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Note

“Man Shall Live by Wheat”

Wheat Porridge (“qamh masluq”) as a Symbol of the Identity of Arab Christians in Israel

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Introduction

In the eastern Mediterranean region, Arab Christians account for less than ten percent of all the Arab population, even when Greek Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant Christians are combined. Because they are a minority group, however, they are more conscious of their identity as Christians and are more willing to let their “standing as Christians” be known in various aspects of everyday life. While Muslims constitute a majority in the eastern Mediterranean region excluding Greece, Arab Christians in Israel have an identity different from that of their counterparts in other countries in the region, because in Israel, only Jews are in a position to play a central role in society. Unlike Muslim countries where being an Arab is taken for granted, Israel, first of all, has two different population groups—Jews and Arabs. In this country, declaring that you are a Christian is equal to identifying yourself as an Arab. This means that Christian identity and that as an Arab, which inherently are two different things, are closely associated with each other and have gradually coalesced into one because of the presence of non-Muslim Arabs, namely, Jews.

This does not mean that Jews are the only “others” for Arab Christians in Israel. Arab Christians share elements of culture including clothing, food, and housing with Muslims who are also Arab, and therefore have more occasions to interact with them on a daily basis than Jews. They see Muslims as “others” more closely associated with them. Because of this closeness, however, Arab Christians are more eager to differentiate themselves from Muslims than from Jews. Out of their desire to mark a sharp distinction between themselves and Muslims, they have given a Christian look and significance to their shared culture.

This paper will discuss the dietary culture of Melkite Catholic Christians and Maronite Catholic Christians in Israel, placing a special focus on the implications of wheat porridge (*qamh maslūq*) for them, and how their identity as Christians is thereby represented. For the purposes of this paper, “Christians” shall mean Melkite Catholic Christians and Maronite Catholic Christians only, and no reference will be made to Greek Orthodox and other Christians.

1. The Implications of *Qamh Maslūq*

Wheat is a staple food for people living in the eastern Mediterranean region. Especially, wheat is seen as a symbol of resurrection by Christians, as it begins to grow upon the arrival of the rainy season and yields a rich harvest. Also, wheat is the main ingredient of Eucharist bread (*qurbān, qurbāna*) offered during Mass as a symbol of the body of Christ. This means that wheat takes on a far greater importance than any other crop for Christians. Many of the Christians in Israel are from farming villages in the Galilee region in the northern part of the country. Today, few villagers make a living solely from farming, and many of them leave home to work in Haifa and other urban areas. Farmers who stay in the villages manage to grow crops—mainly olive and wheat—on a small scale, while the villagers who have gone to urban areas to work will return to their villages to help with farm work during busy periods. Because of a limited harvest, wheat is consumed exclusively at home, not shipped to market. Wheat porridge, to be discussed in this paper, is mostly made from such homegrown wheat.

The Arabic term meaning “wheat porridge” is *qamh maslūq*, which literally means “boiled wheat.” To make *qamh maslūq*, wheat grains harvested in-house are soaked in water overnight, and then boiled for hours with the addition of cinnamon (*qirfa*) and anise seeds (*yanasūn*). In many cases, *qamh maslūq* has sugar added and is served topped with nuts, raisins, and pomegranate fruits while still hot (see photograph). *Qamh maslūq* is a meal that Arab families will offer to visitors during winter days as a way to entertain them.

Qamh maslūq itself is a traditional winter food, common to both Christians and Muslims. While it is only one of winter’s sweet foods for Muslims, it bears special significance for Christians, as discussed below.

(1) Special sweet food offered on the Day of St. Barbara

In the Christian community, *qamh maslūq* is a special sweet food offered on the Day of St. Barbara (December 4).

St. Barbara (*al-Qadīsa Barbāra*) was one of the martyrs of the early Christian age, and the second most popular female martyr in the Eastern Orthodox Churches after the Virgin Mary. While it is believed that she lived in Asia Minor or Egyptian Alexandria around the 4th century, today she is no more than a legendary figure, due to the lack of evidence of her existence.¹⁾ According to the legend she was born to a wealthy family, and as she grew she showed interest in Christianity. Her father was enraged and confined her in a tower. Still, she secretly converted to Christianity and managed to escape from the tower, but was caught and beheaded by her father. Soon afterwards, however, lightning struck the father and fire consumed his body.

Why, then, is *qamh maslūq* offered on the Day of St. Barbara? This is because of the legend that she hid herself in a wheat field when escaping from the tower (Mansūr 1998: 115).



Photo: Wheat porridge, “*barbāra*,” offered on the Day of St. Barbara
Barbāra is topped with roasted sesame seeds, walnuts, and pomegranate fruits.
(Photo taken on December 3, 2000 in Fassutā, Galilee region, Israel.)

Every year as the Day of St. Barbara draws near, all Christian families begin preparing *qamh maslūq*. Interestingly, *qamh maslūq* offered around this day is called “*barbāra*” after the name of St. Barbara.

