



Eating Habits in Rum Culture: The Case of Gökçeada

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the eating habits of the Rum (Greek Orthodox) community living in Gökçeada, focusing on their cultural values. The research data were collected using the interview technique. The interviews were conducted face-to-face between April 18, 2022, and April 23, 2022. Each interview lasted an average of 15 minutes, and the responses were recorded in writing. To explore how the cultural values of the Rum population in Gökçeada are reflected in their eating habits, questions were asked about the relationship between their cuisine and Turkish cuisine, the characteristics of their eating culture, and the sustainability of their culinary traditions. The research involved a total of 20 Rum participants. Content analysis was used to interpret the responses regarding the reflection of cultural values in their eating habits, while descriptive analysis was employed to interpret the research findings. According to the findings, most of the participants were married, aged over 52, and had completed secondary education. The majority of the participants stated that, due to their long-term coexistence, the Rum and Turkish cuisines had influenced each other, resulting in many similarities. In terms of the characteristics of their eating culture, the widespread use of olive oil was particularly emphasized. While breakfast is more important in Turkish culture, lunch holds greater significance for the Rum community. The results revealed that their culinary culture has been influenced by Turkish cuisine, with olive oil being the distinguishing feature of their food traditions. Most participants indicated that their eating culture has persisted, although some mentioned that it no longer continues as strongly as it once did. Furthermore, it was noted that many believe they maintain their culture by continuing to prepare traditional recipes passed down through generations. Lastly, it was observed that the participants generally do not share their culinary recipes with others.

Keywords

Gökçeada, Rum, Cultural Values, Eating Habits

INTRODUCTION

The ways in which people select, prepare, and consume food to sustain their lives reflect their culture, as well as the complex relationships and interactions within the society they live in. Culture is often defined as a way of life for a society, providing its members with an "indispensable guide in all matters of life." In other words, culture refers to the socially standardized activities of individuals (Axelson, 1986).

Culture and food are constantly interacting with each other. People's eating habits are shaped by the cultural influences they are exposed to. During special occasions such as birthdays, funerals, holy days (e.g., Easter, New Year, name days), and certain natural phenomena (e.g., the arrival of spring, solar eclipses), people revive the rituals passed down from generation to generation and reflect these traditions in their meals. Researchers have frequently addressed the relationship between culture and eating habits (Wahlqvist & Lee, 2007; Beşirli, 2011; Timothy & Ron, 2013; Düzgün & Durlu Özkaya, 2015).

The Rum community living in Gökçeada (Imbros) for many years has led a life deeply integrated with the island. The island's conditions have influenced the lifestyle of the Rum people, and this is reflected in their food culture. Due to transportation issues and the difficulty of importing products from the mainland, the islanders have traditionally produced their own supplies and lived in harmony with nature. Although this problem has been alleviated to a large extent today,

the Rum community still prioritizes the consumption of products grown on the island. Their cuisine, shaped by practices such as animal husbandry, agriculture, viticulture, beekeeping, fishing, and wild herb gathering, faces the threat of disappearing as the population ages. This research is important because it examines the culture and eating habits of the Rum people of Gökçeada, a topic that has not yet been sufficiently explored in the literature. In this context, the study investigates the characteristics of the Rum community's eating habits and how they have been passed down to the present day.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Culture and Eating Habits

The term gastronomy had not been in recorded use for nearly 15 centuries until it was revived by French poet Joseph Berchoux as the title of his poem *La Gastronomie* (Ferguson, 2000). The meaning of the word gastronomy can be derived from two parts: "gastro," which is related to the mouth, stomach, and the entire digestive system; and "nomos," which means rule or regulation. Thus, gastronomy refers to the rules or norms associated with eating and drinking. From this derivation, gastronomy can be expressed as guidance on what to eat (and drink), how much, how, where, when, why, and in what form or combinations (Santich, 2004).

Culture refers to the values belonging to a society and the products these values produce. At the same time, culture is a concept that encompasses the distinctive experiences, customs, rules, artistic expressions, beliefs, behaviors, and perspectives of a society, which evolve over time and differentiate it from others, creating its identity as a social entity (Mutlu, 2022; Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2023). Elements such as language, religion, customs, traditions, history, art, literature, and eating habits form the common values of a society, distinguishing it from others. Cultural values are created by humans (Demirel & Karakuş, 2019). Since humans, as biological beings, require nourishment, food plays a crucial role within the continuity of culture. Culture significantly influences eating habits in many ways. For instance, some religions set strict guidelines on what people can or cannot consume (e.g., pork in Islam, kosher in Judaism). Factors that shape culture, such as geography, climate, and economic conditions, directly affect nourishment (Beşirli, 2011).

