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Tengri's Table: Nutrition in Ancient Turkic Belief

Abstract

The belief in Gök Tengri is a significant belief system that shaped the social, cultural, and economic life of ancient Turkic societies. This belief, which regards nature as sacred, profoundly influenced the relationship between humans, nature, and food, leaving its mark on culinary culture through both rituals and symbolic meanings. The nomadic lifestyle and animal husbandry determined the dietary habits of the Turks, with animals such as sheep, goats, and horses, along with dairy products, constituting their primary food sources. Sacrificial practices within the framework of shamanic rituals and the Tengri belief involved making offerings to gods and sacred spirits, thereby strengthening the spiritual and cultural bonds of the community. Sacrificed animals, especially horses, were not only central to ceremonies but also served as indicators of social status and religious devotion. Feasts organized for important social events like births, deaths, and weddings reinforced social unity, while the perception of food as a medium for connecting with supernatural forces highlighted the symbolism of food in Turkic mythology and belief systems. Elements such as the cults of water and trees were also integrated into the food culture as part of a life philosophy in harmony with nature. In conclusion, the Gök Tengri belief shaped the food culture of ancient Turkic societies, creating a powerful reflection of a faith-based lifestyle grounded in the interaction between nature and humanity.

Keywords: Belief and Nutrition, Gök Tengri, Tengrism, Turkish Food Culture

Introduction

Throughout history, belief systems have influenced the social and cultural structures of nearly all societies and the daily behaviors of individuals. They have also regulated communities' eating and drinking habits and attributed certain meanings to foods. A food item may be permissible in one religion while being forbidden in others. Most religions have specific rules for preparing food. Additionally, many belief systems dictate times when food and drink should not be consumed (fasting). Many belief systems influence the food culture of their followers through such rules (Gürhan, 2017; Feeley-Harnik, 1995; Cohen, 2020; Dallam, 2014; Finch, 2010).

Central Asian Turkic societies are no exception. The Gök Tengri belief served not only as a spiritual guide for people but also as a guide that influenced the material world and their way of life (Akgün, 2007; Gömeç, 1998). Besides the Gök Tengri belief, other religions adopted by the Turks throughout history have also been effective in shaping their food and beverage culture. Although there were Turks who adhered to religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, and Manichaeism, it is observed that the most influential religion affecting food and beverage culture was Islam (Batu, 2024; Yalçın, 2023; Samancı, 2021; Solmaz & Dülger Altner, 2018; Bilal, 2018; Gömeç, 2019).

The Tengri belief, with its structure that emphasizes the sacredness of nature and stresses that humanity should live in harmony with it, has also influenced food culture (Isaacs, 2021; Shamakhay et al., 2014). Issues such as which foods are sacred, which are edible, or under what conditions they can

be consumed, as well as topics like sacrificial rituals, respect for the dead, hunting, and animal husbandry, have been influenced by the Tengri belief (Roux, 1999; Gömeç, 2019; İnan, 1952).

As reported by Çini (2019), the Tengri belief was of great importance to Turkic society, holding a position that could be described as the central point of their lives. While aspects of the belief system such as its similarities and differences with other belief systems, sacred beings, religious rituals, family structure, social structure, and ceremonies have been extensively studied before (Onay, 2013; Mandaloglu, 2012; Bars, 2018; Demirel, 2017; Arvas, 2014; Gazanfargizi, 2014; Erkoç, 2018), there is a lack of studies on the effects of this belief on food culture.

The purpose of this study is to determine the effects of the Tengri belief on the food culture in ancient Turkic society. In this context, how the Tengri belief conceptualized the relationship between nature, humans, and food, and how this relationship was reflected in the general cultural structure of the society will be among the main topics to be examined. Revealing the faith-based foundations of food choices and dietary habits will contribute to a better understanding of the spiritual values and cultural continuity of ancient Turkic society.

Literature Review

Shamanism and Tengrism

Shamanism is not just a belief system but also an important tool in shaping the worldview of ancient Turkic societies towards the world and the universe. The term Shamanism was considered a pejorative word among Altai shamans; the term Tengrism was used for the oldest religion of the Turks. Tengrism can be defined as the worship of a single god and showing respect to sacred spirits called "iye" (Tosun, 2024).

