

# CUISINE AS AN ETHNOMENTAL MARKER IN THE EVERYDAY LIFE OF GEORGIANS IN TURKEY (An Ethnolinguistic Analysis)

**TAMILA LOMTATIDZE**

PhD in History, Chief scientific researcher at  
Niko Berdzenishvili Institute of  
Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University  
E-mail: Tamila.lomtadidze@bsu.edu.ge  
ORCID: 0000-0001-6163-5876

**NANULI NOGAIDELI**

MA in Philology, Researcher at the Department of Folklore,  
Dialectology and Immigrant Literature Studies of  
Niko Berdzenishvili Institute of  
Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University;  
E-mail: Nanuli.noghaideli@bsu.edu.ge  
ORCID: 0009-0006-7688-4844

**Abstract:** Traditional cuisine, which encompasses multiple layers, equally attracts the interest of anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, and medical researchers, and numerous studies have been dedicated to it. The present paper attempts to analyze the results of long-term fieldwork conducted among ethnic Georgians living in Turkey and is based on the meanings provided by respondents and the context they themselves have presented. The article analyzes discourses related to cuisine based on these inputs and highlights its role as an ethnomarker in the preservation of Georgian identity.

**Keywords:** cuisine, tradition, identity, marker

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**Introduction:** Cuisine, which encompasses specific ingredients, processing techniques, dishes, rules for organizing meals, norms of dining etiquette, as well as traditions and taboos related to food, simultaneously represents an element of a nation's material culture and a marker of its cultural identity. It preserves certain identifying codes, as national dishes evoke a specific time and space in which the members of that nation live. For them, cuisine becomes a part of national mythology, and traditional food becomes a kind of „taste“ that leads them back to the heart of their nation (Bart, 2015). Therefore, cuisine, as a symbol bearing memory, plays a significant role in the preservation of identity, especially among ethnic groups living outside their homeland for whom cuisine serves as both a symbol and a means of maintaining an unbroken connection to their national roots. This is why, today, cuisine is increasingly being explored in relation to issues of memory and is considered a kind of repository of memory a food-centered memory (Holtzman, 2006, pp. 361-578) . The aim of this study is to highlight national cuisine as a symbol that carries memory.

**Methods:** A variety of methods and theoretical approaches were employed in the course of the research. For data collection, a problem-centered interview method was used. Biographical-narrative interviews were conducted based on both pre-designed questionnaires and questions that emerged during fieldwork. Interviews were carried out both in group settings and individually. Depending on the situation, the method of free conversation was also applied. The empirical research data was aligned with theoretical academic perspectives, and the final research findings were derived through a combination of diverse methodological approaches.

**Discussion** – Under conditions of transnational migration, numerous scholars emphasize the crucial role of cuisine in the formation of cultural memory and the preservation of identity. Research confirms that through food, migrants maintain a connection to the past and assert their identity (Sutton, 2001).

Cuisine emerges as a kind of marker that, on the one hand, defines the boundary between „us“ and „them,“ and on the other, is especially susceptible to external influences in a foreign environment. Nevertheless, it continues to preserve national and traditional traits, features, and nuances most vividly, and it is through cuisine that people most closely associate with their national distinctiveness.

Traditional cuisines developed over centuries. Before the notion of a national cuisine, food was categorized dichotomously as sacred and profane, for the rich and the poor but not by national belonging. In the case of national cuisine, however, food becomes divided into „ours“ and „theirs,“ „native“ and „foreign.“ Thus, „national cuisine“ is an artifact a deliberately constructed collection of native dishes created during the age of nationalism, serving as a symbolic repertoire that a nation uses to define itself (Kuntchulia, 2022) <https://www.spekali.tsu.ge/index.php/ge/article/viewArticle/16/290/>

