

Liturgical Foods and Dietary Habits in Coptic Orthodox Christianity: History and Meaning

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Abstract

In Coptic Christianity, there are some kinds of food connected to different Coptic liturgical occasions and other traditional feasts specified in Coptic Calendar. Certain types of food should be eaten during Coptic fasting periods, while some other food items are prohibited. There are some types of food and food habits are linked to rituals, religious ceremonies and social occasions, which have become over the ages an important part of Coptic heritage.

There is a lack of work on Coptic culture and heritage as most of Coptic studies focus on Coptic art and archaeology, neglecting social and cultural traditions of Copts especially those related to food habits and their origin which is sometimes deeply rooted in the Egyptian society since the ancient Egyptian era. Coptic food culture is an important aspect of the Coptic heritage that needs further studies. Therefore, this study discusses the liturgical foods and food traditions in Coptic Christianity, explaining the different occasions of having these foods, whether religious, social or even traditional. It focuses on the historical origins of some types of food or the raw ingredients that made up Coptic diet and their significance. The study also highlights the reason for the rooting of these food habits in the Egyptian society since ancient times, aiming to clarify this particular part of Coptic heritage in Egypt. It also aims to record and

preserve this part of Coptic civilization in order to avoid its loss, and raise the social awareness of its importance throughout the ages.

Keywords: Liturgical food, Coptic fasting, Coptic feasts, Epiphany, Nayrouz.

1. Introduction

Liturgy in Christianity is a set of practices defines Christian faith and closely connected to Jesus Christ. In fact, the Christian church is formed by the liturgy. These practices include baptism, Eucharist, services, individual worship, daily prayers and annual fasts and feasts (Jones 2012). These religious occasions of Coptic Church are closely connected with certain types of food. Coptic fast is a vegetarian fast as vegetarian food in Coptic Christianity was the food that was prepared for Adam and Eve, and continued to be eaten even after the sin. During the fasts, Copts eat vegetables, cereals, green leaves, legumes and fruits. Fish is also eaten in certain fasts to ease the length of the Coptic fast which is for about 200 days of the year. These types of food are eaten by all Egyptians as they have pre-Christian origin (Morcos et al. 2013)

Coptic ritual food habits have been inherited from one generation to another for about twenty centuries which helped in forming the current Coptic diet. That is, the Coptic food habits and liturgical foods show continuity of ancient food habits as the fertile rich soil and temperate climate conditions of Egypt have helped in diversifying the agricultural crops such as cereals, vegetables, legumes and fruits. The ancient agricultural methods remained unchanged over thousands of years which helped the food habits to take root in the Egyptian society and to have gradual emergence of new nutritional habits satisfy the requirements of the Egyptians (Hamdan 1984; Wassef 2004).

The term heritage is closely connected to history, culture, and identity. That is, food habits and liturgical foods connected to Coptic feasts and fasts are considered very important part of Coptic heritage and culture.

Due to the lack of studies on Coptic culture, traditional ways of life and daily lived heritage including ritual foods and traditional diet (Monier 2021), this study aims to add a new source of knowledge for Coptic culture and heritage related to Coptic feasts and fasts which form a very important part of the intangible Egyptian heritage. It aims also to highlight the ancient Egyptian origin of some Coptic celebrations and food connected to these celebrations such as Nayrouz feast which is considered a traditional feast for all Egyptians not only the Christian.

2. History of Food and Eating Habits

2.1 Diet in Ancient Egypt

Over the long history of Egypt, the annual Nile flood and the fertile land have enabled Egypt to sustain the Egyptians and to be considered as the breadbasket of the whole ancient world, supplying the Greek world, Roman Empire and other ancient civilizations with grain.

Food was understood by ancient Egyptians as one of the most important elements for preserving life. Therefore, food was included

in the funerary offerings of all; rich and poor, human and divine, pharaohs, nobles, gods or commoners. Ancient Egyptian believed that offerings were ensuring continuing existence in afterlife. He offered different types of foods such as meat, fish, poultry, fruits, vegetables, legumes, beer and wine to different ancient deities (Dollinger 2000).

Ancient Egyptian dietary structure was depended on the Nile flood and based on the fertile land of Egypt. Thus, ancient Egyptian relied on legumes, cereals and preserved foods at the time of the flood. They preserved fish, meat, fruits, vegetables and aromatic seeds (Wassef 2004). Many different types of fish were available in the Nile since the Pharaonic era. Some types were considered by the ancient Egyptian as sacred and could not be caught. Moreover, eating fish in some places was considered a taboo on certain days of the year (Mehdawy and Hussein 2010).

In the Old Kingdom, ancient Egyptians dietary was based on bread, vegetables, fruits, meat, fish, milk and cheese. Scenes of ancient mastabas contain images of baking, brewing and wine making, in addition to the slaughtering of animals paintings and reliefs. Workers on the Great Pyramids in Giza were paid in bread, beer and onions. At that time, ancient Egyptians baked bread on embers of the hearths (Saffirio 1972; El-Gendi 2014)¹ (Fig.1).

Types of eaten food in ancient Egypt were different from social level to another. Poor peasants used to eat bread, beer and vegetables, while people of middle classes were eating more varied types of foods such as meat, chicken, fish, vegetables and fruits, as well as the main type of food which was bread and beer. Thus, bread and beer were very important elements of dietary system of ancient Egyptians of all social classes (Mehdawy and Hussein 2010).