Cultural heritage and food are closely intertwined. From a cultural heritage perspective, gastronomy is a mix of tangible and intangible elements (Timothy & Ron, 2013). Thus, food represents cultural identity (Hillel et al., 2013). There is a sense of local food culture inherent to human development, even if not always regional. Food culture originates from the homeland of a people, shaped by resources (climate, soil, water, and fuel), beliefs and knowledge (religion, education, literacy, communication), ethnicity (native or immigrant), and technology (hunting, gathering, agriculture, horticulture, aquaculture, fishing; food processing, storage, transportation, and cooking) (Wahlqvist & Lee, 2007). Fischler (1988) remarks that "man does not feed solely on proteins, fats, and carbohydrates but also on symbols, myths, and fantasies." For example, different foods at Thanksgiving or Christmas dinners are ritually sourced, prepared, and consumed.

Eating and drinking are among the most basic needs for sustaining our lives (Düzgün & Durlu Özkaya, 2015). There is evidence in both written and unwritten history regarding how these needs were met (Cömert & Sökmen, 2017). Societies have developed unique culinary cultures throughout history (Bekar & Belpınar, 2015). Paralleling the lifestyle of a society, culinary culture began to take on a more complex form after the hunter-gatherer period (Düzgün & Durlu Özkaya, 2015). With the advent of settled life and agricultural activities, techniques and tools began to evolve (Aksoy & Çetin, 2018). The use of fire and the continuous development of kitchen tools and techniques led to the emergence of the modern culinary concept, starting with the opening of the first restaurant in France in 1765 (Özdemir & Dülger Altınar, 2019).

Gökçeada and the Rums

Gökçeada, known to have a rich cultural history since ancient times (Erdoğu, 2011), is Turkey's largest island, covering an area of 289 km². Located 26 km off the mainland of Çanakkale province, the island boasts a 92 km coastline (Yaşar, 2006). Homer refers to the island as "Imbros," meaning "the windy island" in the *Iliad*. Gökçeada, a northern island known for its winds, freshwater springs, rock tombs, unique cliffs, and stone houses in Rum villages and later-established settlements (Bademli [Glikli], Kaleköy, Zeytinli [Aya Todorı], Yeni Bademli, Dereköy [İşkenit], Tepeköy [Ağrıdy], Eşkelek, Şahinkaya), is a distinctive destination (Cengiz et al., 2017).

In earlier times, when transportation to the island was more limited, economic activities on Gökçeada were based on beekeeping, sheep and goat farming, and the production of barley and wheat. In the 19th century, the island also produced grapes, olives, honey, cheese, millet, cotton, and madder root (Özekmekçi, 2020). Today, the island's inhabitants make their living through tourism, agriculture, animal husbandry, and fishing. Due to its independence from the mainland, Gökçeada has managed to preserve its unique cuisine and flavors. Although the Rum population on Gökçeada has dwindled, many used to live in stone houses with gardens, where they actively used a traditional oven for making bread and food. Women in Gökçeada baked bread, cheese pie, pumpkin pie, herb pie, rice pie, water pie, and *eftazimo* (a type of rusk). They also made a special pastry called *hirupliskia* before harvesting their annual wheat. Small livestock, game animals, seasonal fish (such as dentex, grouper, bonito, bluefish, mackerel, sardines), squid, octopus, and lobster were frequently consumed by the island's residents (Bozis, 2020). Traditional dishes unique to the island include *Bademli Kurabiye* (almond cookie), *Dondurma* (ice cream made from the milk of freely roaming goats), *Cicirya*

(prepared by Rums living in Zeytinli village), Domates Reçeli (tomato jam made from the island's tomatoes), Ahtapot Yahnisi (octopus stew), and Galaktoboureko (a traditional Rum dessert) (Çavuşoğlu & Çavuşoğlu, 2018). Gökçeada's cuisine closely resembles the Mediterranean diet, characterized by regular use of olive oil (as the main source of added fat), consumption of plant-based foods (grains, fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts, and seeds), limited consumption of red meat (small livestock) and other meat products (such as poultry and duck), and the balanced intake of fish, seafood, and dairy products. Additionally, there is moderate alcohol consumption, mostly red wine (Lăcătuşu et al., 2019).