The deep attachment of Georgians in Turkey to their historical homeland and Georgian ethnoculture is most vividly expressed through their relationship with Georgian cuisine. This attachment is not limited to preserving a wide variety of traditional Georgian dishes, it also includes strict observance of table etiquette and the broader culture of communal dining, which they value as much as other key symbols of national identity. This connection manifests in various forms. People take pride in having preserved many dishes brought from their homeland: „We only make mkhali when the vegetables are fresh and lush – that’s how we love it, because that’s how it’s made back home.“ „I love phkali made with wild chervil – it’s a dish brought from there, it’s truly memleketuri (from our homeland).“ They also continue to prepare dishes whose culinary traditions have faded even in regions like Adjara, such as mokhrakuli and zipia. What’s more, they express surprise and even disappointment that these ancestral dishes are no longer made in present-day Adjara. Many of these traditional foods are still widely consumed in everyday life among Georgians in Turkey, and they are often prepared with a sense of unity and celebration. For example, bekmezi (a thick grape or mulberry syrup), once a popular sweet in Adjarian cuisine, is now rarely made – even in only a few households – while among Georgians in Turkey, especially in the villages of Shavsheti and Imerkhevi, it remains an essential part of breakfast, particularly during summer stays in the mountain pastures. The tradition of collective preparation has also been preserved. During fieldwork in the historical Tao-Klarjeti region, we often observed women gathered in the shade of mulberry trees, preparing bekmezi together in large cauldrons placed over open fires.

The diversity of distinctive dishes is not the only point of pride for Georgians in Turkey, they also take great pride in having introduced Georgian elements into Turkish cuisine. They frequently emphasize this in conversation, proudly distinguishing their culinary knowledge and traditions from those of their Turkish neighbors. Typical statements include: „We, the Gurjs (Georgians), know how to make this, Turks don’t.“ „Among us Gurjs, this is common, Turks don’t know these things.“ „We Gurjs know how to make this dish, the Turks learned it from us.“ „We know it, Turks copied it from the Gurjs.“ „On New Year’s, we boil Pumpkin and corn, they say, ‘what a grace!’ That’s how we Gurjs do it; the Turks learned it later“ (Putkaradze, 1993).

These kinds of remarks highlight not only a sense of culinary continuity but also cultural pride. Food becomes a powerful space where memory, identity, and cultural distinctiveness are affirmed, especially in a diaspora context. Through their cuisine, Georgians in Turkey assert their identity and trace the contours of cultural difference, all while maintaining and reshaping their heritage.

Naturally, as a result of long-term cohabitation, the cuisine of Georgians in Turkey has incorporated Turkish dishes. However, even those borrowed dishes have been infused with distinctly Georgian flavors. Moreover, they have added a Georgian touch to holidays unfamiliar to traditional Georgian life – by integrating elements of the Georgian supra (feast table) even into Muslim celebrations. For instance, during the Hidirellez festival, which is significant in Turkish tradition, Georgian communities organize rich feasts and communal meals. As one respondent explains: „Everyone knows about the Hyderelez.

We make pilaf... The pilaf is served, everyone eats together, there is dancing and fun.“ Another adds: „On this day, the older women say: ‘Let the food be abundant, let there be singing and joy, so that the year ahead will be just like this.’“ Georgians living in Turkey prepare as many as 30 different dishes for this day and proudly host their Turkish neighbors. In contrast, within the traditional Turkish ethnographic context, *Hıdırellez* is simply a „forbidden work day“ – a time when agricultural and household labor is paused, but it is not typically associated with ritual feasting or shared meals (Lomtadidze, 2010).

This transformation of the holiday into a festive occasion with abundant food and hospitality reflects the Georgian cultural imprint. It is a clear example of how diasporic Georgians preserve and express their identity: by reinterpreting and embedding their own traditions into new cultural frameworks – ensuring continuity, distinction, and pride in their heritage.

Georgians in Turkey have not only preserved traditional dishes and flavors but have also maintained the customs and traditions associated with cuisine. In many villages of the Devskele Valley, for instance, we observed the enduring practice of women organizing *nadi* – a communal gathering for food preparation, particularly before returning from the *yaylas* (summer pastures). Women gather and take turns preparing dairy products and *sinori fidebi* (pastry layers) for the families to take with them to the lowlands. The tradition of organizing communal neighborhood feasts has also been preserved for various celebrations, especially weddings. Although younger generations now often hold wedding ceremonies in modern banquet halls, known locally as *salons*, it is still customary – especially in rural areas, for the main wedding feast, or *p'uroba*, to take place in the ancestral home. This continuity reflects a strong adherence to traditional customs: „When we have a wedding, everything is *Gurjuli* (Georgian) – the songs, the speech, the rituals, the food.“ „When we throw a wedding, it's all Georgian – everything is done in our way. We start preparations two days in advance before bringing the *p'at'ari* (bride). We cook all kinds of traditional dishes.“ These testimonies show that food traditions are deeply woven into the social fabric of Turkish Georgians' lives, not only in terms of what is eaten, but how, when, and with whom it is prepared and shared. These culinary practices serve as powerful tools of cultural continuity, helping to maintain a sense of collective identity and belonging across generations and borders.