In the Ptolemaic period the bread was made of hard or durum wheat rather than the emmer wheat. The silt bread platters with some

¹. However, more information is needed as the full production of ancient Egyptian bread and beer is still not completely known (See: Samuel, D. 1997, pp. 579-580)

recesses inside their surfaces were used from the Roman period (Tomber 2013).

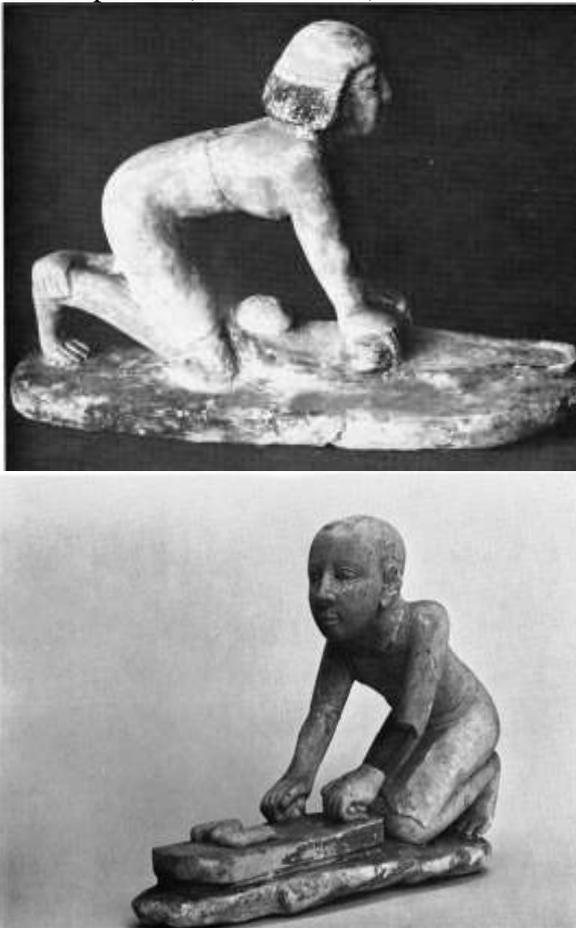


Figure 1. Old Kingdom limestone statues of making bread. After: Leek, F. (1972). *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology = JEA*, Vol. (58).p. 132.

2.2 Diet and Food Habits in Coptic Egypt

Copts are the descendants of Ancient Egyptians who adhere to the traditions of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Coptic Orthodox diet is unique due to its vegetarian nature as the Copts have four fasting periods during the year which is about two thirds of the year. During the fasts, they consume cereals, vegetables, fruits and legumes. These types of foods have pre-Christian origin as they used to be eaten by all Egyptians in ancient times; poor and wealthy as they were considered part of the traditional Egyptian diet as it is mentioned above (Wassef 1971). Thus, the diet of Coptic Orthodox Christian is rich in whole-grain bread, beans and sesame (Morcos et al. 2013).

3. Monastic Food

In early times of Coptic Christianity, monks of the 4th century were living in cells scattered around the desert, while some ascetics lived in caves. However, they still needed a place to gather and celebrate the liturgy, as well as they also needed a place to bake bread. Copts knew dry bread since that early times; the monks had a Coptic word *paxamatia* which is a small dry loaf 12 ounces in weight, made of wheat, barley or sometimes chickpeas. Early monks baked bread in bulk, dry it and store it for weeks or even more and would reconstitute it by dipping into water. The diet of early monks was quite similar to the diet of the Egyptian peasant; bread, salt, olive oil, stew lentils and grain porridge. The sayings of early monks also mentioned onions, herbs, dry figs, dates, cucumbers and greens and some other staples (Hansen 2021).

In monastic life when the soul desires to variety of foods then it is time to eat water and bread which teach the soul how to be grateful for a little piece of bread. Thus, it is believed that satiety desires different types of foods while hunger feels itself happy to get nothing more than bread (Geffert and Stavrou 2016). Coptic and hermits always desire to curb the physical appetites which include eating variety of foods in order to discipline their spirits and reach to the greatest love of God. Therefore, they depend on the basic foods for their bodies and avoid eating various food items (Jones 2012).

The diet in Coptic archaeological monasteries differed according to the strictness of the monastery's system, so the diet varied from monastery to another; in the Pachomian system, monks were allowed to eat their meals in the dining room inside the monastery, while the more austere hermits ate salt, water and bread inside their cells. Other monks' food consisted of bread, vegetables, fruit, fish soup or cheese, while wine and meat were not allowed at all (Walters 2002). (Fig.5).

Early literary sources from the 6th to the 8th centuries tell us about the diet of monks of the monastery of St. Epiphanius at Thebes, which contained bread as the main ingredient and was eaten with salt or vinegar. The sources also mentioned green herbs, oil, vegetables, lentils, cumin, lupines and beans as common types of food inside the monastery. On the other hand, fish was rarely eaten and meat was not mentioned in all these sources. That is, fish was unusual food items in the diet of hermits of Theban monasteries, while meat was not eaten at all by the monks of Thebes (Walters 2002; Winlock et al. 1926). However, fish was found in some monasteries outside Thebes such as the coenobitic monastery of Apa Apollo at Bawit in Middle Egypt where a text mentions the daily deliveries of grain, wine and salted fish was discovered. Moreover, traces of fish bones and shellfish were discovered in the monastery of Kom el-Nana (304 km south of Cairo) which has been dated to 425-650 AD. That is, Consuming fish in Coptic Christianity reflects religious and social culture related to the beliefs about Christian religion and Christ himself (Awad 2020).

