

Article

# The Sociocultural and Economic Evolution of Mansaf in Hartha, Northern Jordan

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**Abstract:** Food and cooking techniques play key roles in preserving cultural sustainability and individual identity. Everything people eat becomes a part of not only their biological being, but also represents and identifies a part of a community's sociocultural fabric. Using the loom approach, a new model to heritage interpretation, this paper intends to examine the sociocultural and economic dynamics during the preparation, cooking, and eating of mansaf—Jordan's national dish—throughout its history. To reconstruct the heritage of mansaf and present it as a complete picture, both the tangible heritage, such as cooking equipment, whether modern or traditional, and the intangible heritage, such as the cooking techniques and associated traditions and activities, were analyzed. Mansaf has changed greatly over the past decades; however, living memory does not extend much beyond the 1940s within the informants to further examine mansaf's changes in the case study of the village of Hartha, Northwest Jordan. Mansaf still remains an important signifier of major occasions, a tie to local heritage, and part of local and national identities.

**Keywords:** mansaf; Jordan; identity; foodways; heritage; traditions; Hartha

## 1. Introduction

Tangible heritage is the majority focus for most preservation efforts across the world. Intangible heritage is often under-researched by comparison and is harder to preserve with its lack of physical space to occupy and the difficulty in measuring it. Heritage foods are one example of intangible heritage which are beginning to be studied on a wider basis [1]. Voltaire Cang [2] concluded that intangible heritage was initially ignored and excluded by UNESCO's original system to document and preserve tangible heritage. Food did not have a place in the system according to one UNESCO official; however, in the intervening years, intangible heritage such as foodways have found their way into the UNESCO system, and the list is growing as new recipes or dishes are documented [2]. Unfortunately, local foodways promoted as heritage are often haute traditional cuisine, relying on imagery of native peoples and ingredients being used in conjunction with ancient practices and recipes to promote what are actually cosmopolitan dishes [3].

Foodways are tied to identity. Food becomes a way to discover who is in a group and who is outside of the group, and belonging can come through foodways as a means of at least temporarily being let inside another culture [4,5]. Analysis of food and foodway symbolism gives an indication of sociocultural classifications such as economic status or gender. Food can serve as a connector or an isolator for those within or outside of a culture and society. Immigrants may retain foodways as part of their identities, but they may also incorporate new foodways or ingredients that show possible economic gains or ingredient availability. Female immigrants can become the purveyors of traditional and communal values by being the preparers of food while balancing new foodways available in the locations to which they have moved. For Arabic women, this can be a show of family values, love, and affection [6].

People consume foods that have a special association with their own culture to maintain ties [7]. According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, food within a society is chosen because of its meaning to the people of the society, not due to taste [8]. Mansaf, the national dish of Jordan, contains both intangible and tangible heritage as well as a strong link to Jordanian national and local identity. Mansaf is tied to Jordanian identity and marketed as such [9]. Mansaf is a dish of rice, meat, and yogurt, which is often served at special occasions or for visitors [10]. Mansaf forms part of the Jordanian identity, even though it is not exclusively a Jordanian dish [9]. Mansaf is not a monolithic dish; its origins and cultural links are influenced by temporal, local, historical, and cultural changes. Travelers who visited the Ottoman Empire described pies made of meat, rice, and almonds covered in butter [4]. Sally Howell [9] researched mansaf from her own experiences outside of Amman. However, very little research has been done on the evolution of mansaf and its ties to identity and heritage in Northern Jordan. Using the town of Hartha in Northwest Jordan, as a case study, this article will examine the sociocultural and economic dynamics of mansaf from the local perspective, a popular dish that has been passed down from one generation to another for many decades. This article will also elaborate on how mansaf has evolved through time to become part of the local’s heritage and identity.

## 2. Materials and Methods

In this work, the author used ethnography and informal conversations, and the loom approach to heritage studies presented by Alobiedat [11] was adapted (see Figure 1). The loom approach is a new model for heritage interpretation. Heritage becomes a kind of woven cloth model. The loom comprises the warp representing intangible and tangible heritage, the weft representing time, the loom finances, and the scholar as the weaver. As applied to mansaf, the tangible heritage is the cooking equipment and the intangible heritage are the cooking techniques coupled with the social and cultural aspects of mansaf. The author chose the loom approach because, as a means of interpretation, this method includes both the tangible and intangible heritages and allows these aspects to be viewed across time. The loom approach also functions as an organizer. This helps to organize the researcher’s thoughts as well by following the weft through time. This way, not one aspect of heritage, and no time period is marginalized or ignored [11].