According to the belief of Shamanism, the universe consists of three parts. The upper realm, consisting of 17 layers, represents the sky. The lower realm is the world of darkness and is said to consist of 7 or 9 layers. According to the belief, the most supreme of the gods is Tengere Kayra Khan, who is seen as the beginning of all beings. Kayra Khan is one of the names given to the Sky God (Toleho, 2024, p. 101).

"Turks, in every period of history, have believed in a creative power they called Tengri. This creative power is a creator who bestows *kut* (divine grace/power), *küç* (strength), *ülük* (destiny/share), and unity upon the khagans" (Uğurlu, 2012, p. 331). Kayra Khan is the creator of many divine beings, including the well-known Erlik and Ülgen (Radloff, 2008, pp. 19-23). Within the Tengri belief, besides these divine beings, tree and water spirits also hold an important place. Natural water elements such as water sources, rivers, and springs are generally associated with protective spirits, while trees also have a significant place for the Turks. These trees, considered sacred in every aspect of life from the cradle to the grave, are generally seen as a "trust from God." These spirits living in trees and waters can help people as well as punish them (Zarcone, 2005, pp. 36-37).

Central Asian Food Culture

In Turkic mythology, foods hold a significant place not only as a source of sustenance but also as a means of communicating with and appeasing mythological beings. In rituals shaped by the influence of Shamanism and Gök Tengri beliefs, foods offered to gods and *iyes* (spirits) strengthened the bond between humans and supernatural forces. These foods, used in every aspect of life from daily routines to special occasions such as births, deaths, and weddings, were offered to request abundance, seek protection, and express gratitude to the gods. The mythological significance of food was not limited to its use in rituals but also shaped social order and traditions. Offerings made to mythological figures like the spirits of fire and earth have a deep-rooted place in the cultural codes of Turkic societies. This demonstrates how mythology, beliefs, and cultural practices converge through food.

Central Asia is a geography that forms the cornerstones of Turkish food culture. The nomadic lifestyle directly influenced dietary habits shaped by agriculture and animal husbandry. Besides horses,

sheep, and camels, milk and dairy products (yogurt, kumis, butter) were primary food sources. Meat was generally consumed boiled or dried, while foods like *yufka* bread and *tutmaç* made from grains were developed to suit the needs of nomadic life. While the meals stood out for their naturalness and simplicity, ritual feasts that strengthened social bonds were of great importance. Grand tables set up for festivals and weddings were indicators of a culture of sharing and hospitality (Batu & Batu, 2018).

The Turks, who sustained themselves with herds of horses and sheep, migrated according to the seasons. In spring, the nomads moved to plateaus with vast pastures, and in autumn, they descended to arid valleys and especially to riverbanks. Their dietary habits were based on foods such as oily pastries kneaded with wheat flour, milk and dairy products, and the meat of horses and sheep. As a beverage, "kumis," prepared from mare's milk, held an important place. Although the limited variety of fruits and vegetables in their region might give the impression that their cuisine was simple, it is seen that they possessed a wide variety of foods (Koşay, 1962; Dilmeç & Koç, 2023).

Meat products held a significant place in the diet of Central Asian Turks. Due to geographical conditions and a nomadic lifestyle, small-scale animal husbandry was preferred, which made the consumption of sheep, goat, and beef widespread. The tradition of not consuming pork dates back to before Islam and is explained as a practice linked to the steppe conditions. The Turks benefited not only from the meat of animals but also from their milk and dairy products, frequently consuming items like butter, yogurt, and cheese. The wealthy generally preferred horse meat, while the middle class opted for sheep, goose, and duck meat. Pork, however, had no place in the Turkish cuisine (Karaman, 2023).

When looking at foods consumed by the ancient Turks and still consumed today—such as Kumis, Shubat, Beshbarmak, Naryn, Shashlik, Lagman, Uzbek pilaf, Samsa, Borsch soup, Olivier salad, Uzbek manti, and Kurut (a significant delicacy of Central Asian cuisine), Ulpershek, Ultabar, Borsha et, Tashkent tea, and Pelmeni—it is evident that meat is used in the majority of the dishes (Gürdal, 2024).