In the Monastery of Apa Thomas at Wadi Sarga in Middle Egypt a Coptic letter mentions the consumption of meat in the monastery has been found. It is also evidenced that the monks of this monastery consumed salted fish too. Some literary sources from the monastic site of Tell Edfu (113 south of Luxor) also evidenced the consumption of meat by the monks at this monastic site (Awad 2020).

The popularity of Fish in Coptic Christianity is due to the consisting of the five Greek words forming the word fish in Greek (*ikthoos*) which clearly described the qualities of Christ and has become the symbol for Christianity. Each of the five letters forming the word represents one of Christ's name and mission; *i*= *Iesus* *k*= *Kristos*, *th*= *Theos* (*God*), *oo*= *oios* (*Son*), *s*= *Soter* (*saviour*). That is, the word means "Jesus Christ, Son of God, The

Savior" (Masri, 1982; Rasimus, 2012). In early times of Christianity, early believers used the fish symbol to show and affirm their belief. Fish is a very important religious symbol in Coptic Christianity as it is a biblical subject and related to miracles of Jesus Christ such as the feeding of five thousand people with only five loaves and two fish, and the catching of a huge fish. Therefore, in Coptic religion fish symbolizes blessings and power of Christ, and Christ himself (Guirguis et al. 2020), as well as, it is one of the common traditional motifs of Coptic art and architecture which is usually represented inside Coptic Churches and monasteries (Fig.2).



Figure 2. A representation of a Fish with a Cross, Monastery of Abu Makar. After: Guirguis, M. Dewidar, K. Kamel, S, and Iscandar, M. (2020), Categorization of Symbolism in Religious Architecture; A case study of the Coptic Orthodox church architecture, AEJ, (59). p.538

3.1 Oil and Bread in Coptic Monasteries

In Ancient Egypt, oil was extracted from olives, caraway, lettuce, sesame seeds and linen seeds. There were different uses of oil at that time such as, food, mummification, ointments and feeding animals (Mehdawy and Hussein 2010).

In Early Christian time of Egypt, oil was the lifeblood of the monastic communities. Old texts tells us about some monks who had left their cells to the fertile land of Nile Delta in order to assist in the annual harvest and return back with jars full of oil. It is said that the common oil used in monastic communities

was from olive, sesame or linen seeds. However, the ancient Coptic texts mention that one of the Copts made oil from horseradish for the use at his table. Some monks are depending in their diet on dipping bread in oil or salted water. Bread is known in Coptic as *owek* or *kake* which is made of wheat. Bread is commonly eaten with lentils, onions and oil (Hansen 2021).

That is, Coptic monasteries were not the same in their dietary habits and food consumption due to the fact that the food types and dietary laws in monastic communities are not mentioned or explained in the bible. The monk's abstention from eating meat in Theban monastic communities is probably due to the following of the sayings of Egyptian desert fathers who believed that eating meat is result of the fall of Adam and Eve. Therefore, they wanted to return to the prelapsarian state by following a dietary system without meat and sex (Ward, 1984). They sometimes consumed fish or salted fish which was considered by early Christians a type of food that facilitated their union with Christ (Awad, 2020). However, the diet of Coptic monks in general was very simple just like the Egyptian peasant; bread, salt, stew of lentils, porridge grain, onions, vegetables and green leaves. Some types of figs were also consumed such as figs, grapes and dates (Hansen 2021).

As it shown above bread is considered a staple food of the monks throughout the ages and has an ancient Egyptian origin. In the Neolithic age, ancient Egyptians depend on wheat and barley as the main food stuffs in their diet, and therefore they used them to make the early ancient bread and porridge. In Pre-dynastic period, ancient Egyptians knew how to make the leavened bread and bear and they became their basic food. That is, they used fermentation food processing which is a way to improve storage qualities of the bread in order to contend with the threat of water shortage and famines (Samuel 1997). There are several tomb reliefs and paintings illustrate different bakery activities. In addition to the archaeological findings related to bread making such as rubbing stones, bread moulds and whole bakeries with ovens (Fig.3)

(Samuel 1989). Discovered actual loaves in different archaeological sites emphasize that in ancient Egypt bread was made of emmer wheat; hulled wheat (Tomber 2013). In the old Kingdom, there were up to 15 different types of bread (Mehdawy and Hussein 2010) (Figs.4).

In the New Kingdom, Egyptian dietary included different types of bread and pastries, which are can be counted up to 40 different kinds. Whole bread loaves are found in some ancient tombs and are preserved in different museums throughout the world (Fig.5). At that time, ancient Egyptians built real bread ovens. Many houses at Tall al-Amarna (18th dynasty) and Dair al-Madina contained storehouses for grains (Mehdawy and Hussein 2010). Bread was made mainly from wheat, barley, corn, or other cereal grains which was the main reason for the variety ancient Egyptian bread types and textures (Mehdawy and Hussein 2010; Samuel 1994). That is, Bread was the most important ingredient of ancient Egyptian diet of all society classes including poor and wealthy alike. It was consumed almost in every meal alone or with other types of food².