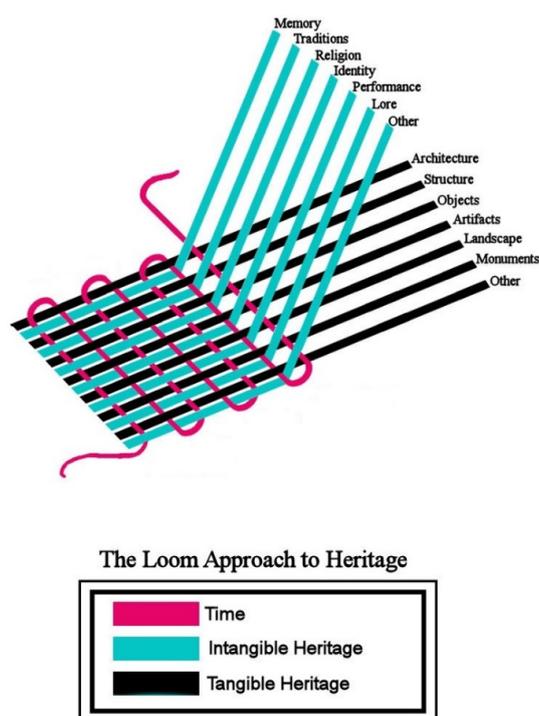


Figure 1. The loom approach to heritage [11].

Using information gathered from native residents in the village of Hartha from the fall of 2015 through early 2016, the author assembled a picture of mansaf evolution within the culture and location across time. These interviews were conducted with strict confidentiality, and the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement [12]. This brief history of the evolution of mansaf in Hartha is not meant to necessarily apply to the history of mansaf across all Jordan. Different locations and people have differing circumstances economically and socially, and it is impossible to generalize the experiences of one group of people across an entire country. However, this article documents one of several potential histories of mansaf and its importance to foodways, identity, and heritage for those who live in Hartha in Northern Jordan.

### 3. Results and Discussion

Cuisine can play a significant role in heritage, especially in smaller societies. It is not the only form of identity, but it is one of a handful of main components. Food is a major part of group identity, often along ethnic or national lines and also forms local or familial boundaries [13]. Cultivation, food preparation, and the consumption of edibles are used to define a cultural heritage of any one area or people on the local through international scales. Food can give one a sense of belonging or separation from any group: social, ethnic, gender, or class. Some authors believe that classing foods as cultural heritage is problematic [14].

In Hartha, the residents use food to express their hospitality and other symbolic issues related to culture and identity, especially when the food presented is mansaf. Family gathering during mealtime in Hartha is not simply about the consumption of food—it is a family and in some cases a community or wider social event. Culture, including foodways as an aspect of the human heritage, evolves and develops over time. Researchers Bob McKercher and Hilary Du Cros [15] as well as Edward Bruner [16] argue that all cultures are continually recreating themselves. Culture is always developing, animate, and cultural behaviors are authentic. Sociologists Mimi Sheller and John Urry [17] also added that mobility or fluidity was not just restricted to cultures and traditions, but stretched to places as well. Without a doubt, both the cultural and the physical realms in a society are evolving. As a result, it is very important to take the rates of and the reasons for change into consideration to understand what encourages the sociocultural changes and reconfiguration of place in a society [15–17]. Foodways are constantly reborn and remodeled through cycles within any population as well as from influences outside a population. Changes to foodways can also be affected through discrete groups such as gender [14].