(2) Eucharist offered at the end of a funeral Mass

A Maronite and Melkite Catholic funeral consists of at least four parts. First, a funeral Mass is held on the day after death, followed by other Masses on the third and seventh days after death. And the last and most important Mass (*Junnāz al-Arba'in*), which mourners are invited to attend, is conducted on a grand scale on the 40th day after death.²⁾

At the end of this last Mass a piece of Eucharist is offered to each attending mourner, according to the traditional custom. Usually bread is used for this purpose, made of wheat dough with a little sugar added, and flavored with mastic (*mustaka*),³⁾ but in some rare cases, *qamh maslūq* is offered in place of bread. I have had only one occasion to witness such a case: it was when I attended a Maronite Catholic Mass held on the 40th day after a death. The ritual guidebook authored by the present Melkite Patriarch indicates that it is more formal to offer *qamh maslūq* than bread at a funeral Mass (Lahām 1988: 167). While bread can be purchased at a bakery, preparing *qamh maslūq* requires some time and labor. For this reason, I suspect, bread is more widely used than *qamh maslūq* today. *Qamh maslūq* for offering at a funeral Mass used to be prepared by female members of the bereaved family. Today, it is the role of female members of the bereaved family to cut bread into loaves on the day preceding the Mass to offer to attending mourners. In the light of these customs, I would say that these

Christians have retained the practice of conducting a funeral service through the cooperation of relatives of the deceased.

(3) *Qamh maslūq* as an offering to celebrate the arrival of baby teeth

While *qamh maslūq* is closely associated with Christian rituals in the above-mentioned cases, it is often used for non-religious purposes as well. For example, there are cases where *qamh maslūq* is offered simply to celebrate the growth of children.

Christians have a custom of offering *qamh maslūq* to their relatives and neighbors to celebrate the arrival of baby teeth. This ritual aims to announce to the public that the baby is reaching the weaning stage, ready to eat solid food, and they mimic feeding the baby several wheat grains. *Qamh maslūq* offered in this ritual is called “*sinunīya*,” rather than “boiled wheat” or *barbāra*, and the name is derived from the Arabic word *sin*, meaning “tooth.”

2. Symbolism of *Qamh Maslūq*

Based on the above-mentioned cases, I discuss the symbolism of *qamh maslūq* below.

(1) Symbol of death and the body of sacrifice

In general, feast days of saints are days to celebrate the saint’s martyrdom, in Christianity and Islam alike. This means that *qamh maslūq* offered on the Day of St. Barbara symbolizes the body of the martyr herself, as indicated by the fact that it is called *barbāra*.

It is widely known that for Christians, bread is a symbol of the body and sacrifice of Christ. To prepare *qamh maslūq*, they boil whole (un-milled) wheat grains, which, if put in the ground, would otherwise sprout and grow. In other words, they “kill” living wheat grains by boiling. Moreover, they soak wheat grains in water overnight to make them more viable before boiling. In this sense, *qamh maslūq*, which is made from “dead” wheat grains, is more directly associated with the image of the corpse than with bread. Perhaps it is for this reason that Christians distribute *qamh maslūq* as Eucharist among the mourners at a funeral Mass.

(2) Symbol of life

However, it is not only death, but also life, that is symbolized by *qamh maslūq*, as evidenced by *sinunīya*.

Christians take in the Spirit of Christ by eating bread—the body of Christ—offered at a Mass. While Jesus Christ said, “Man shall not live by bread alone” (Matthew 4.4), this remark in turn indicates the importance of wheat as a main ingredient of bread for residents of the eastern Mediterranean region. Christians eat wheat to sustain their bodies on the one hand, and receive Eucharist bread, symbolic of the body of Christ, for their spiritual nourishment on the other. Man is made to live by wheat.

However, wheat and wheat products cannot be eaten without teeth. This means babies can take in nourishment both physically and spiritually from wheat and become Christians only after they have teeth to masticate wheat products. For this reason, *sinuniya* is offered to celebrate the rebirth of babies as adults and as Christians.

3. The Struggle Between the Two Identities and the Role of Wheat Porridge in its Easing

Christians in general do not hesitate to boast that their culture, including food, is superior to that of Muslims.⁴⁾ To show an example of their cultural superiority, they often refer to wheat meals,⁵⁾ representative of which is Eucharist bread as well as *qamh maslūq*, offered at Mass in place of Eucharist bread.

Most Christians say that the Eucharist bread offered at every Sunday Mass “tastes better than any other bread (aside from the holiness of the bread).” Indeed, Eucharist bread, made of quality wheat with some sugar added, has a slightly sweet, pleasant taste. Christians think they are privileged to eat such tasty bread. *Qamh maslūq*, on the other hand, is merely a Muslim winter meal, and it bears greater significance for Christians: Christians confer religious holiness on *qamh maslūq* and expect it to bridge death and life. Wheat grains fall into the earth, grow, yield a rich harvest, and die when men eat them to sustain their lives. In this sense, wheat is considered to represent a cycle of death and life. Christians use wheat in various recipes, offer many kinds of wheat meals, and boast how good *qamh maslūq* and Eucharist bread are. By doing so, they proclaim their superiority to Muslims in terms of spirituality.

