A Study on Current Culinary Culture and Religious Identity in the Gulf Region*
- Focused on the ashura practice among the Shia Muslims of Bahrain and Kuwait -

IkRan Eum**
Myongji University, Seoul

Abstract

This paper questions how religious identity between Sunni and Shia Muslims are shaped in the Gulf area from the culinary cultural perspective, taking an example of the distinctively Shia ritual, ashura, in Bahrain and Kuwait. In order to bring the less highlighted issues to the forefront, this paper firstly examines different food regulations of Sunni and Shia Muslims and their different perspective on ashura observance. Second, by comparing Shia Muslims in Bahrain and Kuwait and their social affiliation, this paper will discuss what role politics play in shaping religious identity and culinary culture. The two countries represent two very different examples of Sunni and Shia Muslim identity in the Gulf region. The minority Sunni and the majority Shia Muslims are antagonistic in the former case, whereas the majority Sunni and the minority Shia Muslims are cooperative in the latter case. The study shows in conclusion that food itself does not represent different religious identity between the two Islamic sects. It is rather politics and economic availability which have significant influence on shaping Shia Muslims’ identity.

Keywords: Islam, food culture, Gulf region, Shia, Sunni

1. Introduction: significance of studying culinary culture

Food, usually treated as a trivial and mundane item of everyday life, has seldom drawn anyone’s attention as a research subject in academia. However,
food, as a basic object that sustains human life as well as a reflection of one’s natural needs, can be a tool for discovering a people’s culture. First, food and food culture show the essence of one’s culture and its distinctions as it represents one’s tradition and custom as well as past and present. Food culture can also display one’s religious faith and value when the religion calls for certain culinary guidelines. Second, food culture can serve as a barometer of social change as the introduction of new recipes and ingredients are indicative of cultural exchange and people’s movement. In addition, the accommodation or rejection process of a certain food can implicitly represent power relations among the people. Lastly, food culture represent one’s or the community’s identity from such diverse aspects as socio-economic, political, and religious perspective as food acts as a marker of social boundary, touching on the issues of class, gender, race, and ethnicity.

Among these various aspects, this article focuses on the last point by discussing how religious identity between Sunni and Shia Muslims are shaped in the Gulf area from the culinary cultural perspective. The study takes an example of the distinctively Shia ritual, ashura, in Bahrain and Kuwait, and the differences in their food culture surrounding this common religious event.

In order to bring the less highlighted issues to the forefront, this paper firstly examines different food regulations of Sunni and Shia Muslims and their different perspective on ashura observance. Second, by comparing Shia Muslims in Bahrain and Kuwait this paper will discuss what role politics play in shaping religious identity and culinary culture between the two sects. The two countries represent two very different examples of Sunni and Shia Muslim identity in the Gulf region. The minority Sunni and the majority Shia Muslims are antagonistic in the former case, whereas the majority Sunni and the minority Shia Muslims are cooperative in the latter case. In addition, the two countries are easily accessible for the ‘outsider’ to carry out fieldwork.

The scope of ‘food culture’ in this paper is broad. It refers not only to actual dishes people eat, but also behavior and meaning that people confer to the food or specific events related to the food. For this research, I have interviewed several people in Bahrain (two Sunni and one Shia) and Kuwait (three Sunni and two Shia), based on the fieldwork performed in January 2008, along with literature review and continuous email exchange. However, I should admit that this research has several limitations due to time and budget restrictions on the field. Some of the information gathered could have been more detailed. For