Food is a symbol of community or local heritage which evolves as the communal heritage evolves. In discussing mansaf with the informants from Hartha, several changes to the dish were contained within their memories. Mansaf today is a dish which consists of a bed of rice topped with some type of meat such as lamb or chicken, then topped with almonds or pine nuts. A yogurt sauce, *jameed*, is ladled over the meal. The meat is cooked in the jameed sauce in order to intensify its flavoring. Mansaf is served on both happy and sad occasions, and is very labor intensive. Initially, mansaf consisted of large, thin pieces of bread called *khobz al-shrak*—a whole wheat flour bread. Foodways can vary from urban to rural settings and many use what is local to them to create their foods [4,12]. Wheat flour was used due to the ease of accessibility of wheat to the agriculturally-based Hartha residents. Wheat was a common crop grown by many villagers. The meat was boiled in water, and butter was clarified on the side. The meat broth would then be poured over the bread, the meat piled on the bread, and the clarified butter (*samin beladee*) then poured on top. The next evolution of mansaf was the bread base covered with less broth than before, with bulgur wheat on top, then meat, then the clarified butter. These first two forms of mansaf were prior to 1945, although the informants were not sure when one led to the other. In order to process the wheat, they would boil the wheat after it had been cleaned of chaff and impurities such as stones, spread it on a clean surface in the sun, and would then leave it alone for a few days to dry. During the drying process, the wheat would be stirred daily to prevent

mold. When the wheat was finally dried, it would be ground coarsely or finely to make bulgur wheat. The wheat would be cooked in the same manner as the rice is cooked today [12].

The evolution of mansaf continued. Around 1945, the use of rice instead of bulgur wheat became popular. The timing of the introduction of rice varies from what Howell notes in her article [9], perhaps due to Hartha's proximity to the Syrian and Palestinian borders and closer access to wider trade networks. Bulgur wheat was used through the early 1950s concurrent with rice, until rice overtook bulgur in popularity. Mansaf stayed in this stage until the early 1960s. In the early 1960s, roasted almonds began to be added to the assembled mansaf as a topping. In the mid-1960s, pine nuts were added to the almonds as a mixture. This stage also saw the addition of jameed, the yogurt sauce now commonly associated with mansaf, instead of the clarified butter and the broth. In this stage, the form of mansaf was the shrak, the meat, the jameed sauce, the pine nuts and the almonds. The other important point about this stage of mansaf was that people started cooking the meat in the jameed sauce in order to create a more robust flavor, marinating the meat as it cooked. Prior to cooking the meat in the jameed sauce, though, residents boiled it in water in order to clean the meat of the scummy film that develops on the surface. By the early to mid-1970s, the use of shrak in mansaf had declined significantly until it was finally phased out. Very few, if any, people still continue to use shrak today [12]. In the beginning, people did not use rice because it was not available. Bread was something that was easily made and commonly used. The use of bulgur saw a similar development, where it was a crop that was widely grown and available to those who were making mansaf. Adding bulgur also meant that the meal could feed more people. Most people also kept animals; at the time, animal prices were inexpensive enough that meat was widely available for use in mansaf.

Until the mid-1970s, copper cauldrons were still being used to cook mansaf. The cauldrons were large enough to cook at least 25 kg of meat at one time. These cauldrons were placed over a fire in the courtyards of houses. The mansaf was cooked outside in the courtyard due to the cauldron's size exceeding any other place possible for cooking. The cooked ingredients were then placed on a large, copper platter that required two men to hold it and bring it out to the guests. The platter was large enough that it could hold a whole lamb. At this point, major changes had happened to the mansaf. The shrak had disappeared, the local agricultural connections were gone with the introduction of rice as opposed to local foods, and the platter changed from being the traditional copper to either being aluminum or enamelware with floral and faunal decoration. Mansaf remained in this form up until the mid-1980s. The mansaf was also cooked in copper pots or aluminum during this time if cooked only for the family. During the late 1980s, only one thing had changed during the mansaf for celebrations or the family [12]: The platter moved from being enamelware or aluminum to exclusively plain aluminum platters.