In Coptic Christianity, Bread is considered one of the most important liturgical foods. The "Holy Sacrament" of the Eucharist or last supper is the Passover meal that Christ ordered his disciples to observe it. It is the service commemorates the Christ's sacrifice to redeem the mankind from sins. In Early times of Christianity, Christians celebrated the Eucharist with friends and large, formal Jewish meals. Since Christian religion was illegal till the time of Constantine, Eucharist's ceremonies were celebrated in private homes of early Christians. By the end of the 1st century AD, Eucharistic ceremonies served only bread and red wine with the inclusion prayers and scripture readings. Early Christian descriptions mention that during the ceremonies and after the prayers the bishop was breaking bread to distribute it with wine to the congregants. From that early time on, bread and wine are not considered merely

². The staple diet in ancient Egypt was composed of bread, onion along with beer (See: Mehdawy, and Hussein, 2010, p. 12).

bread and wine, but they have an important meaning as they represent the true body and the blood of Christ, the Redeemer (Geffert and Stavrou 2016).

The Eucharist has also known as the "Thanksgiving", the "Lord's Supper", the "Holy Communion", the "Holy Sacrifice" and the "Divine Mystery". It is the sacrifice of Christ for all humanity. That is, the liturgy is applied to the religious ceremonies for the sacrifice for the Christ's body and blood (Malaty 1992). In the upper room in Zion, on the night of Jesus' passion he took bread, blessed it and gave it to his disciples saying to them "Take eat, this is My Body". Then, he took a cup of wine and gave it to them to drink saying "This is My Blood of the new covenant which is shed for many" (Mettaous 2000).

The Eucharistic bread should be leavened, unsalted and made of the finest wheat flour, oil and yeast. The dough should be well leavened and salt free. It is a round loaf like the sun which refers to the Lord Jesus Christ, the sun of Righteousness from whom the blessings of warmth and light come. The round shape of the holy bread also reflects the concept of unity; when the bread of the Eucharist unifies with the body when he eats it as the believer becomes one with Christ (Malaty 1992). Bread of the Eucharist is not consumed as any other type of food but it has a very important religious significance in Christian church (Jones 2012). The Eucharist celebration is called "Lord's Day", and it is considered the first feast of church life (Soliman 2015).

Before serving the Eucharist bread, a large cross in the centre should be stamped by a wooden seal (Figs.7, 8). This central part of the loaf is called "*Despatikon*" which means "Lordly". Around the central large cross, twelve smaller crosses representing the twelve disciples should be stamped. Around the perimeter of this design the Coptic word "*Agios*" means "Holy" is written on the three times in three phrases; "Holy God, Holy Mighty, and Holy Living". The Eucharist bread is known as "*Qorban*" or "holy bread" (Malaty 1992; Mettaous 2000) (Figs 6, 7,8,9). Breaking of bread in the Eucharistic Liturgies takes place before the Communion and after

the rite of Commemoration. It is called "Fraction" and celebrated during the Liturgy to represent how the church united in the Christ. Fraction is performed in two stages at the time of the Liturgy. The first stage is immediately after the prayers when the celebrant takes the Oblation³ and divides the bread into three thirds without actually cut them. The second stage is after the Epiclesis of the Liturgy which is accompanied with special prayers known as fraction prayers. In this stage celebrant divides the bread into 13 pieces which represents the Lord Jesus Christ and his 12 disciples. At the end of the service of the Eucharist the priest distributes a bite of holy bread over the believers called "Elugia" or the "blessed bread" (Malaty 1992).

That is, bread is considered one of the main ritual foods on which Coptic monks and hermits depend in monasteries and cells all over Egypt (Fig.10), as well as it is an essential element in mass rituals within the Coptic Orthodox Church.



Figure3. A Cylindrical Oven found in Amarna workmen's village, New Kingdom. After: Samuel, D. (1999) Bread Making and Social Interactions at the Amarna Workmen's Village, *World Archaeology* 31(1), p.133

³. Oblation is a solemn offering to God during the Liturgy. It refers to the elements of bread and wine in the Eucharist (See: Malaty, T. 1992, p.80).



Figure 4. triangle of bread found near Luxor, around 2000 B.C. British Museum (40942
After: [https:// www.britishmuseum.org](https://www.britishmuseum.org).



Figure 5. A loaf of bread found in the tomb of Hat-Nefer, New Kingdom, Metropolitan Museum (36.3.74).
After: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/571401>



Figure 6. Making Eucharist Bread
After: <https://rawi-magazine.com/articles/ourbana/>



Figure 7. Eucharist Bread Seal.
After: <https://rawi-magazine.com/articles/ourbana/>



Figure 8. A Bread Seal bearing a Star with a Cross in the Middle, 4th -5th centuries AD, BA Antiquities Museum (0890).
After: <https://antiquities.bibalex.org/Collection/Detail.aspx?lang=en&a=890>



Figure 9. Coptic Bread Seal Bearing a Cross, 5th-6th centuries, BA Antiquities Museum (0886).
After: <https://antiquities.bibalex.org/Collection/Detail.aspx?collection=41&a=886&lang=en>



Figure10. A primitive Coptic granite quern still used in a monastery in Wadi Al-Natrun.

After: Leek, F. (1972). *Teeth and Bread in Ancient Egypt*, JEA, (58).p. 132.