Rituals and Sacrificial Traditions

In his work, Gömeç (2003, p. 80) provides the following example for the rituals performed: "It is recorded in Chinese sources that the Kök Turks made *töz* (effigies) from felt and leather, greased them with suet, and hung them on poles, and that they offered sacrifices in the four seasons of the year."

In his work, Çini (2019) said the following about the Tengri belief: "The Turks' equestrian skills and ability to move quickly, along with their steppe life culture, led them to be in a constant struggle with nature. In this respect, the sky was seen as the beginning and end of everything for them. For the Turks, everything in the universe is a reflection and a part of Tengri."

Rituals and ceremonies in Shamanism do not occur without sacrifices; these sacrifices consist of food and drink. Shamanist Turks offered their sacrifices for many reasons: to ask for rain during a drought, to wish for healing during times of illness, to bring peace to the souls of the dead, for the health of the mother and baby at birth, or for a healthy marriage at weddings (Uzun & Aymanıkuy, 2024).

Altai Shamanism and Ritual Practices

Altai shamanism is prominent for its rituals aimed at communicating with the spirits of the lower, middle, and upper worlds. Shamans connect with spirits to heal illnesses and find the causes of disasters, performing protective rituals for the community. At the beginning of each ritual, prayers are offered to protective spirits, after which the shaman seeks support from his supernatural helpers to appease the spirits causing harm or to journey to the upper world. Offering sacrifices holds a significant place in the rituals. Cows can be offered as a sacrifice. Although these rituals have little effect on events, believers continue the rituals by offering more valuable sacrifices; this situation can sometimes lead to the economic collapse of families (Alekseev, 2014, pp. 68-74).

During the rituals, shamans strike the sick person with the liver of the sacrificed animal. In addition, after the meat of the sacrificed animal is eaten, its bones are collected and thrown away. It is believed that the spirits harming the patient are also cast away with the bones. During the ritual, flour and foods

made from flour are used as a ritual snack, in which the spirits also partake. The shaman smears the blood of the sacrificial animal on the patient. In some places, along with small livestock, chicks or roosters are also used (Basilov, 1976, pp. 149-159).

Sacrificial Traditions in Ancient Turks

In ancient Turks, rituals of offering sacrifices to God and ancestors held an important place. The Asian Huns would sacrifice animals at the graves of their ancestors every May, praying to God for abundance. These ceremonies were conducted under the leadership of the community leader, the khagan, and evoked a kind of pilgrimage. The horse held a special place in the life of the Turks; it was sacrificed only in important ceremonies. Some Kazakh and Kyrgyz groups continue to sacrifice horses even on Eid al-Adha.

In ancient Turks, sacrifices were divided into two categories: bloody and bloodless. Bloodless sacrifices were performed through rituals such as *saçı* (tying cloth), pouring oil into the fire, and sprinkling kumis. The most important bloodless sacrifice was the animal called "*ıduk*," which was dedicated to God and set free. In bloody sacrifices, the horse was the most valuable animal, followed by the sheep. The bones of the sacrificed animals were considered sacred and were buried without being broken or thrown into the fire. During the autumn festival, offerings were made to protect against evil spirits, showing that sacrifice held a sacred place in the belief world of the Turks (Gömeç, 1998).

Ceremonies for the dead were also of great importance. The belongings and food of the deceased were placed in their graves, which were covered with a mound, and hundreds of animals were sacrificed for wealthy individuals. The skins of these animals were hung on the trees around the grave. After the Turks became Muslims, these traditions continued, blended with Islamic elements. After a death, it was not welcomed to light a fire in the house of the deceased, so neighbors would bring food to the funeral home.

Nature Cults and Food Traditions

The ancient Turks offered sacrifices to water and trees and considered water sacred. The water cult manifested itself both as worship and as fear and reverence. In religious ceremonies held in all four seasons, animals such as sheep, roosters, dogs, and pigs were sacrificed. Families with insufficient financial means would offer rakı and eggs instead of a sacrifice. In the *Tayılga* ceremonies, a horse was sacrificed; this was done by stabbing the animal in the heart instead of slaughtering it, and it was usually performed in the evening (Yılmaz, 2014).