Residents of Hartha also moved to using silverware for the consumption of mansaf within the family homes, only using their hands as traditionally practiced during events such as weddings or funerals. Hand *versus* silverware use to consume mansaf is also dependent on age. Individuals over the age of 50 tend to use their hands to eat mansaf regardless of the occasion; middle-aged and younger adults tend to only use their hands when dining with older individuals at special occasions out of respect for the older individuals. There is also strict etiquette about eating only out of the spot in front of the individual and not reaching across the food dish without verbal permission. If someone transgresses this social behavior, often an older individual will grab the transgressor's hand and shove it into the hot rice as a physical warning to not do so again. Physical posture also changes based on eating at home *versus* in public at an occasion. At home, individuals simply find a place around the mansaf dish to sit. In public, more guests have to fit around the mansaf trays. Seven or eight individuals will be around a single tray and will keep their left arm behind them, forcing a sideways posture to approaching the dish with their right hand and arm. This way allows more individuals to fit around the dish and prevents physical encroachment upon each other. Conversations around the public consumption of mansaf revolve around the importance of mansaf and teaching the younger generations about traditions regarding the dish. Eating with one's hands is a symbol of manhood

or adulthood, and if one from the younger generations tries to use silverware instead of the hand, the older individuals will mildly chastise the younger person about not preserving traditions and gently mock the younger adult in a lighthearted manner trying to force a change in behavior [12]. Alteration in the traditional means of consuming mansaf with the hands is seen as a negative decline in tradition by the older generations while the same changes are viewed as a positive modernization by the younger generations. If the younger generation did not succumb to the hand-in-rice treatment; however, there would be no consequences for that individual.

In the Michoacán culture of Mexico, food preparation is largely a female endeavor and men are virtually absent from this gendered activity. This can lead to gendered perceptions and inheritance of foodway heritage: when surveyed, it was found that women had inherited foodway traditions the most in Michoacán culture [3]. With a heavy reliance on corn as the chief staple in Mexican cuisine, discrete gender roles related to corn culture and processing were developed. Corn is a labor intensive crop, and the men primarily worked on the agricultural side of corn while women processed the corn and cooked it. Women's identities became wrapped up in corn, showing they were wives, mothers, and caretakers of their families through hours of intensive labor creating tortillas and other corn-based foods [18]. As opposed to a gender separation in culture brought about by the Mexican culture of corn, mansaf brings genders and social classes together in Hartha through shared responsibilities in cooking, preparation, serving, and consumption of the dish. Although the economic aspects of mansaf can be dependent on occasion, the type of occasion can influence the sociocultural dynamic. During dour occasions, the ingredients used in the making of mansaf represent the same economic status of the host, whereas the same mansaf is made during celebratory occasions by the all hosts. When a household is in mourning, mansaf is prepared by neighboring adult women or more distant relatives of the household but with a lack of ceremony and cultural ritual. While women are responsible for assembling the ingredients and cooking, men are responsible for assembling the mansaf in its final stage: The men pour the rice onto the platter and then top it with the meat, nuts, and other additives. Vallianatos and Raine [6] noted that the kitchen is considered a female sphere by both male and female Arabic immigrants to Canada. Although men are typically not involved in cooking in Hartha's culture, mansaf allows men more freedom within cultural limitations, altering some of the gender roles. Yet the reputation of the host and the reputation of the household are more intense in this situation and much more is socially at stake. The occasion is sad, so people must try to do their best and create the perfect mansaf in terms of flavor and presentation. When the occasion is sad, people are more likely to be judgmental and unforgiving of mistakes [12]. The event is more personal, as opposed to happier occasions like weddings where the entire village or town may show up. These dour occasions are instead restricted only to close family and friends of the deceased. Celebratory occasions, especially weddings, are much more complex socio-culturally than dour occasions when it comes to mansaf. The celebration of a wedding is not as personal as the mourning of a funeral, and the guests are in an understandably happier mood. The cultural rituals involved in a wedding are much more flexible than those of a funeral.

Cuisine preparation and consumption can be a gendered experience. Mansaf has never been an activity which has excluded genders, socioeconomic classes, or age groups in Hartha, unlike how Croatians described gingerbread as a craft and linked it to their heritage, noting it was primarily a gendered activity by men which has now opened to women as well [14]. In Hartha, mansaf, especially in celebratory occasions, includes all adults being involved in the cooking and presentation of the dish, while children may also be involved in the process. Although gender and age roles may be discrete, socioeconomics does not affect whether an individual performs a job or not. Young boys and girls are involved in carrying the water necessary for making the mansaf sauce jameed: Adult women soak the dried jameed under warm water while taking handfuls of the cakes and grinding them. This is done inside of a metal pot used for cooking or inside a plastic tub. Women will work in shifts while preparing the jameed sauce, and the common drink served during this work is hot tea. Men are not involved in this part of the process. During the jameed sauce preparation process,