3.2 Salt in Coptic Monasteries

Salt is considered one of the main components of the monk's meal in Coptic monasteries. History tells us that some monks depended on only salt, bread and water for their food following by this the law of their fathers in austerity and asceticism (Walters 2002). Salting fish was also known in earliest monasteries of the 4th century (Hansen 2021).

Salt was commonly used in ancient Egypt as ancient Egyptians used salt in mummification process. Natron salt which was a natural sodium salt was used in Egypt and Greece for salting fish and meat, and also as a remedy for many diseases and pains (Josset 1996).

4. Fasting and Feasts in Coptic Church

Traditionally, Egyptians like to celebrate feasts and different annual special occasions since the Pharaonic era. The ancient Egyptian used to celebrate three seasons related to the Nile; flood, sowing and harvesting. During the month of *Kihak* ploughing feasts were celebrated, as well as, the feasts of the resurrection of the god Osiris was celebrated at the same time. The annual ancient feast of *Opet* was celebrated for almost a month. During all these feasts ancient Egyptians used to eat different types of food such as meat, poultry, milk, bread, bear and fruit (Mehdawy and Hussein 2010).

Then, Copts as heirs of ancient Egyptians inherited from their ancestors many ancient feasts as some Coptic feast have ancient Egyptian origin, which will be addressed in some detail in the following pages.

4.1 Coptic Calendar

Around 4000 BC, the ancient Egyptians invented the first calendar in the world. It was directly associated with the flood of the Nile, which was the source of life for the ancient Egyptian. According to the ancient Egyptian calendar, the year was consisting of 360 days, twelve months and three seasons; flood (*Akhet*), sowing (*Perrt*) and harvest (*Shmow*). Each season was composed of four months and five extra days at the end of the year (Wassef 1971). This ancient Egyptian calendar has been recorded on the walls of the ancient Egyptian temples in Pharaonic and Greco-Roman eras such as the calendars in the temples of Karnak, Abydos, Kom Ombo, Isna and Idfu. The ancient Egyptian recorded also a list of feasts and rituals that are celebrated on each date of the calendar. At the beginning of the Roman times, the Romans had a lunar calendar till Julius Caesar decided when he came to Egypt to use the ancient Egyptian calendar. By the year 46 BC that calendar which was originally Egyptian became the official calendar throughout the Roman Empire, but it was called the Julian calendar (El-Gendi 2014; Kamel 2011).

The Coptic Calendar has started during the reign of the Roman Emperor Diocletian in 29th August 284 AD when early Christians were persecuted and martyred. Therefore, that year was called the Year of the Martyrs due to the worst kinds of torment and persecution tasted by early Christian. According to the Coptic calendar, the Coptic year consists of 13 months, each month has 30 days and the last month of the year is the small month that is composed of five or six days. With this division of the year, the Coptic calendar is similar to the ancient Egyptian calendar. However, the Coptic year begins with the

Coptic month “*Tut*” which is on September 11th or 12th (Gabra et al. 2008; Kamel 2011).

4.2 Coptic Fasting

Fasting and feasting in Christianity are considered the two suitable liturgical practices to proper Christian eating manner (Jones 2012). In early times of Christianity, fasting was the entire abstention from food for the whole or some hours of the day. In Coptic Christianity, fasting is still the same with considerable strictness as refraining from eating involves strengthening the soul and preparing it for worship (El-Masry 2006).

For Coptic Orthodox Church, fast means limiting the number of meals or some types of food. Coptic fasting may reach 210 days per year according to the Coptic calendar. During fasting, Copts are not allowed to eat meat or animal products such as, milk, eggs, cheese, butter, etc., while seafood is allowed in certain fasting. Jesus Christ fasted for the sake of the Christians 40 days (Malaty 1992). The purpose of fasting is the grasping of spiritual discipline and realizing food is not everything in life (Jones 2012). Coptic Church determined fasting periods as follow (Malaty 1992; Morcos et al. 2013);

- Lent fasting (55 days fasting without eating fish).
- Fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays of the week.
- Paramone⁴ fasting is the day before Christmas and Epiphany. Copts do not eat fish in this feast.
- Jonah fasting (3 days).
- Christmas fasting (43 days, with fish).
- Apostles fasting (varied from 15 to 49 days without fish).
- Mary Virgin`s fasting (15 days) (Malaty 1992; Morcos et al. 2013).

⁴. Paramone is a Greek term means watch or vigil. It is a term used in Coptic Christianity for the vigils of the Nativity of Christ and of the Epiphany. (See: Malaty, 1992, p. 82).

As it is shown, fish allowed to be eaten in certain feasts because Christians fast about 200 days of the year which is more than the half of the year. Therefore, Christians were allowed to eat fishes in certain fasts to ease the length of fasting.

Thus, vegetables are considered very important in the Coptic dietary which is almost vegan. Vegetables have historically been part of the ancient Egyptian cuisine due to the nature of the fertile soil of Egypt (Wassef 2004). Fish also considered a blessed food because it is associated with the miracle of Christ when he fed five thousand people with only five loaves and two fish (Guirguis et al. 2020).