The Rums of Gökçeada, who were left out of the population exchange following the Treaty of Lausanne, saw a dramatic decline in population, with a 90% decrease by 1975 (Yücel & Yıldız, 2014). Today, the island is home to families from various regions of Turkey, including Istanbul, Erzurum, Van, Bingöl, Isparta, Ordu, Burdur, Samsun, Diyarbakır, and Artvin, as well as a remaining Rum population (Kahraman, 2005).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Purpose and Significance of the Research

The aim of this study is to determine the extent to which the eating habits of the Rum (Greek Orthodox) community, who have lived with the Turkish people on Gökçeada for a long time, are influenced by their culture, and whether Turkish and Rum cultures have converged over time. In this context, the study seeks to explore whether the Rums living in Gökçeada have maintained their gastronomy, which has developed within their own cultural framework.

Population and Sample

The population of the study consists of the Rum (Greek Orthodox) community living in Gökçeada. The snowball sampling method was employed to determine the study's sample. The snowball technique is commonly used when there is difficulty accessing key individuals within the population or when there is a lack of information about the population. Researchers using the snowball technique aim to gather data by asking, "Who is the most knowledgeable and accessible person regarding this topic or situation? Who should I start interviewing?" (Flick, 2014). In this context, the sample of the study consists of 20 local Rum individuals living in Gökçeada.

Research Method

The research data were collected using the interview technique. Qualitative research is a comprehensive approach in which the researcher observes individuals in their natural environments to explain the underlying qualities of individual and social events and phenomena based on their experiences (Creswell, 2013). The semi-structured questionnaire used in this study was developed based on a literature review and consists of 22 questions under three main topics, formulated with the assistance of three experts in the field. The interviews were conducted between April 18-23, 2022, with each interview lasting an average of 15 minutes, and all responses were recorded in writing. To examine how the cultural values of the Rums living in Gökçeada are reflected in their eating habits, the interview questions were structured around three main topics created with the help of the three expert academics. These topics are as follows:

- What is the relationship between your cuisine and Turkish cuisine?
- What are the characteristics of your food culture?
- Do you think your food culture is sustainable?

In-depth questions were included under each of these topics to obtain detailed information. For example, the main question, "What is the relationship between your cuisine and Turkish cuisine?" was supported by sub-questions such as: "What are your favorite dishes from Turkish cuisine? What dishes do you make from Turkish cuisine? What are the similarities between your cuisine and Turkish cuisine? What are the differences? Do you use locally sourced products in your cooking (goat, olives, wild herbs, seafood, fish, honey, flour)? What do you consider the most iconic dish of the island?"

The second main question, "What are the characteristics of your food culture?" was explored through sub-questions such as: "Which culinary cultures have influenced your cuisine? What are the most distinguishing features of your cuisine? What dishes are associated with your culture (seafood, oven dishes, wild herbs, meats, appetizers, drinks, desserts)? What dishes are cooked the most frequently (and how often)? What essential ingredients do you use in your cooking? What dishes do you prepare for special occasions (name days, Sunday services, weddings, Easter, Christmas)? What is your favorite dish? Do you prepare your own meals or prefer to eat out? If you eat out, what do you consider when choosing a place to dine?"

The final question, "Do you think your food culture is sustainable?" was supported by sub-questions such as: "Do you believe you are maintaining your food culture? If so, how? With whom do you share your recipes? Are there any gastronomic values that are at risk of being lost? If so, what are they? Have any of your foods and drinks changed over time? If so, how? Does your food culture have any stories associated with it? If so, what are they?"

The data collected from the interviews were analyzed using content analysis and descriptive analysis. Content analysis is a method used to analyze messages in verbal, written, or visual communication networks. As a qualitative research method, content analysis is a systematic and objective tool used to describe and measure phenomena (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). The goal of content analysis is to interpret the data using statistical methods, allowing researchers to make systematic and objective interpretations (Koçak & Arun, 2013). Descriptive analysis involves organizing and interpreting the data obtained from interviews and observations to present it to the reader. While descriptive analysis does not require

in-depth examination, content analysis allows for a more thorough investigation of the data and helps identify concepts and themes that describe the data (Karataş, 2015). In this study, content analysis was used to explain the responses of 20 Rums living in Gökçeada regarding how their cultural values are reflected in their eating habits, while descriptive analysis was used to interpret the research findings.