women sing traditional folkloric songs which creates a rhythm for the grinding motion and is meant to distract the workers from the difficulty of the task, encouraging them to work harder. Sometimes they also tell short stories or have conversations about other aspects of daily social life, especially if one of the mansaf workers is doing this for her first time. This is also a teaching process, where the adult women will teach young girls about the process of creating the jameed sauce. Although young boys are not involved in the sauce preparation, they often remain in close proximity in order to listen to the songs and help with carrying water when needed. This teaches the younger generation about unity, respect, and supporting each other. It also teaches younger villagers about their history and heritage through a type of cultural performance in the making of mansaf. Wedding celebrations are around three days long. The making of the jameed sauce starts the day before the communal lunch, and lasts approximately half the day. Many of the communal lunches for the community that was attending the wedding took place on Fridays, so women would often begin making the jameed sauce on Thursday morning until the early afternoon [12].

Rice and lamb are cooked on Friday. The cooking may start as early as 5:00 a.m. Adult women will assemble the ingredients and supervise the cooking process while the young girls and boys help to collect and carry firewood used to cook. Copper cauldrons (*qader*) are used to cook lamb and rice separately. Stones are placed in a triangle underneath the cauldrons to balance them on the ground. On Friday, all the cooking should be finished by noon. Once the cooking has concluded, the role of women in preparing the mansaf has also concluded. The men will also assemble the mansaf in its final form for celebratory occasions. During this stage, there are usually no folkloric songs or stories. The older, more experienced men supervise the younger men, and no dish is set out without the approval from the supervisors [12]. Older men are well versed in which pieces of meat are which, and they distribute the meat in even ways better as compared to those younger men who are less familiar with the cuts.

After the mansaf is assembled, the men assemble in a line to carry the mansaf to the guests. The guests are seated in a large tent in the yard of the host or adjacent to the host's house. The line of men carrying the mansaf proceeds toward the tent. As this happens, other men will shoot celebratory gunfire and women will begin ululating (*zaghareed*). After the mansaf is set outside for consumption by the guests, at each table where the mansaf is set down, there is an adult man who is from the host's family that will serve and welcome the guests through welcoming and pouring the jameed sauce on the mansaf for them. Young boys are in charge of holding hand towels and pouring water from a plastic jug over the hands of guests so that they may wash themselves after eating [12].

It is interesting to note that, contrary to what Howell stated in her research, mansaf, has an interesting etymology according to the residents of Hartha. The informants stated that the word mansaf derives from the word for blast/explosion referring to the bubbles that burst in the boiling water or the jameed sauce. It also refers to the fact that many people gather around the mansaf platter during dining, and, as if the served dish was packed with explosives, very few material remains are left after the dinner [9,12].

Food can form an important part of local or symbolic identity. For example, corn means different things to different groups; in some places, such as Mexico, corn forms a major part of local and national identity. Corn can also hold a symbolic meaning for those whose cultures are highly connected to the food [18]. Mansaf also means different things to different groups and can hold its own symbolic meanings understood to those who prepare, serve, and eat it. Mansaf in Hartha not only represents the socioeconomic status of the host and his generosity, but it is also an indicator of the importance of the guests and the occasion at which it is served. Since the early 2000s, people have been making mansaf less and less during celebratory and family gatherings. With the high inflation, the prices of the mansaf ingredients have begun to be out of reach for many people in the village of Hartha. The ingredients of mansaf in the past were indicative of socioeconomic status. Lamb was the most expensive meat, followed by goat, and finally by chicken. Pine nuts were more expensive than almonds. The same economic trends for mansaf continue, but lamb is especially hard to purchase and peanuts have now replaced almonds as the most common nut used. Whereas in the past mansaf etiquette rarely allowed

guests to be served a chicken mansaf, it is becoming increasingly popular and has become the norm within Hartha in order to attempt to maintain mansaf traditions in the face of what would otherwise be a cost prohibitive tradition. The informants also noted that some traditions are deteriorating and that some social aspects of social cohesion are lessening, and people are not as connected as they were 30–40 years ago. In the past, friends, neighbors, and relatives would donate a sheep or lamb to the celebration in order to help the hosts with the feeding of so many guests, but now with the poor economy, the strain is felt by everyone, and the donations are no longer occurring, leaving the hosts unable to bear the burden of feeding so many people [12]. This also points to a weakening social bond between those who would normally have donated with those who are acting as hosts. Mansaf, like any other social tradition, is not necessarily resilient enough to withstand economic impacts without alteration.