4.3 Coptic Feasts and Food Habits

4.3.1 Major Feasts of Christ

- The Nativity feast on 29th Kiahk (7th January), which is Christmas Holidays in English (El-Masry 2006).
- The Epiphany on 11th Tobah (19th or 20th January) (Soliman 2015).
- The feast of the annunciation to the Holy Virgin which brings an annunciation of Salvation; it is on 29th Baramhat (7th April) (Geffert and Stavrou 2016; Shenouda III 1997).
- The Palm Sunday feast which is celebrated on the seventh Sunday of Great Lent. It does not have fixed date.
- The Easter Sunday, on the first Sunday after the Resurrection. It is at the end of Pain Week
- The Ascension Day which is celebrated on the 40th day after the Resurrection; it is the feast of The Lord.
- The Pentecost Day which is celebrated on the 50th day after the Resurrection and 10 days after the Ascension Day (Shenouda III 1999; Malaty 1992; El-Masry 2006).

4.3.2 Minor Feasts of Christ

- The Circumcision Day which celebrated on 6th of Tobah (14th January). (El-Masry 2006; Malaty 1992).
- The Entrance of Jesus Christ into the Temple with his mother Virgin Mary. It is celebrated on 8th Amshir (15th February) (El-Masry 2006).
- The Entrance of Jesus Christ and the Holy Family into Egypt. It is celebrated this day on 24th Bashans (1st June) (Malaty 1992; El-Masry 2006).
- The Miracle of Jesus Christ of attending the wedding in Cana and his transforming of the water into wine. It is celebrated on 13th Tobah (12th January) (El-Masry 2006).
- The Transfiguration of Christ on the mountain of Tabor. It is on 13th Musra (19th August)
- Maundy Thursday Feast, which is the fifth day after Palm Sunday.
- Thomas Sunday, which is the Sunday following Easter (Malaty 1992; El-Masry 2006).

4.4 Food Traditions Related to Some Coptic Feasts

4.4.1 Nativity Feast (Christmas)

While Western Christians, including Catholics and Protestants, celebrate Christmas on December 25th, the Copts of Egypt and Eastern Orthodox celebrate this feast on January 7th, corresponding to the 29th of Kiahk in the Coptic calendar. The celebration of Christmas did not begin until the middle of the fourth century AD, after the Roman state converted into Christianity at the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine I (336 AD) (Soliman 2015).

Copts celebrate Christmas by eating the traditional Egyptian Cookies (*kahk*) in the morning before going to church. Eating cookies is an ancient Egyptian custom deeply rooted in Egypt from the time of the Old Kingdom, when ancient Egyptians celebrated

and ate cookies on seeding season. They made cakes of flour, margarine and honey, which is almost the same way of making the today's Feast cookies or "*kahk*". However, ancient Egyptians printed a sign of a *hotep* on it and shaped it in the form of a sun disk (Mehdawy and Hussein 2010)⁵.

4.4.2 Epiphany Feast

The Epiphany or the Feast of Baptism is the feast in which the Church reminds the people that Jesus was baptized by immersion in Jordan River, and also the believers in the New Testament are baptized by immersion (Shenouda III 1997). It is one of the oldest feasts in Coptic Church (Soliman 2015).

In Epiphany feast, the vast majority of Coptic Christians in Egypt eats Sugarcane⁶ and cooked taro for dinner (Sataty 2010).

Taro is known in Greek as *kolokasia*, *qarqas* in Hebrew, *korkasi* in Coptic, and later in Arabic as *Qulqas* or *Qolqas*. Little is known about the origin or the early history of eating taro in the Mediterranean basin. It is believed that taro has a Greek origin as its earliest mention in the ancient texts dating back to the 3rd or 4th century BC. An archaeological finding of taro consists of fragments of corm tissue dating back to 1050-1170 AD has been found in the ancient port of Qusair al-Qadim in Egypt. In the Abbasid period (8th century AD), taro was regarded a common type of food and medicinal plant as there was many references on taro at that time. However, it is worthy to notice that the name of this plant has been changed over time. Today, taro is widely cultivated in the Mediterranean basin and extensively in Egypt. Therefore, taro is commonly included in Egyptian and other Middle Eastern recipes (Grimaldi et al. 2018).

5. The scenes of making Egyptian feast cookies are detailed on some tombs in Thebes and Memphis such as the tomb of *Rekhmy-Ra* which is dating back to the 18th dynasty (New Kingdom) (See: Sataty, 2010, p.123).

6. Sugar cane and the other types of refined sugar were unknown prior to the Arab conquest in 641 AD. Honey was used as a sweetener from the ancient Egyptian times till the Arab conquest. (See: Leek, 1972, p.126).

Taro symbolizes the Christ's baptism in Coptic culture as boiling taro in water removes its harmful toxins which reminds humanity of purifying of sins when immersed in the water. Moreover, taro roots are buried underground like baptism is burial followed resurrection of Christ. Taro's skin should be peeled off when it is cooked like the Copts shed their robes of sin in baptism. (Täckholm and Drar 1950).

As for sugarcane, it has been cultivated in Egypt since 641 AD after the introduction of this crop by the Arabs. It is grown along the Nile River in the area between Menya region at middle Egypt and Aswan region in the far southern part of Egypt (Mehareb et al. 2022). In Coptic Christianity, sugarcane symbolizes heavenly wishes due to its high altitude (Sataty 2010). Eating sugarcane in Epiphany feast also refer to the sweetness of faith.

In Egyptian villages, children celebrate this feast with reed sticks. At the top of each stick they put a wooden cross and five oranges arranged in the shape of a cross and decorated with candles. This celebration goes back to the early times of Christianity when the Copts were celebrated the Epiphany feast outside the church, throughout the city and on the banks of the Nile (Sataty 2010).

