

FOOD: IDENTITY OF CULTURE AND RELIGION

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Abstract

Culture is what makes everyone different from who they are and where they originate. It embraces all the aspects of human life and their way of communicating and interacting with other human beings. Food is an essential part of people's lives, and not just a means of survival. It is also the main factor in how we view and differentiate people and influences the impacts on their culture. Different cultures have varieties of food and ingredients and this is a fusion of foods with their culture. You are what you eat, it doesn't matter how they eat it or how they cook it as long as it represents them and their culture. There is a strong link between culture and food; this includes their religion, tradition. Media plays an important role supporting in retaining culture and food identity. The myriad of published cookbooks and food magazines, culinary festivals, TV shows, celebrity chefs, blogs has completely changed the meaning of food. The aim of this paper is to try to give answers to the questions of how food communicates our culture, and how we relate food to our religious and cultural identity. There is an increased awareness of significance of food within contemporary society and culture, and therefore there is a need to explore it.

Keywords: *communication, culture, cuisine.*



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INTRODUCTION:

People also connect to their cultural or ethnic group through food patterns. Food is often used as a means of retaining their cultural identity. People from different cultural backgrounds eat different foods. The areas in which families live and where their ancestors originated influence food like and dislikes. These food preferences result in patterns of food choices within a cultural or regional group.

In religion, food is one of the most important parts of religious ceremonies. The role of food in religious culture is an important part of showing respect among their communities and many of these religions obey the religious commandments, hence food is prepared in different ways. The meaning of food is an exploration of culture through food. What we consume, how we acquire it, who prepares it, who's at the table, and who eats first is a

form of communication that is, it has a rich cultural base. Beyond merely nourishing the body, what we eat and with whom we eat can inspire and strengthen the bonds between individuals, communities, and even countries. There is no closer relationship than the one with the family and food plays a large part in defining family roles, rules, and traditions. It helps us to discover attitudes, practices, and rituals surrounding food, it sheds light on our most basic beliefs about ourselves and others. There is a relationship between culture and food. This negotiates our identities, cultures and environments.

Food has been widely studied in the fields of anthropology, sociology and cultural studies. It has not, however, been much addressed in communication studies. When someone thinks of, or mentions food, the question that comes to mind is where does it come from and how does it taste, and how is it connected to culture? Giving the answers to these questions, people usually refer to the cultural and religious context.

The term culture refers to the set of values, knowledge, language, rituals, habits, lifestyles, attitudes, beliefs, folklore, rules and customs that identify a particular group of people at a specific point in time. Some think of culture as the values, symbols, interpretations, and perspectives that distinguish one people from another in modernized societies; it is not material objects and other tangible aspects of human societies. People within a culture usually interpret the meaning of symbols, artifacts, and behaviors in the same or in similar ways. Culture is created, shaped, transmitted and learned through communication, and communication practices are largely created, shaped and transmitted by culture.

Communication is the activity of conveying information through the exchange of thoughts, messages, or information, as by speech, visuals, signals, writing or behavior. It is the meaningful exchange of information between two or more persons. Broadly defined, communication is the process by which we understand the world and our attempts to convey that understanding to others through both verbal and nonverbal language. We can consider food as a form of communication because it is a nonverbal means of sharing meanings with others. Scholars like Roland Barthes, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jacobsen provided us with theoretical tools to understand and analyze how food is communicated, how food communicates and how we communicate about food.

Barthes uses semiotics to put the role and function of food into context. He claims that food functions as a sign, a sign communicating something in addition to itself, perhaps

something other than itself. With food, we are not just buying or consuming a product but a whole system or chain of meanings. For example a mango is not just the sweet object that you ingest for nutrition; it is the whole system that contributed to growing the fruit that is the sun, water, animals, human farmers. Ronald Barthes explains further explains that eating habits, and culture are very closely related. It helps us to trace and analyze the signification of food. Barthes describes how culture influences tastes and so does class, and talks of how food is a 'situation'. Coffee, for example, became associated more with the idea of taking a break than with its effect on the nervous system, which ties in with his claim about food and advertising. Advertising has become a huge part of culture, and Barthes states that because of this advertising, people have become loyal to the brand more than the food. He claims food makes its own statement, and discusses how it affects culture and culture affects food. Food as commodity is related to industry and consumption. On the other hand, food as culture is related to tradition and nostalgia, with the rhetorical repertoire of aesthetics, identity, and uniqueness.

Food is seen more than just a means of survival. According to Barthes food is considered to be multidimensional, as something that shapes us, our identities, and our cultures and in the end, our society. Just as different clothes signify different things example the white coat a doctor, the uniform of a police officer or army personnel, food also transmits a meaning. But the meaning varies from culture to culture. Furthermore, food could not be viewed as a trope if it did not signify a meaning of something to begin with, for example: tomato, basil and mozzarella cheese on a pizza signify a taste of Italy. In addition, various food tropes are used in everyday life: Many scholars have analyzed the relationships between food, identity and communication. One of the most common ways we use food is in the construction of our personal identities. But can food operate as a sole factor in the identification of a group or an entire nation? Does food have its place within a broader set of values linked to age, religion, social status, of which some are closely linked to diet, while others have no link to food? Is the position of food flexible, or is it central (or trivial) in the formation of one's identity?

