

Traditional Food Culture and Ethnic Identity Issues in Georgia

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Abstract. In the conditions of modern globalization, cultural identity is a dynamic and multi-layered process that is constantly undergoing transformation. The intensification of social, economic and cultural changes, on the one hand, leads to a revision of traditional practices, and, on the other hand, increases the need for their symbolic meaning. The article analyzes the role of traditional food culture in the process of ethnic identity construction in Georgia. The research is based on anthropological and sociological theories and discusses food as a symbolic, social, and cultural practice. Particular attention is drawn to the Georgian feast as a multi-layered social institution, and traditional dishes as carriers of cultural memory and identity. The research is also based on a qualitative methodology and includes ethnographic observation, oral history method, and discourse analysis. The paper shows that food culture actively participates in the formation, maintenance, and transformation of ethnic identity in both local and global contexts. © 2026 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.

Keywords: food culture, ethnic identity, Georgian feast, cultural memory, globalization

Introduction

In the modern conditions of globalization, when cultural boundaries are gradually disappearing and different societies are entering into intensive interaction with each other, the issue of preserving and constructing ethnic identity acquires particular relevance. Ethnic identity is not a static given; it is a social construction that is constantly created and reproduced through everyday practices, among which food culture is one of the most enduring and symbolically charged forms, simultaneously per-

forming material, social and symbolic functions. It is not only a means of satisfying biological needs, but also a kind of cultural language through which ethnic groups express their identity.

The aim of the research is to analyze how traditional food culture participates in the construction of ethnic identity and what meanings it acquires in the modern social context. The Georgian cultural space is particularly interesting in this regard, as traditional food is closely connected to social relations, rituals, and historical memory. The traditional food system, on the one hand, is a symbol of

mentality, a bearer of cultural memory, and on the other hand, a constantly evolving segment that is taking on new forms under the influence of globalization, but its uniqueness is manifested in the fact that it preserves the country's historical past, traditions, and many elements of ethnoculture. The paper is studying the symbolic meanings of food culture, its social functions, and the ways in which it shapes and reinforces the perception of "Georgianness" in both the local and global contexts.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The theoretical framework of the study is based on theories of cultural and interpretive anthropology, cultural memory and identity. According to interpretive anthropology, culture can be considered as a system of meanings through which people interpret their own experiences (Geertz, 1973). Traditional belonging to ethnical cultural part of food in this context is perceived as a symbolic system that gives forms to social meanings and cultural codes. It includes not only particular dishes, but also deals with the rules, rituals and social practices associated with them.

Food culture is one of the most important components of a society's identity, combining both material and non-material cultural elements. Anthropological studies show that food is a symbolic system that reflects social relations and values (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002). At the same time, "the cognitive attitude towards national food and the folk food system is also a means of expressing the everyday characteristics of an ethnos and ethnic psychology" (Gotsiridze, 2007).

Eating practices also play an important role in defining social boundaries. Eating practices are considered as an expression of taste and social differentiation (Bourdieu, 1984). Thus, eating is not only a tool of cultural self-expression, but also of social order and classification.

In the context of cultural memory, traditional dishes and feast practices are associated with the

past, ancestors, and historical experiences. They create a sense of continuity and establish a connection between the individual and the collective identity. These processes are especially important in the context of migration and globalization, when food culture often becomes one of the main means of "preserving one's own culture."

Thus, the theoretical analysis shows that food as inevitable part of culture is an important mechanism through which ethnic identity is not only preserved, but also actively constructed and represented in various social contexts. The research is based on the qualitative methodology and includes:

- Ethnographic field research;
- Observation
- Oral history method;
- Discourse analysis;
- Comparative analysis

The study represents an analysis and theoretical interpretation of the material obtained as a result of a research and exploration conducted by a group to study the traditional food systems of different parts of Georgia, various ethnic groups living in Georgia, and ethnic Georgians living outside Georgia (Turkey) (Shoshitashvili et al., 2025; Loria et al., 2026).

Discussion

Food culture is one of the important components that unites both material and immaterial cultural elements and creates the foundations of a society's identity. In anthropological and sociological studies, food is considered not only as a means of satisfying biological needs, but also as a part of a symbolic system that reflects social relations, values, and cultural codes (Douglas, 1972).

Georgian food culture is particularly rich in this respect. In Georgian reality, food is closely linked to traditions and historical heritage. Ivane Javakhishvili emphasizes that one of the most important elements of Georgian existence is food culture, which is an organic part of culture, religion, and everyday life (Javakhishvili, 1986). Thus, food in

Georgia is not only a practical necessity, but also a form of cultural self-expression. It is a diverse and complex phenomenon, closely related to both material and non-material culture. It includes not only food and dishes, but also the traditions, customs, symbols and social practices associated with them. Dishes, products, kitchen equipment, utensils and table decoration often carry symbolic meaning and express the values, identity and worldview of a society.