Traditionally, Copts eat oranges, carrots and tangerines in this feast. In the past, they used to make lanterns from oranges by putting inner candles after hollowing them to illuminate homes in this feast. Children were holding these orange lamps and going out in processions towards the church which was indicating a procession of a newly baptized Christians (children) entering the church to be prepared to participate in the sacred liturgy (Shenouda III 1997).

4.4.3 Palm Sunday

Palm Sunday is the first day of the last week of Lent, which is called Holy Week, and the Sunday just before Easter (Malaty 1992; Sataty 2010). This day commemorates the entry of the Lord into Jerusalem which is traditionally symbolized by the use of palm fronds decorations on this day (Malaty 1992). The joyful church melodies change into sad ones until we reach the night of Resurrection

Sunday so that the church rejoices and is filled with joy and sings happy melodies. Job's Wednesday is the fourth day of Holy Week, in which the church remembers the consultation of the traitorous disciple Judas over the Lord Christ. This day was attributed to Job the Prophet, because from the religious point of view it represents Christ in his nation and his experiences, which ended in a happy ending. As for the popular point of view, it refers to Job the prophet when he bathed on Wednesday with thyme and recovered from his diseases. Hence, the rural communities used to wash with this plant in order to be cured (Sataty 2010).

On this day Copts celebrate the omens of wheat cultivation and they make a bride of wheat as an offering to the gods and a talisman from the evil envious eye. Therefore, crushed wheat *Fereek* is considered the main dish on Copts' dining tables on Job's Wednesday, in addition to eating wheat grains as snacks. Cooked crushed wheat has ancient Egyptian origin as it was a popular food since the Pharaonic era (Mehdawy and Hussein 2010).

4.4.4 Maundy Thursday

It is the Thursday in the Holy Week commemorates the establishment of the Eucharist by Jesus Christ which is the day when Christ washed the feet of his disciples (Malaty 1992).

On this day which is the Thursday before Easter, the church celebrates it to remember the Last Supper of Christ with his disciples before Judas was handed over him to the Jews to crucify him.

According to the popular tradition, in this minor feast, Copts eat lentils with crumbs of bread "*lentils fattah*" on this day. Lentils are one of the favourite traditional foods for Egyptians of all social classes. On this day, the popular culture is keen not to shake hands because of not remembering what Judas the traitor did, who delivered his master to the Jews (Sataty 2010).

Egyptian have known lentil since the pre-dynastic period and became one of the favourite food in the Old, Middle and New

Kingdoms. Lentils have been found in the pyramid of Zoser, Dra' Abu al-Naga, and Dair al-Bahari at Luxor. A woman cooking lentils soup is depicted on one of the walls of the temple of Ramesses III. Herodotus mentions that lentil was used as food for the builders of the pyramids. Lentils continued to be popular in the Graeco-Roman era (Mehdawy and Hussein 2010).

4.4.5 Good Friday

It is the Friday Just before Easter (Malaty 1992). On this Friday, the church remembers what the Jews did to Jesus when they took him to the Roman ruler and asked him to crucify the Christ and release the thief. It is called "Good" because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ meant the saving of the whole world; Jesus is "Savior of the World" (Malaty 1992).

The popular celebrations on this day are limited to preparing only one meal with its main components of green salad and boiled beans. Boiled beans (*ful nabet*) are traditionally eaten in this day with crumbs of roasted bread (*fattah*) because this meal is light and easy to digest after a long fasting day (Sataty 2010). The ancient Egyptians knew the beans and mastered its cooking in several ways that are still present today in our daily lives such as the "stewed *ful*" (fava beans) which is the most popular and most consumed type of food in Egypt (Mehdawy and Hussein 2010; Wassef 2004).

Vinegar also is an essential ingredient in the food of this day, in memory of Christ, who quenched his thirst for soldiers with a sponge moistened with vinegar (Sataty 2010). Copts used to eat greens fresh, raw or preserved in vinegar. Vinegar also used to be added to wine to make it sour. It is usually mentioned with salt and bread as the basic food for Coptic monks (Ahmed 2021).

4.4.6 Easter Sunday Followed by Spring Day (Nayrouz Feast)

Copts celebrated Easter Sunday after a long fasting for 55 days which is called "Great Fast". It was celebrated by all Christian denominations in the world until 1582 AD

when its date has been changed by the Western churches. They changed the date of the Christian Easter, not caring about the date of the Jewish Passover, after which Christian Easter should come, thus the date of the celebration of Sunday Easter has been changed among Christian denominations around the world as the Orthodox Church uses the Julian calendar, while the Western church uses the Gregorian calendar (El Masri 2006).

Traditionally, Copts eat Lupine beans on this day. Green onion and lettuce are also considered among the most important types of food eaten in Easter Sunday. Lupines were found in many ancient tombs which represents that it was eaten since the ancient times. Ancient Egyptians added lupine beans to the beer to give it a bitter taste. They were also soaked in water and salt, cumin and chilli were added as same as nowadays. It is believed that green onions keep the evil eye and prevent envy. This belief goes back also to the ancient Egyptian times as onions were stuffed in the eyes of the mummies and were commonly drawn on the walls of ancient tombs. Lettuce was also considered by ancient Egyptians one of the holiest plants belonging to the ancient god of fertility and Reproduction "Amon-Min". Copts also make special cookies "kakh" to celebrate this feast (Sataty 2010; Mehdawy and Hussein 2010).