In Hartha, mansaf has not been modernized significantly in the sense of changing based on increased levels of technology or the cultural change in general beyond the addition of nuts in the 1960s. Instead, the dish is still made as closely to its older incarnations as possible. What has changed the most are the economic abilities of people to pay for the amounts or types of meats used previously. The types of nuts used has also changed based on the expense involved in almonds or pine nuts. This is similar to what Howell noted in the careful measurement of meat portions in the mansaf served by the Balga Bedouins [9]. With the introduction of platters made from cheaper materials, individuals are now also able to have more platters for serving mansaf, which is a technological advance allowing more people to eat at once, as opposed to the successive eating style mentioned by Howell [9]. Furthermore, Howell stated that the Bedouins had a certain order of eating the meal from men through women, as well as separating the genders to allow for a more freeing experience for the women as signs of respect and modesty, although still containing a social and gendered hierarchy. Unlike most other areas in Jordan, Hartha does not segregate men from women on social or private occasions unless forced to do so by the size limitations of the place where the main gathering occurs. It is important to note that, if women are the focus of the gathering, men will remove themselves from the home and allow women to have first choice of foods and space as a sign of respect if the space is too restricted. The guests are the focus of the attention of the host, and the guest gender does not influence the amount of attention or behavior of the host. Men and women will routinely eat from the same mansaf platters in Hartha.

Howell also mentioned Margaret Abujamous's experience with mansaf as a non-Arab and her first experience with mansaf as being alone in her bedroom to prevent her from being embarrassed in a new situation with other women eating at the communal dish [9]. However, in Hartha, food is delivered to the bedrooms of newly married couples in Jordan, foreigner involved or not, to allow them to eat together in a private space. When guests come to deliver this food, often the husband or wife will greet the guests and may be away for a time while thanking the guests for their gift. In this circumstance, the wife is not expected to eat alone, and it is not to spare her from an unfamiliar experience, but rather part of the allowance of privacy for a husband and wife. This is a tradition which continues to the present time, even if the form of mansaf used is not as elaborate as it would have been in the past.

Using the loom approach, the author examined the sociocultural and socioeconomic evolutions of mansaf by weaving the tangible and intangible heritage of the dish into a single fabric across time. The evolution of the tangible heritage, the cooking implements and serving implements as well as the ingredients, show a clear development within the short 80-year period examined. The intangible elements such as the folkloric songs used while processing jameed or the social uses of mansaf have changed less over time, but still show some evolution. Interestingly, it seems the tangible elements of the dish have changed the most across the fabric, and at present seem to force the current changes through economic restrictions, altering the abilities of people to pursue mansaf in the preferred form which is currently unobtainable for many villagers in Hartha who simply cannot afford the tradition.

#### 4. Conclusions

The excitement and anticipation of most locals in Hartha who know they are about to eat mansaf during celebratory occasions is palpable. The dish exudes strong memories through its sensory qualities—the smell of the rice and meat, the tanginess of the jameed sauce, and the warmth of family and friends gathered around the dish. The changes brought about through time to the ingredients, cooking methods, and service ware are well documented within living memory, but memories fade and participants in older practices become fewer and fewer with the passage of time.

It remains to be seen how mansaf will continue to evolve over time both within Hartha and in Jordan at large. At the intangible level, the social dynamic has altered with the changing job responsibilities, gender, and age roles. Mansaf has always been a way to bring the gender and age groups together through the shared responsibilities in creation and serving of the dish during special social occasions as opposed to normal behaviors or cooking mansaf for the nuclear family. Mansaf has changed with the evolution of cultural dynamics. The stages of mansaf are evidence of broader social and cultural changes in Hartha. At the tangible level, changes occurred to the ingredients and the cooking equipment used in mansaf. The ingredients and equipment were affected by the economic system and with fashion trends. With increasing economic and social pressures, mansaf may become something new or slowly fade into the realm of memory.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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