Also, growing wheat is seen as a symbol of agriculture for farmers in the Galilee region. While fewer people are now engaged in farming in this region, local farmers still follow the traditional agricultural calendar, beginning with the Cross Festival on September 14 or 15⁶⁾ when a sign of the rainy season is annually seen. Upon arrival of each rainy season the farmers set about the harvesting of olives and the sowing of wheat, and at the end of the rainy season, reap a wheat harvest, after which their leisure season starts. This means that the growing cycle of wheat itself underlies the annual farming schedule, and thus symbolizes the farming community which is home to most Arabs in the Galilee region. Moreover, the sense of belonging to the farming community means much to not only Christians but also Arab citizens in Israel, because it constitutes the very core of their identities (Sugase 2005: 62-64). For this reason, it may be concluded that for Arabs who were born and raised in the Arab farming community, boasting of the superiority of their wheat meals is equivalent to declaring their identity as Arabs.

On the other hand, Arabs who are Melkite or Maronite Catholic Christians are more attracted to the West than Greek Orthodox Christians because of their association with the Roman Catholic Church. Due to their rivalry with Greek Orthodox Christians and Muslims, they take pride in their religious closeness to the West, and sometimes even feel hesitant

to identify themselves as Arabs (Sugase 2005: 132). Inside themselves, they are always torn between two different identities—their identity as Arabs and as Christians.⁷⁾ Even so, to me, they seem to try to harmonize and integrate these two different identities by attaching Christian significance to, and speaking highly of, *qamh maslūq*, a traditional meal prepared and eaten by all Arabs in the eastern Mediterranean region regardless of the differences in their beliefs. Thus, Arab Christians' act of proudly serving *qamh maslūq* can be interpreted as a representation not only of their pride in being Christians and their assumed superiority to Muslims, but also of their desire to retain the same Arab identity as Muslims.

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NOTES

- 1) While St. Barbara is generally believed to have lived in Asia Minor, the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt and other Eastern Orthodox Churches hold that she lived in Alexandria. This is also the case with another much-loved saint, Saint Georgios (Mār Jirjis, Mār Juris). Various theories have been presented about his origin, some arguing that he lived in Palestine, not Asia Minor, and others insisting his mother was a Palestinian.
- 2) Masses are held also after six months and/or one year following the death if bereaved family members so wish.
- 3) *Mustaka* is resin taken from trees native to Chios Island in Greece, and has been valued for its efficacy as digestive medicine since ancient times. Greek Orthodox Christians use it to flavor Eucharist bread as do Melkite Catholic and some Maronite Catholic Christians. This indicates that although the Melkite Catholic Church separated from the Greek Orthodox Church and was placed under the control of the Roman Catholic Church in the early 18th century, they still retain a number of doctrines and customs of the Greek Orthodox Church.
- 4) During my field survey, I sometimes heard Muslim housewives say how much they admire the “meals prepared by the Christians living in the northern village” in the presence of women from that village, who were much pleased with the remark. In fact, it is reported that Muslims seem to admit that “Christians have more sophisticated taste” than them (Sa’ar

- 1998: 221), though the case reported in this paper refers to the taste in furniture.
- 5) In addition to Eucharist bread and *qamh maslūq*, “*kubba ni’a*” should be mentioned as one of the examples that demonstrate the excellence of Christian foods. This meal is prepared by soaking *burgul*, ground wheat grains, in water, and then mixing them with minced raw goat meat, herb, spice, and paprika paste to make dumplings. It is a feast offered to entertain guests in the northern villages of the Galilee region, which has a large Christian population. The villagers take pride in being able to offer *kubba ni’a*, because it indicates they have a sanitary environment and advanced techniques that allow them to eat fresh raw meat. Another example is “*ma’amūl*,” a sweet substance prepared by each family to celebrate Easter. This is also made from wheat and shaped like Christ’s crown of thorns or a tomb, which is symbolic of Christianity. Muslims also make and offer *ma’amūl* on the occasion of *Eid-Ul-Adha* or Feast of Sacrifice, but its shape has nothing to do with any particular religious symbols.
 - 6) The Cross Festival (*’Īd al-Salīb*) is an occasion to celebrate the discovery of the Cross of Christ by St. Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine, on Golgotha Hill. It is believed that if rain falls on this day, then that year’s rainy season will have much rain and a rich harvest will result. The chance of rain is said to be high on this day. I attended the festival in Haifa, Israel twice, in 2001 and 2002, and light rain actually fell during the 2001 festival despite the fine weather.
 - 7) For Melkite Catholic Christians, this conflict is even more serious, because the Melkite Church separated from the Greek Orthodox Church to set up a new church for Arabs. Therefore, identifying oneself as a Melkite Christian is equal to declaring oneself an Arab. Yet, many of them feel hesitant to declare their identity as Arab, owing to their disappointment in the neighboring Arab countries and their rivalry with the Muslims who constitute an overwhelming majority of the population of these countries.