After death, mourning and funeral feast ceremonies called "*yog*" were held. In these ceremonies, the memory of the deceased was commemorated, laments were sung, and meals were served. Today, practices in Turkish-Islamic societies such as giving food after a funeral and holding *mevlit* (prayer gatherings) on specific days after the death carry the traces of these traditions. It can be said that the funeral feasts and ceremonies in ancient Turks reflected the importance given to the soul and value of the deceased (Gömeç, 2019, pp. 84-104).

To show gratitude to their ancestors, the Turks organized sacrificial ceremonies at the sacred cemetery called "*Atalar Sini*" (Ancestors' Tray), honoring the spirits of the ancestors. With the adoption of Islam, this tradition transformed into offering sacrifices during visits to tombs and saints' shrines. *Saçı* (libation/offering) practices were performed for elements considered sacred, such as water, fire, and earth, while the Siberian Turks offered sacrifices in the name of Ülgen and Erlik. The sacrifices were usually dedicated to the spirits through special ceremonies, by strangulation rather than slaughter (Dabağ, 2024).

Food and Social Life

In Turkish culture, food is an important part of social life. People would come together at feasts prepared for events like pillaging feasts (*yağmalî toylar*), collective work gatherings (*imece*), births, deaths, and weddings, sharing their joy or sorrow. The term "*aş*" was used instead of "yemek" (food),

and meals called "ölü aşısı" (food for the dead) were prepared for funeral ceremonies (third day, seventh day, fortieth day memorials). These traditions continue in Anatolia under names like "dede aşısı" (grandfather's food) or "hayır pilavı" (charity pilaf). Foods that gained meaning through prayers at events like Hıdırellez strengthened cultural bonds. Milk and meat are the basic food sources of the Turks; sheep meat, in particular, has been widely consumed (Talas, 2005).

Conclusion

The Gök Tengri belief had profound effects on the food culture of ancient Turkic society, serving as a guide that shaped the relationship between nature, humans, and the sacred. This belief system not only offered a spiritual way of life but also determined the society's dietary habits, sacrificial rituals, and the symbolic meanings associated with food. The nature-sanctifying structure of the Gök Tengri belief directly influenced the rules regarding the production and consumption of food. As a society living in harmony with nature, the Turks made animal husbandry and agriculture their primary means of subsistence, and in line with this belief, they imbued their food with both material and spiritual value.

The nomadic lifestyle of the Turks placed animal husbandry at the center of their dietary habits. Animals such as sheep, goats, and horses were not only primary food sources but also an integral part of rituals and ceremonies. While meat consumption held a significant place along with sacrificial rituals, milk and dairy products were also indispensable in daily life. The fact that Turks did not consume pork even before Islam appears to have been shaped by natural conditions. The sacrificial rituals, particularly within the Tengri belief, not only expressed gratitude to God but also strengthened social solidarity.

Shamanism and Tengrism guided mythological rituals and sacrificial practices in ancient Turkic communities. In Turkic mythology, food was used not only for sustenance but also as a means of communicating with supernatural beings. Sacrificial rituals were present in every stage of life, from birth to death, serving as an expression of gratitude to gods, *ıyes* (spirits), and ancestors. The sanctification of natural elements like the cults of trees and water in the Gök Tengri belief was influential in shaping rituals and practices related to food.

When compared with other belief systems, the differences and similarities in the food culture of ancient Turkic societies are noteworthy. For example, while meat consumption was forbidden in Buddhism, leading to an absence of sacrificial rituals, meat consumption and sacrificial practices held a significant place among the Turks. Similarly, beliefs such as Christianity and Manichaeism also had an impact on the dietary habits of Turkic societies, but these effects were never as profound as that of the Gök Tengri belief.

In conclusion, the Gök Tengri belief shaped the food culture of ancient Turkic societies on both practical and symbolic levels. This belief system, which held nature sacred, was decisive in the selection, preparation, and consumption of food. The influence of the Tengri belief on food culture is a reflection of the strong bond between the spiritual values of the Turks and their material life practices. This bond largely continued after the adoption of Islam and contributed to the continuity of Turkish culture.

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“"Tengri's Table: Nutrition in Ancient Turkic Belief" başlıklı çalışmanın yazım sürecinde bilimsel kurallara, etik ve alıntı kurallarına uyulmuş; toplanan veriler üzerinde herhangi bir tahrifat yapılmamış ve bu çalışma herhangi başka bir akademik yayın ortamına değerlendirme için gönderilmemiştir.”