Easter Monday "Spring Day", "Sham El-Nessim" or "Nayrouz Feast" was celebrated by the ancient Egyptians more than five thousand years ago. It is suggested that the term *Nayrouz* has a Persian origin which mean "The New Year" and ancient Egypt took it when the Persian dynasty ruled Egypt. However, most probably this term is coming from the Greek word "Nilus" meaning the Nile, because this feast was connected with the Nile flood and the New Year since the ancient Egyptian era (Kamel 2011). Some historians mention that this celebration was known in the ancient city "Awn" or "Heliopolis" since the pre-dynastic era (Sohair 2017). However, most probably the origin of the word *Sham* is ancient Egyptian coming from the word *shmo* which was "the harvest season" or "summer season". Ancient Egyptians also

considered this day the “Creation Day” especially since the ancient Egyptians believed that the beginning of creation was the feast of life, fertility and greenery, which was meant to them birth and joy (El-Gendy 2014). Ancient Egyptians celebrated this feast by baking special cakes and pies and drinking wine. They believed that this day was the day when the whole world created. Ancient Egyptians were celebrating the *Shmow* feast by eating special types of food including ripe green chickpeas which was representing the coming of spring, and lettuce which was connected to the ancient Egyptian deity Min, the god of fertility (Mehdawy and Hussein 2010).

Nayrouz feast is the Coptic New year feast which is celebrated on the 1st of Tut⁷; the first month of the Coptic calendar (Soliman 2015). The seasonal fruit of this month is the red dates which only come during Nayrouz days. In Coptic heritage, red dates symbolize the blood of the Coptic martyrs and when palm trees are thrown by stones they bring us the most delicious fruits and thus they symbolize the martyrs and their suffering as well. In addition, the inner part of a date which is white symbolizes the purity of the hearts of Coptic martyrs (Kamel 2011). Thus, Nayrouz feast for the Coptic Church is the feast of martyrdom and the pain of love and sacrifice of Coptic martyrs (Wassef 1971).

Traditionally, this day is not only celebrated by the Copts but also all Egyptians in all over Egypt like to celebrate this occasion. They paint eggs in different colours, and they eat grey mullet salted fish “*fessekh*”, Onion and lettuces. Egg is a symbol of rebirth and resurrection as a new life being born the egg. Duck and goose eggs were offered to the gods and goddesses in ancient Egypt⁸. Due to the abundance of fish in the Nile, the ancient Egyptian used to salt or smoke the fish for

longer storage, and they considered it a symbol of fertility (Mehdawy and Hussein 2010; Wassef 1971). Coptic documents mention that salted fish was among the basic Coptic food, and the Copts excelled in salting the fish in the same way as their ancient Egyptian ancestors did, and made the *fessekh* and *Sardines*. Bawit Monastery which was located north of Asyut was famous for making salted fish. Copts used to salt fish in pottery jars; the most popular type was the Amphora which was a long pottery vase with a narrow neck and painted with contour from the inside. Today the most common kind for pickling is grey mullet but it could be anything from *sardines* and herring to anchovies. Copts also knew the salted pigeons as well as the salted cheese (Sohair, 2017). Onion and Lettuce were among the well known types of vegetables as onion was used in mummification and as a medicine for some eye diseases, while has been eaten in this day since the Pharaonic times as it grows a lot in spring (Wassef 1971)⁹.

In Pharaonic era, salted fish was also the main meal for the Egyptians in the Harvest Feast “*shmw*”, which means the tradition of eating the today’s salted fish *fessekh* goes back to the ancient Egyptian times (Mehdawy and Hussein 2010).

Thus, Nayrouz feast is considered a national feast for all Egyptians because it is considered a celebration of the coming of the spring, in addition to being a traditional celebration celebrated by the Egyptians for thousands of years (El-Gendy 2014). Therefore, Egyptian Muslims have been celebrating it since early Islamic ages. In the Fatimid period, all Egyptians and rulers celebrated Coptic feasts as a very important aspect of social life in Egypt, especially Nayrouz feast, which became an official holiday for everyone at that time (Mahmoud 1995).

7. The word “*Tut*” is derived from the ancient Egyptian deity “*Thut*”; the deity of knowledge, writing, moon and music in ancient Egypt (See: Kamel, M. 2011, p. 4)

8. Chicken eggs was not existing in the Pharaonic Egypt because chicken was introduced to Egypt later in the Ptolemaic period (See: Mehdawy, M. and Hussein, A. 2010, p.61).

9. Herodots mentioned that bread and onion were the staple diet for the builders of the pyramids (Mehdawy, M. and Hussein, A. 2010).

5. Conclusion

As shown in this study, some Coptic feasts and celebrations are considered an extension of ancient feasts that ancient Egyptians used to celebrate thousands of years ago. Furthermore, most Coptic liturgical foods associated to Coptic feasts, celebrations and religious occasions show a continuation of ancient Egyptian food traditions. Due to the long history of these ceremonies and the foods associated to them, some of them have become traditional feasts for all Egyptians and an important part of Egyptian intangible heritage, such as “*Sham El-Nessim*” or “*Nayrouz Feast*”.

The study sheds light on an important aspect of Egyptian society, as Coptic liturgical foods and their historical origin are parts of the Egyptian heritage that all Egyptians should know for better understanding to the history and identity of the Egyptian society.

6. References

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