Religion and Food is also connected which adds meaning and significance to our lives. Some food beliefs and practices are based on religion. Around the world, Muslims fast during Ramadan, believed to be the month during which the Quran, the Islamic holy book, was given from God to the Prophet Muhammad. During this month, Muslims fast

during daylight hours, eating and drinking before dawn and after sunset. Orthodox Jews and some conservative Jews follow dietary laws, popularly referred to as a kosher diet which is part of their Jewish scripture. The dietary laws, which describe the use and preparation of animal foods, are followed for purposes of spiritual health. Many followers of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism are vegetarians, in part, because of a doctrine of non-injury or nonviolence. Abstinence from eating meat in these traditions stems from the desire to avoid harming other living creatures. Despite religious food prescriptions, dietary practices vary widely even among those who practice the same faith. Such variations may be due to branches or denominations of a religious group, national variations, and individuals' or families' own degree of orthodoxy or religious adherence. In this we can understand that food conveys religious sentiments of the people, making them unique and having their own identity.

In addition to impacting food choices, culture also plays a role in food-related etiquette. People in Western societies may refer to food-related etiquette as table manners, a phrase that illustrates the cultural expectation of eating food or meals at a table. Some people eat with forks and spoons; more people use fingers or chopsticks. However, utensil choice is much more complicated than choosing chopsticks, fingers, or flatware. Among some groups who primarily eat food with their fingers, diners use only the right hand to eat. Some people use only three fingers of the right hand. In some countries, licking the fingers is polite; in others, licking the fingers is considered impolite. Rules regarding polite eating may increase in formal settings. At some formal dinners, a person might be expected to choose the right fork from among two or three choices to match the food being eaten at a certain point in the meal.

The amount people eat and leave uneaten also varies from group to group. Some people from Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian countries might leave a little bit of food on their plates in order to indicate that their hunger has been satisfied. On the other hand some people from different locations might be offended if food is left on the plate, indicating that the guest may have disliked the food. Similarly, a clean plate might signify either satisfaction with the meal or desire for more food. Even the role of conversation during mealtime varies from place to place. Many families believe that mealtime is a good time to converse, share and to catch up on the lives of family and friends. Among other families, conversation during a meal is acceptable, but the topics of conversation

are limited. In some Southeast Asian countries it is considered polite to limit conversation during a meal.

Food plays an important role in the lives of families in most cultures. However, the degree of importance varies from culture to culture. In many families, activities and ceremonies center on cooking and eating habits. A host family demonstrates its prosperity or societal rank by providing large quantities of food. Among other families in other locations, activities and celebrations include food, but food is not necessarily the center of the event. Food traditions vary widely throughout the world. Even among people who share similar cultural backgrounds and some of the same food habits, eating patterns are not identical. Further, families vary from their own daily routines on holidays, when traveling, or when guests are present. Men eat differently from women. People of different age groups eat differently. However, in most parts of the world, food is associated with hospitality and expression of friendship. Therefore, sensitivity to food rules and customs is important in building and strengthening cross-cultural relationships.

As food culture has undergone transformations and developments, so has it also caused changes in some places? Without discarding its own customs and traditions, food culture in many regions could gain a new visual identity, and help us to better understand our own culture and those of others. The multicultural character of contemporary different cuisines is the result of the specific circumstances in which regions identify themselves, and yet its authenticity and cultural preservation is maintained. It does not seem easy to define food as a means of communication, before we try to answer some of the following questions: What is it about food that makes it an especially intriguing and insightful lens of analysis? What questions about food ways still need to be addressed? How has food regimes changed through time? How does the universal need for food bind individuals and groups together? What sort of changes at the personal, community, national or international levels could contribute to a more equitable food system?

The main reason we should view food as a form of communication is because it is directly linked to both ritual and culture, where ritual is defined as the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically effect or participate in the serious life. Food is at the center of every important event in our lives, such as birthdays, weddings, holidays and funerals. Within ritual contexts, food often stands in

for expressions of life, love, happiness or grief. This explains the relationship of food and religious rituals.

An important aspect of food communication is its everydayness, its ubiquity in ordinary life. Taking food and our relationships to it for granted may have contributed to the ignorance of food as an object of study or informing communication research. Interestingly, while food may have been a blind spot for communication studies, it demonstrates that communication theories can be used to help understand and research our relationships with food. From the perspective of communication studies, food has and continues to be an important symbol in our creation of meaning. Food is a site not just for sharing meaning but also as a place where we struggle over meaning.

Food has symbolic meanings based on association with other meaningful experiences. An example of the symbolic meanings including food references can be found in many of our common expressions. Bread is a good example of the symbolism found in foods. When people sit together with friends at a meal they are said to break bread with one another. This expression symbolizes a setting where friends come together in a warm, inviting and jovial manner to eat. Bread has been called the staff of life. The type of bread consumed by a person has been known to indicate social standing. For instance, white bread has traditionally been eaten by the upper class (also known as the upper crust – a bread reference) while dark bread is consumed by the poor. Whole wheat bread is the bread of choice in today's society by persons concerned more with their health than their status. Greek soldiers take a piece of bread from home into battle to ensure their safe and triumphant return home. Sailors traditionally bring a bun on their journeys to prevent shipwrecks.

In **conclusion**, understanding a culture through food is an interesting process because once a person starts asking these questions, such as how something is made, what ingredients are in it, or why it is called a certain way, the answers obtained go beyond culinary learning. In these answers, food tells us something about a culture's approach to life. In the end, we can say that food functions symbolically as a communicative practice by which we create, manage and share meanings with others. Understanding culture, habits, rituals and tradition can be explored through food and the way others perceive it.

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