In general, the *supra* (feast table) holds a particularly significant role in shaping and expressing ethnic identity – especially for those living outside of Georgia. Among Georgians in Turkey, the feast table becomes a space where their „Georgian“ traits are most vividly expressed. Despite religious restrictions, the tradition of drinking wine and making toasts (*sadegrdzelo*) is still clearly present. Respondents shared: „At weddings, they would drink *rakhi*, beer, and *sharaphi* (wine).“ „We used to make *rakhi* from rice, watermelon, or grapes. We made wine from grapes, and beer from barley.“ „At weddings, some people would drink wine. They still do – I won't lie. They wouldn't allow the *mullah* to attend the wedding.“ „My grandfather used to make *rakhi* from grapes.“ They even justify violating the religious ban on alcohol by emphasizing its quality and taste: „It's a beautiful drink, it's delicious, I drank it and I prayed afterward.“ Drinking wine is not only normalized in some cases, but even becomes a point of pride. One example illustrates this cultural valorization: „Three years ago, at a wedding in a village in Sinop, my relatives finished two *minivans* full of wine.“ These examples reveal that for Georgians living in Turkey, the feast table is more than just a meal, it is a ritualized, symbolic performance of identity. Through wine, toasts, and feasting, they affirm their Georgianness, often contrasting it, explicitly or implicitly, with the surrounding cultural and religious norms. In this context, the feast table becomes both a social anchor and a cultural statement of belonging, resistance, and pride.

Georgians in Turkey organize feast tables not only for collective celebrations and holidays, but also during ordinary days, making them a regular and deeply ingrained aspect of daily life. The feast table serves as one of the primary forms of socialization and communication, taking place on a smaller scale, but frequently and meaningfully. The feast table is an inseparable part of everyday life for ethnic Georgians, a social space that fosters connection and interaction. If a guest arrives, they often call in other Georgian neighbors as well. When the guest is Georgian, the hospitality becomes even more elaborate: the hosts go to great lengths to prepare only traditional Georgian dishes. The feast becomes

a stage for reaffirming their connection to the Georgian world. These gatherings are especially open and heartfelt when fellow Georgians visit. The hosts strive to conduct the feast table in a fully traditional Georgian manner: A tamada (toastmaster) is chosen, Traditional songs are sung, Stories of ancestors and heroic deeds are told, particularly about notable individuals, They proudly highlight Georgian generosity, often contrasting it with the perceived frugality of their Turkish neighbors, sometimes even playfully mocking the latter. In essence, the feast table becomes a performative expression of Georgian identity. It is a space where cultural belonging is asserted, preserved, and celebrated, reinforcing a sense of shared heritage and distinctiveness in a non-Georgian environment. Through the rituals of the feast table, Georgians in Turkey visibly and intentionally maintain and display their ethnic identity.

The special relationship that Georgians in Turkey have with Georgian cuisine is vividly illustrated in the story of ethnic Georgian Ugur Zuboglu (Zumbadze), the founder of the „Georgian Café“ in Istanbul. After moving from his village to the city, Ugur was disappointed to find that he couldn't find any place serving traditional Georgian dishes. This motivated him to open his own café – not just as a business, but as a space where Georgians could connect, not only over food, but also with each other. For Ugur, the „Georgian Café“ is more than just a restaurant; it is a personal link to his culture, his past, and his childhood. In an interview, he explains: „Georgian cuisine is our life. Language, music, even culture might be lost, but cuisine is the hardest to lose. Losing cuisine means losing your origins.“ Yet he expresses concern that Georgians – especially the younger generation, often do not visit his café. (Nadirashvili, 2022)[Source: <http://www.gurcuhaber.com/2022/11/14/eka-nadirashvili>] In general, the importance of Georgian ethnic identity among the younger generation in Turkey has noticeably declined. However, many young people still maintain a sense of belonging to the Georgian ethnic group precisely through cuisine. Food continues to be a powerful bridge between generations. For some, even if they no longer speak the Georgian language, they still know, and love, the dishes. It is often around the feast table that they connect with their families, engage in cultural memory, and maintain a thread of identity in an otherwise assimilating environment. In this way, cuisine becomes both a medium of cultural continuity and a subtle, yet resilient, form of identity preservation.

