalizm v sredneaziatskom obschestve. M., 1989.

²²⁾ Ionin L.G. Sociologiya kulturi. M., 1998, s.149.