Food also serves as a cultural memory. Dishes are associated with the past and ancestors, which strengthens the connection between the individual and the collective identity (Holtzman, 2006). The meaning of dishes goes beyond their culinary purpose and moves into the cultural-narrative space, where they are associated with the idea of “Georgianness”. Thus, food becomes part of the identity narrative, which is constantly repeated and reinforced in everyday practice. There are dishes that are considered “unwaveringly” Georgian, although the question of their specifics often becomes a subject of discussion. For example, khachapuri, khinkali or satsivi are perceived as an integral part of national cuisine, despite the fact that their formation is historically associated with various cultural influences. However, in intensive discussions about their origin and belonging, Georgians firmly defend their positions and perceive and declare these dishes as national belonging. This kind of “cultural struggle” further strengthens the importance of these dishes in the context of national identity. At the same time, there are products whose “Georgianness” is almost undoubtedly recognized – for example, wheat, wine, and honey. These products are not only nutritional resources, but are also deeply involved in the formation of Georgian consciousness. Wheat has been the basis of Georgian agrarian life for centuries and is associated with the land, labor, and the continuity of life. Wine, as one of the oldest cultural achievements, is associated not only with everyday life, but also with religious and ritual practices, which gives it a

special symbolic meaning. Honey is often perceived as a symbol of purity, naturalness, and health. The combination of these products creates a cultural code that defines the attitude of the Georgians towards nature, work, and life.

Georgian food culture also clearly reflects regional diversity. Culinary traditions developed in different parts of Georgia differ in ingredients, preparation techniques, and taste characteristics. For example, Kakheti is known for its wine and meat dishes, while Imereti is known for its light and plant-based ingredients. Mingrelian and Svan cuisines are distinguished by their high-calorie and spicy dishes, which is in harmony with the mountainous environment. Such differences confirm that food reflects not only taste, but also socio-ecological reality (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002). These differences often demonstrate the natural environment, economic conditions and historical experience of a particular region. Every region has its own so-called “culinary brand”, which is considered an undeniable proof of its image. For example: Svanetian kubdari, ham from Racha, ghvezeli from Guria, Megrelian elardji, Meskhetian khinkali with goose apokhti, Kakhetian chakafuli, Adjarian khachapuri, Imeretian pkhaleuli... Every region is proud, praises and protects “its” dish as a “symbol” that carries great emotion, that is why even disputes over “belonging” to certain dishes arise between regions. Food becomes an expression of not only national, but also regional identity.

At the same time, food represents a system of order and categorization that defines cultural boundaries, through which the separation of “ours” and “others” takes place (Douglas, 1972). Therefore, traditional food as integral part of the culture is given special significance for ethnic groups living in foreign environments. Cooking traditional dishes outside of one's homeland becomes a kind of act of preserving identity. It is especially important that cooking is an significant mechanism for preserving identity for the various ethnic groups living in Georgia. Greek, Azerbaijani, Armenian,

Jewish and other communities maintain their own culinary traditions, which emphasize their cultural identity. For these ethnic groups living far from their native environment, food plays an important role, as it reinforces cultural differences and identity at the level of everyday practice.

Traditional Georgian dishes become symbols of national identity and participate in the formation of a collective narrative for the Georgians living outside of Georgia. Ethnic Georgians living in Turkey preserve and cherish their traditional cuisine as much as they care for other national symbols. Cuisine is a means of self-identification for them and one of the main values through which they maintain both a cultural-historical and emotional connection with their native ethnos. Interviews show that food culture is perceived not only as a daily practice, but also as an emotional and symbolic basis of identity (Lomtatidze and Noghaideli, 2025).

The best way to construct identity is still the Georgian feast, with its etiquette and dining culture. The Georgian table is a multi-layered social institution related to food culture. It represents one of the central cultural practices, which is not only the process of eating, but also a kind of area of social relations, symbolic meanings and representation of ethnic identity. Its structure, rules, and rituals reflect the values and norms that have historically been formed in Georgian society and continue to function as an important form of cultural self-expression. "For me, the feast is not just about eating process. It is the opportunity of being together, it is the family, and relationships. It is where you feel that you are the Georgians"; "The feast is a tradition that keeps us alive. Times change, but Georgian feast is unchangeable" – the respondents note. Special importance is attached to the ritualized nature of the feast. A feast is not just a meal; it is a strictly organized social space, where each participant has a defined role. The central figure in this process is the toastmaster, who manages relationships, determines the sequence of

toasts, and creates a common emotional and symbolic field. The Georgian feast can be considered as a kind of demonstration of collective memory, where everything: the choice of food, the table setting and rules of conduct, the manifestation of hospitality reflect the collective cultural experience. It is particularly interesting that the symbolic significance of the feast is preserved even among ethnic Georgians living outside Georgia. For them, the feast often becomes one of the main mechanisms for preserving ethnic identity and reconstructing "their own culture" (Lomtatidze and Noghaideli, 2025). Although the Georgian feast is undergoing certain transformations under the conditions of globalization, its main symbolic functions have been preserved, especially the creation of a sense of social unity and ethnic belonging.

