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HOSPITALITY CULTURE, COOKING AND ARTISTIC POTTERY DURING THE TIMURID ERA: HISTORICAL AND ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract: This study provides a historical-ethnographic analysis of the culinary culture, state-level reception ceremonies, diplomatic hospitality etiquette, and the art of fine pottery during the Timurid Renaissance (14th–16th centuries). It examines the distinctive features of banquets held under rulers such as Mirzo Ulugbek and Sultan Husayn Bayqara, as well as the diplomatic role played by Timurid princesses—specifically Saraymulk Khanum (Bibi-Khanum)—in court festivities and political receptions. Also, for the first time in the article, the art of tableware, which is an integral part of table culture - the interaction between imported Chinese porcelain and local mysterious ceramics belonging to the Samarkand and Herat pottery schools, and the healing properties of food based on the medical theory of Abu Ali Ibn Sina ("client" theory) is comparatively analyzed on the basis of local and foreign historiographical sources.

Keywords: Timurid Renaissance, Saraymulk Khanum, hospitality etiquette, Samarkand banquets, Herat gatherings, Ibn Sina's medicine, national cuisine, Chinese porcelain, glazed earthenware, blue-and-white pottery.

Hospitality and Diplomatic Etiquette in the Timurid State

In the Timurid court and in social life, receiving guests was not merely a custom but a system elevated to the level of state policy and high cultural refinement. Amir Timur and his successors adhered to strict rules—or etiquette—when receiving foreign envoys, scholars, and travelers.

Foreign researchers note that the culture of dynastic dining and mass banquets that emerged during this period served as a primary means of legitimizing political authority and establishing strong ties with the local elite (Dale, 2004).

Palace Receptions and Banquets

During the Timurid era, the grandest banquets were held at the Kuk-Saray or in the famous gardens surrounding Samarkand (such as Bagh-i Dilkusha, Bagh-i Shamol, and Bagh-i Nav). According to the Castilian ambassador Ruy González de Clavijo, hundreds of magnificent tents were erected for banquets held in honor of ambassadors, and special areas were designated for foreign guests (Clavijo, 2010).

These lavish tents and the strict hierarchy within them were a sublime synthesis of Central Asian nomadic and Islamic urban traditions (Subrahmanyam, 2011).

Seating (Jazi shura): At a banquet, guests were seated according to their status. Ambassadors and scholars were seated close to the ruler, according to their rank.

The Art of Dishware: An Analysis of Chinese Porcelain and Local Mystery Ceramics



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During the Timurid era, the decoration of the table and the type of dishes used on it rose to the level of high art, showing not only aesthetic taste, but also social and political status. The manner in which food is served at banquets is considered an indicator of the state's economic power and international relations.

Imports and Demand for Chinese Porcelain

The revival of the Silk Road through Central Asia brought diplomatic and trade relations with China's Ming Dynasty (1368–1444). As a result, the Timurid court began to receive large quantities of Chinese porcelain in the famous "Blue-and-White" style.

Cobalt-patterned porcelain: Porcelain plates, bowls, and jugs with dark blue cobalt paint on a white background, decorated with dragons, phoenixes, and floral motifs, became an obligatory attribute of palace banquets.

Diplomatic and political significance: Clavijo specifically mentions in his diary that during receptions with Amir Temur, food and drinks were served not only on gold and silver platters, but also on very finely crafted Chinese porcelain dishes (Clavijo, 2010). Fragments of Ming porcelain found during archaeological excavations in Tashkent, Samarkand, and Shakhrisabz fully confirm this idea.

Local Glazed Earthenware and "Timurid Porcelain"

The immense demand for prized Chinese porcelain spurred revolutionary developments in the local pottery schools of Samarkand and Herat. Striving to emulate Chinese porcelain and create products of comparable quality, local artisans developed the technology for "cobalt-glazed earthenware."

Technological distinctiveness: Due to the absence of porcelain clay (kaolin), Central Asian potters utilized high-quality local clay, coated it with white *engobe* (liquid clay slip), painted designs using local cobalt pigment, and finished the pieces with a transparent lead or alkaline glaze (Golombek et al., 1996). The result was the emergence of a unique type of vessel that was visually indistinguishable from Chinese porcelain yet enriched with local Eastern motifs-such as *islami* (floral arabesque) patterns, geometric designs, and calligraphic inscriptions.

Functional types of vessels: Large plates, bowls, soup bowls, long-necked jars (attobas) for pouring juice and musallas, and small cups were widely used at the tables. In modern art criticism, these local mysterious ceramic samples are considered "the phenomenon of Timurid pottery" (Mason, 2004).

The Role of Timurid Queens in Banquets and Diplomatic Influence

During the Timurid period, women, especially the dynasty's queens, actively participated in social and political life, as well as in high-level palace banquets and ceremonies for receiving ambassadors. Western historiography has separately studied the social status of Timurid queens and their economic and political independence, and their place in palace ceremonies is highly valued (Balabanlilar, 2012).

Saraymulk Khanum (Bibi-Khanum) and Diplomatic Receptions

Amir Timur's senior wife, Saraymulk Khanum, was a woman of great intellectual and political stature who personally presided over the most significant diplomatic banquets at the court.



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Independent Receptions: In his diaries, Clavijo describes with admiration how Saraymulk Khanum hosted grand, separate banquets for foreign ambassadors. At these events, the queen would receive the envoys-wearing a tall, gem-studded headdress (*qubba*) and a delicate veil-and engage them in political discussions (Clavijo, 2010). Foreign scholars interpret this as evidence of women's direct participation in state governance and diplomacy (Lal, 2005).