In line with the purpose and scope of this research, ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Scientific Research Ethics Committee of the Graduate Education Institute at Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, under decision number 08/42 dated April 14, 2022.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The demographic characteristics of the Rum participants from the Gökçeada district of Çanakkale who participated in the research are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Gender		Marital Status	
Female	11	Married	13
Male	9	Single	7
Age		Education	
35-40	1	Primary Education	6
41-46	1	Secondary Education	2
47-52	3	High School	10
53 and above	15	University	2

When Table 1 is examined, it is observed that a total of 20 local Rum residents from Gökçeada participated in the research, with 11 being women and 9 being men. Based on the findings in the table, the majority of the participants were married (13), aged 53 and above (15), and high school graduates.

The Relationship Between Turkish and Rum Cuisine

Most participants expressed that, due to the long history of cohabitation, Rum and Turkish cuisines have influenced each other, resulting in many similarities between the two. The Rums stated that they particularly enjoy Turkish dishes such as kebabs, meat dishes, lahmacun, pilaf, stuffed grape leaves (sarma), dolma, hünkâr beğendi, soups, and the dessert künefe. The Turkish dishes they most frequently prepare include şakşuka, stewed beans, pilaf, fried liver, sautéed chicken, roasted goat, moussaka, chickpeas, dolma, meatballs, imam bayıldı, tray kebab, güllaç, and a bean stew made with carrots, potatoes, and celery stalk. The dishes that are similar to Turkish cuisine include moussaka, olive oil pilaf, lemony beans, meatless imam bayıldı, Zamatışti (similar to water pastry), Kreato Pita (meat pie), Eftazima (rusk), meat stew, caciki, meat dishes, stuffed vine leaves, kapuska (cabbage stew), spinach pie, dolma, green beans, and pasta with minced meat.

The differences between the two cuisines were noted as follows: Turkish cuisine uses more spices, particularly hot spices, while Rum cuisine varies the type of fat used depending on the dish, and Turkish cuisine commonly uses animal fats. Additionally, olive oil is widely used in Turkish cuisine, while pork is common in Rum cuisine. Rum cuisine is generally simpler compared to Turkish cuisine, and Rums incorporate alcohol into their dishes, which is less common in Turkish cuisine.

When asked, "Do you use locally grown products in your cooking?" most participants responded, "Yes, we generally use locally grown wild herbs, octopus, squid, cheese, honey, meat, and flour." Lastly, when asked what they considered to be the island's most iconic dish, participants named lamb stuffed with rice, keşkek (a traditional wheat and meat dish), roasted lamb, Bakalyaros (prepared on October 28 and March 25), roasted kid goat and boiled kid goat for name days, Paskalya çöreği (Easter bread) for Easter, and stuffed turkey for Christmas.

Some of the participants' comments regarding these questions include:

"Yes, there has been an interaction because we have lived together for a long time." (P1)

"For us, they are all the same. We were born and raised here. There is no difference for us. We just don't cook as spicy as you do." (P10)

"Yes, we only use locally grown products (seasonally)." (P12)

Characteristics of Eating Habits in Rum Cuisine

Most participants emphasized the widespread use of olive oil as a defining feature of their eating culture, and noted that while breakfast is more important in Turkish culture, lunch is more significant in Rum culture. They mentioned that their culinary traditions have been influenced by Turkish cuisine, with olive oil being the most distinguishing feature. Their culture is mainly associated with dishes such as moussaka, almond cookies (ezme badem kurabiyesi), Cicirya, octopus stew, wild herb salad, Suvlaki (pork skewer), caciki, Pitaniya (flatbread), shrimp pasta (Karidomakaronna), Zamatışti (water pastry), octopus roasted in ash, pumpkin pie, Pastico (pasta with minced meat), and stuffed goat. They reported cooking dishes such as sautéed vegetables (lahanika), fish, mashed potatoes, chicken, meat, seasonal dishes, pork chops, boiled lamb and goat meat, and Pastico two to three times a week. The essential ingredients in their kitchens include olive oil, cheese, squid, shrimp, beef, bay leaves, octopus, wild herbs, Greek salad, fennel, thyme, and mint. On special

occasions, especially name days, they prepare dishes such as rabbit with pearl onions, baked goat, spinach pie, Artos (church bread), Easter bread, and stuffed lamb. Their favorite dishes include stuffed cabbage with meat, meat and fish, beans, moussaka, caciki, hünkar beğendi, stuffed goat, Suvlaki, and Cicirya. They also mentioned that they usually prepare their meals at home. Some participant comments on these questions are as follows:

