
Egyptians' Relationship With Food Choices And Religious Practices

Egypt has been an Islamic state for more than a century (Metz & Library Of Congress, [Metz & LOC], 1991). 90% of its population identify as Sunni Muslims and the remaining 10% identify as Christians, with a majority of them belonging to the Coptic Orthodox Church (Central Intelligence Agency, 2019). Egyptians from different cultural backgrounds consume different types of food due to their individual dietary preferences and religious beliefs (The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions, 1997). Food plays a significant role in religious festivities and Egyptians from all walks of life celebrate their faith with many festivities throughout the year (Riolo, 2009).

Islam is practised by the Sunni Muslims in Egypt. Under Islamic law, food is categorised into three groups; halal (permitted), haram (forbidden) and mushbooh (doubtful) (Fieldhouse, 2017). The consumption of meat and dairy products must be prepared in the halal way. They are considered halal when animals are both healthy and alive. They are then slaughtered with a single cut to the throat and prayers are being uttered when blood is drained from the carcass (Goldberg, 2011). However, any produce originating from a pig is forbidden. This is in addition to blood, intoxicating liquor, drugs and food that has been made as offerings to the Gods (Grivetti, 2000).

The Muslims celebrate their holidays according to the Islamic calendar. Three main festivals, Ramadan, Eid Al Fitr, and Eid al Adhu are widely celebrated in Egypt (Zayan, 2007). As reported by Wassef (2004) reports that during Ramadan, Muslim men and women, except the sick and frail, young children and travellers, do not consume food and drinks from sunrise to sunset. For sohoor, Ramadan pre-dawn breakfast and iftaar, Ramadan after-sunset dinner, they usually consume meals that are rich and high in calories. Breakfast dishes are cooked and prepared the night before as it is eaten early in the morning before the sun rises (Wassef, 2004). At dinner, dates and glasses of apricot juice are eaten and drank to break their fast before the main meal. As Ramadan lasts for a month and the daily meals comprise primarily of soups, meat, vegetables, rice or pasta, with the dishes changing every day. Dinner culminates with a plate of assorted fresh fruits and sweets (Riolo, 2009). During the fasting month, a higher quantity of nuts and dried fruits are imported as the Egyptians consume more of these than usual due to their nutritional value and they are also used in pastries and cookies which are exchanged as gifts at the end of Ramadan (Wassef, 2004). On the first day of Eid al Fitr, which is a three-day celebration marking the end of Ramadan, traditional Eid cookies, Kahk a l'eid — a cookie made with rose water is eaten for breakfast. Muslims then visit the mosque for prayers thereafter and family and friends gather at each others' homes with guests arriving bearing gifts, exchanging them and having a delicious feast together (Zayan, 2007). During this period, meals are usually lighter and fish is the main ingredient in the dishes (Riolo, 2009). Eid al Adhu is the largest holiday known as Big Eid in Egypt (Riolo, 2009). On this day, families make an offering by sacrificing an animal. Sheep are usually sacrificed in these offerings. After the sacrifice, a third of the meat is given to the needy, the other third shared amongst family members and the remaining third kept for the family's own consumption (Zayan, 2007). Meat from the animal is present in the dishes throughout the meal as it is considered wasteful to dispose meat of the sacrifice animal.

Conversely, Christianity was introduced during the first century A.D when Egypt was colonised by the Romans (Metz & Library Of Congress, 1991). Coptic Christians celebrate their holidays in accordance to the Coptic Calendar. The Copts fast for more than 210 days in a calendar year and during the fast, they abstain from food and drinks for a period of time and maintain a vegan diet after the fast. They are allowed to imbibe in wine but getting intoxicated is disallowed and spirits are prohibited (The Coptic Orthodox Church Centre, n.d.). Coptic Christmas is celebrated on January 7th in the Gregorian calendar. On Christmas Eve, they attend mass where the holy bread, qurban, made from wheat and water, is distributed after mass (Zayan, 2007). After mass, families gather in their homes for a celebratory meal. A traditional Christmas dinner usually includes dishes prepared with turkey, meat, fish, and dairy to celebrate the end of the fast.

Aside from religious festivities, national holidays, like Moulids and Easter, are celebrated by Egyptians from all walks of life. Moulid means birthplace and birthday, and it is held to celebrate the birthdays of saints. During the celebration, food, pastries, and beverages are consumed throughout the evening with recitals of religious poems, dancing and other types of entertainment (Schielke, 2012). Sugar dolls, knights on horses that are adorned in colourful outfits, and an assortment of sweetmeats made with different types of nuts and chickpeas are displayed in shop windows and street stalls (Wassef, 2004). Easter, Shamm an Nassim festival, known as 'smelling of the breeze' will see families heading outdoors and having picnics together (Zayan, 2007). Hard-boiled eggs are prepared and coloured with natural dyes, and these eggs are subsequently hidden around the house waiting to be found and eaten by children. On this day, foods with symbolic significance are still eaten. Dishes prepared with fish, eggs, onions, and green chickpeas are eaten as they symbolise fertility, rebirth, an abundance of crops and are believed to ward off evil (Riolo, 2009).

In conclusion, in this modern day and age, despite Egyptians hailing from different faiths. Food continues to be one of the reasons where people gather and bond. Beliefs are still being respected and practised. Despite abstinence from food and drinks during religious days of fasting and certain food being forbidden in some faiths, the meals that are consumed are nutritious. Traditions originating from different religious faiths are still being practised alongside the preparation and consumption of symbolic foods during the festivities. In conclusion, food is the anchor that binds people from different religions and faiths together.