Domestic Order and Generosity: At banquets hosted by queens, foreign guests were served a variety of delicacies, sweets, and fruits on the above-mentioned fine blue-and-white porcelain and mysterious clay plates. At the end of the party, Mrs. Saraymulk personally presented expensive coats and horses to the ambassadors, which served to strengthen diplomatic relations (Yazdiy, 1997).

Etiquette for Princesses at Banquets

During the Timurid era, banquets attended by women were conducted with a high degree of decorum. At these gatherings-attended by princesses, female confidantes, and handmaidens—musicians, singers, and dancers showcased their artistry.

At the same time, princesses such as Gawharshad Begim and Khanzada Begim also made significant contributions to the development of the culinary arts by organizing special "gatherings of refinement" for poets and scholars at the courts of Herat and Samarkand (Wasifi, 1979).

The Era of Mirzo Ulugbek: Scientific Debates and Intellectual Gatherings

During the reign of Mirzo Ulugbek (1409–1449), high-level banquets in Samarkand evolved into arenas for scientific and philosophical debate rather than mere occasions for dining. Ulugbek would invite the era's prominent scholars-such as Qazizoda Rumi, Ghiyath al-Din Jamshid al-Kashi, and Ali Qushji—to these gatherings (Akhmedov, 1989).

Banquet proceedings: Before the feast began, sessions involving questions and answers on poetry, astronomy, and mathematics were held. Meals were served to celebrate the successful completion of scientific observations (such as the work on the *Zij-i Gurkani* tables). In foreign sources, such gatherings led by Ulugh Beg are characterized as "intellectual symposia" (Sayili, 1960).

A distinctive detail: At the reception for ambassadors held at Ulugh Beg's palace, great importance was attached to "Kök Suv" (specially chilled medicinal spring water) and light dishes enriched with saffron.

The Era of Sultan Husayn Bayqara: Gatherings of Refinement, Art, and Poetry

During the reign of the ruler of Khorasan, Sultan Husayn Bayqara (1469–1506), and the tenure of the state's chief minister, Alisher Navoi, the banquets held in Herat were distinguished by their refined aesthetic taste and high artistic quality. As attested by Zayniddin Wasifi, masters of music, the spoken word, and the art of calligraphy played a leading role at these Herat gatherings (Wasifi, 1979). In her research on the history of South and Central Asia, the foreign scholar Maria Subtelny describes the banquets of the Herat court as highly institutionalized cultural ceremonies (Subtelny, 2007).

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"Majlisi Uns" (Gatherings of Friendship): At these banquets, dishes were served in a specific artistic sequence. Navoi also organized separate charitable feasts-known as *Taomnomai Masokin*-for the poor and needy during his banquets.

Delicacies: The banquets featured dishes such as small bird meat wrapped in dough and *pilaf* prepared in various colors. Modern international research indicates that these culinary traditions subsequently formed the foundation of the court culture of the Mughal Empire (for instance, the *Nuskha-i-Shah Jahani* collection of *pilaf* recipes) (Richards, 1993).

National dishes of the Timurid era and their healing properties

In the culinary art of the Timurid era, dishes were prepared not only according to their nutritional properties, but also based on Abu Ali ibn Sina's theory of "Mijaz" (heat, cold, dryness and moisture) (Ibn Sina, 1982). Each dish was enriched with certain ingredients in order to strengthen human health and prevent diseases.

Meat dishes and their medical properties

Mutton and Deer Kebabs: Amir Temur was the main source of energy in his military campaigns. According to Ibn Sina's teaching, mutton is "hot and wet" for the client, which increases blood and quickly restores strength in the body (Ibn Sina, 1982).

Qozi-qarta and horse meat: Recommended for warriors and those traveling in cold climates. Horse meat was believed to possess properties that warmed internal organs and alleviated joint pain; for this reason, Babur mandated its consumption among his troops during the winter season (Babur, 1989). Modern food historians demonstrate that the low fatty acid content and high energy value of horse meat played a crucial dietary role during the long-distance campaigns of the Timurid army (Perry, 2001).

The Therapeutic Properties of Palov and Medical Recommendations

It was during the Timurid era that palov rose to the status of not only a royal dish but also a medicinal remedy. According to historical sources, the physicians of Amir Timur recommended this dish-composed of seven ingredients (rice, meat, carrots, onions, oil, water, and salt)—to ensure soldiers did not lose weight or become physically exhausted during long campaigns. The cumin in the palov aided digestion, while the saffron strengthened heart function and lifted the mood. Quince and pomegranate seeds were added to lighten the dish, which helped protect the liver from fatty deposits.

The Healing Power of Drinks and Confections

Kumis and Shubat: These are considered the most potent remedies for treating low gastric acidity and combating lung diseases (such as tuberculosis). In his memoirs, Babur writes that he regained his strength by drinking kumis while in mountainous regions (Babur, 1989).

Sikanjubin (Vinegar and Honey): This beverage, made from honey and vinegar, was regularly consumed by the court nobility to thin the blood, clear obstructions (blockages) in the liver and spleen, and quench thirst (Ibn Sina, 1982).

In short, during the Timurid period, hospitality, national cuisine, and artistic pottery formed a high-level system that complemented each other. The science of Mirzo Ulugbek, the art of Sultan Hussein Baykara, and the diplomatic skills of queens such as



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Saraymulk Khanum also brought the field of cuisine and pottery to a high peak. Local glazed ceramic dishes, which developed under the influence of Ming dynasty porcelain, testify to the high aesthetic level of the table culture of this period. Most importantly, the culture of eating during this period developed in close connection with the medical teachings of Ibn Sina, serving to ensure human health and longevity.

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