“Our culture is similar to Turkish culture; breakfast is important in Turkish culture, while lunch is more significant in Rum culture.” (P1)

“In our culture, we don’t use a lot of spices, and we don’t consume much soup. Breakfast is usually quicker and eaten on the go.” (P2)

“The dishes are the same as the Turks, but the techniques and ingredients are different.” (P7)

“In our culture, we consume a small amount of alcohol during or after meals.” (P19)

Sustainability of Eating Habits

Most participants indicated that their eating culture continues to this day, although some emphasized that their cultural practices on the island do not persist as strongly as they once did. They believe that they maintain their culture by continuing to prepare recipes passed down from generation to generation. However, they also noted that they generally do not share these recipes with others. They reported that some culinary values, such as Zamatişti (similar to water pastry), Kreato Pita (meat pie), Eftazima (rusk), and various types of flatbread, are on the verge of disappearing. While there has been no change in the recipes themselves, there have been changes in cooking techniques and ingredients. Most participants stated that they could not recall any specific stories associated with their food culture. Some participant comments on these questions are as follows:

"Eftazima is made with chickpea yeast, kneaded and leavened seven times, and it has to be made during a full moon. The original recipe has been lost." (P1)

"Tarhana and winemaking (every household used to make their own wine) are gradually being abandoned in favor of convenience, and store-bought products are being used." (P3)

"Pies are no longer made. They used to be made on Saturdays, but this tradition has stopped." (P5)

"Many things used to grow on the island. My mother and her generation made everything themselves, but that’s no longer the case." (P15)

"Yes, I try to make old recipes. Sometimes I write them down. I’m experimenting at home now and noting them down so they won’t be lost. The elders didn’t give us many recipes." (P20)

CONCLUSION

Cultural values are the collective elements created by people. Since humans, as biological beings, require nourishment to sustain life, food plays a crucial role within the continuity of culture. Culture influences nourishment in many ways. For example, certain religions have strict guidelines about what people can and cannot consume (e.g., pork in Islam, kosher laws in Judaism). Factors that shape culture, such as geography, climate, and economic conditions, also directly impact food practices (Beşirli, 2011).

This study has determined that the cultural values of the Rum population living in Gökçeada are reflected in their eating habits, passed down from generation to generation. It was observed that the Rums of Gökçeada, who have lived on the island for many years, reflect both their own cultural values and, over time, those of the local population of Gökçeada. For example, the widespread use of olive oil, which is common in Turkish cuisine, is also prominent in Rum cuisine, showing similarities between the two. Rum cuisine is generally simpler compared to Turkish cuisine, and their unique recipes are considered to hold gastronomic value. The Rums continue to make traditional dishes for special occasions, maintaining their cultural practices. The sustainability of their food culture is linked to the fact that Rums have historically made up the majority of the island’s population, and their gastronomic traditions remain intact. Their long-term cohabitation on the island has allowed them to integrate aspects of both Rum and Turkish cultures into their daily lives.

However, despite the continuation of certain cultural values in the eating habits of the Rums who have lived on the island for many years, some of these cultural values are at risk of being lost. It has been observed that certain cultural practices handed down from their ancestors have been abandoned or lost over time. Therefore, to ensure the sustainability of cultural values, it is essential that these values are passed down from generation to generation and remain at the forefront. The more cultural values are shared and preserved, the greater their sustainability. For this reason, it is important to maintain traditions and culinary practices from the past. Furthermore, since there is insufficient information in the existing literature regarding the culture and eating habits of the Rums of Gökçeada, it would be beneficial for academics and relevant institutions to collaborate on scientific studies. Such efforts would help preserve cultural values and increase awareness, providing a foundation for future generations to learn about their cultural heritage and guiding future academic studies on the topic.

CREDIT AUTHOR STATEMENT

All authors have contributed equally. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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