This is precisely why cuisine has become a means of safeguarding national identity for Georgians in Turkey. It stands as one of the core values around which they unite and through which they maintain both a cultural-historical and emotional connection to their native ethnic roots. In the context of diaspora life, where language, traditions, and even communal structures may gradually fade, traditional food remains a tangible and emotionally charged link to the homeland. For many Georgian communities in Turkey, cuisine is not just nourishment; it is memory, belonging, and a living symbol of their identity.

The attitude toward cuisine as an ethnic marker, a defining element of ethnic belonging, is also vividly reflected in the lexicon preserved among Georgians living in Turkey, which stores layers of gastronomic history through terminology:

- There is a strong presence of Old Georgian terms, as well as vocabulary typical of Southern Georgian dialects.
- Many terms have been preserved that are no longer used in Georgia today. For example, „paphoni“ – a dish name forgotten in modern Georgia, offers a glimpse into archaic culinary traditions.
- Words from Old Georgian have survived in reference to: Daily food distributions (khevsis, zarmeli), Names of utensils (badia, koka, kope, kotsi), Terms for food preparation and processing, and Traditional dish names.
- Traces of ancient beliefs are also evident. For instance, when preparing ghomi (a cornmeal dish), the special flat wooden spoon known as lafera is first dipped in water, a ritual referred to as „amonatvla“ (which literally means „to baptize“), suggesting a sacral echo reminiscent of baptism.
- The linguistic material preserved by Georgians in Turkey even helps clarify certain forgotten Georgian terms. For example, the term „seriskudi“ (used to describe a light meal or snack after

dinner) preserves the old Georgian word for supper, *seri/seroba*. In this way, the Turkish Georgian dialect retains variants like „*vakhshmis kudi*“ or „*kurtchi*“ (tail or end of dinner), providing insight into lost terminology (Noghaidzeli, 2013).

- A sacred attitude toward food is evident in oath formulas such as: • „*chadis madlma*“ (by the grace of corn bread) • „*puris madlma*“ (by the grace of bread) These expressions elevate everyday food to the level of something to be sworn by – demonstrating its deep cultural and symbolic significance.
- However, many elder Georgian speakers in Turkey express sorrow that these unique Georgian culinary terms are slowly disappearing. The lexicon, once a living link to ancestral practices, is under threat, further highlighting the need for active cultural preservation through documentation, education, and use in daily life.

**Conclusion.** Thus, the attachment of Georgians in Turkey to Georgian cuisine, their attitude toward traditional Georgian dishes, and their insistence on preparing them, even during non-Georgian holidays, can be seen as a voluntary act of „returning to the bosom of the nation“ (Barth). Through this act, Georgians in Turkey symbolically rejoin the collective identity of the Georgian nation, as it is often food and drink that most powerfully reconnects people with their roots. The „code“ of the nation, its ethnic identity markers, is emotionally preserved in cuisine, and for this reason, they safeguard and cherish traditional Georgian foods just like any other national symbol. Despite intercultural influences, they continue to uphold the historical foundations of Georgian culinary tradition, which enables them to maintain an emotional connection with the roots of their ancestors. According to the responses gathered during our survey, the main object of nostalgia is Georgian cuisine, its flavors and aromas. Therefore, food, as one of the core components of ethnic identity, occupies a significant place in the collective memory of Georgians living outside the homeland and serves as a vital ethno-mental marker for their ethnic self-identification. As multiple studies confirm, the penultimate stage in breaking ties with an ethnic group is total indifference to one’s ethnic origin; the very last stage is the loss of loyalty to traditional food. (Berdzenishvili, 2005, p.64) Georgians in Turkey remain highly devoted to Georgian cuisine, preserving and protecting these culinary traditions with exceptional care.

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