Traditional food elements have become even more important in the context of globalization, as traditions are often reconstructed in modern societies to strengthen identity (Hobsbawm, 1983). In the Georgian case, traditional dishes and feast culture are actively used to represent national identity both domestically and internationally. Preserving national flavors, exploring the historical roots of dishes, reviving customs and traditions related to food culture, and "reviving" authentic kitchen equipment and utensils have become the best ways to represent the country. Due to the great interest in food culture as an indispensable and very valuable element of cultural heritage, we consider it to be very important to compile existing and new information related to it in the ethnolinguistic dictionary of the Georgian traditional food system, which will even more clearly present traditional and innovative culinary culture, many elements of ethnoculture, intercultural connections and mutual influences, and local peculiarities. We believe that the gastronomic history reflected in terminology will be the best way to understand and appreciate traditional food culture, its place in modern socio-cultural processes, and its role in constructing ethnic identity.

Conclusion

While resuming, the emphasis should be given to the fact that the study shows that the traditional food culture in Georgia is one of the central mechanisms for constructing ethnic identity. Food culture is that part of everyday culture in which identity is formed not only as a remnant of historical heritage, but also as an ongoing social practice. That is, it is not just a static category, on the contrary, it is a dynamic cultural-historical process that is constantly reproduced in everyday practices, memory structures and social relations. Therefore, it is a kind of “living space” where individual elements of food culture are constantly created and re-formed: dishes, feast etiquette and dining rules, many elements of material and non-material culture related to food: housing, farm buildings, inventory, labor and ritual practices. It is noteworthy that food culture preserves them not only as a historical heritage, but also as a mechanism for everyday representation of identity. Traditional dishes and food practices perform the function of a carrier of cultural memory, which

strengthens the connection between the individual and the collective identity.

Food culture participates in global cultural flows as a tool for identity reconstruction (Appadurai, 1988). In Georgia, under the conditions of globalization, food culture is undergoing transformation, although it still retains its basic functions and adapts to new realities. Its importance does not diminish, but its form and context change. Identity is reproduced daily at the Georgian feast, which, as a social institution, combines ritual, symbolic, and social functions and creates a space for the representation of identity.

Thus, in the modern socio-cultural context, cuisine has become an inevitable element of culture, the promotion and revival of which emphasizes identity in the present. That is why nowadays special attention is given to the to the certain boom in relation to traditional dishes of Georgian cuisine. Traditional Georgian cuisine has become a dynamic space for the construction of identity, where traditional food practices do not disappear under the influence of globalization, but rather are transformed into a representational form.

ეთნოლოგია

ტრადიციული კვების კულტურა და ეთნიკური იდენტობის საკითხები საქართველოში

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§ საქართველოს ეროვნული მუზეუმის ისტორიისა და ეთნოლოგიის კვლევის ინსტიტუტი, თბილისი, საქართველო

(წარმოდგენილია აკადემიის წევრის ელდარ ნადირაძის მიერ)

თანამედროვე გლობალიზაციის პირობებში კულტურული იდენტობა წარმოადგენს დინამიკურ და მრავალშრიან პროცესს, რომელიც მუდმივად განიცდის ტრანსფორმაციას. სოციალური, ეკონომიკური და კულტურული ცვლილებების ინტენსიფიკაცია, ერთი მხრივ, იწვევს ტრადიციული პრაქტიკების გადახედვას, ხოლო, მეორე მხრივ, ზრდის მათი სიმბოლური მნიშვნელობის საჭიროებას. ნაშრომში გაანალიზებულია ტრადიციული კვების კულტურის როლი ეთნიკური იდენტობის კონსტრუქციის პროცესში საქართველოში. კვლევა დამყარებულია ანთროპოლოგიურ და სოციოლოგიურ თეორიებზე და კვებას განიხილავს როგორც სიმბოლურ, სოციალურ და კულტურულ პრაქტიკას. განსაკუთრებული ყურადღება ეთმობა ქართულ სუფრას, როგორც მრავალშრიან სოციალურ ინსტიტუტს, და ტრადიციულ კერძებს – როგორც კულტურული მეხსიერებისა და იდენტობის მატარებლებს. კვლევა ეფუძნება ხარისხობრივ მეთოდოლოგიას და მოიცავს ეთნოგრაფიულ დაკვირვებას, ზეპირი ისტორიის მეთოდს და დისკურსის ანალიზს. ნაშრომში ნაჩვენებია, რომ კვების კულტურა მეტად მნიშვნელოვანია ეთნიკური იდენტობის ფორმირებაში, შენარჩუნებასა და ტრანსფორმაციაში როგორც ადგილობრივ, ისე გლობალურ კონტექსტში.

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