

ԱԶԳԱՅԻՆ**KHASH AND ITS HISTORY**

This assignment explores the history of *Khash*, where it comes from, what the origin of it and how it became a national food in Armenia. Initially, in Medieval Armenia *Khash* was intended to feed the poor, illiterate, unskillful, and impoverished people, and eating or tasting it was reprehensible for aristocrats or rich people. But if *Khash* was accepted as a poor man's food, how did it become a national food over the years and a respectable dish? Could it be a shift or change in cultural understanding? Did the poor of olden times ever think that one day what was an ordinary diet for them could become a national food and an internationally respected dish? Of course, had the rich people realized sooner that the ingredients of *Khash* could be used to prepare a healthy dish; they certainly would keep them instead of throwing them away as waste. It would have been way beyond the poor people's imagination that one day the rich would crave for their dish, and that it would become a national delicacy.

*Khash* is a dish that is widely eaten in many countries, such as Armenia, Turkey, Georgia, Bulgaria, Azerbaijan, and the Middle East in general. The name *Khash*, origins from the Armenian verb *khashe'l*, meanING “to boil.”<sup>1</sup> In Georgia and Bulgaria *Khash* is known as an Armenian dish. However, as Sedrak Mamulyan claims, the Armenian origin of the dish is not acknowledged in all the above countries where *Khash* is served.<sup>2</sup> Armenian *Khash* is a traditional and national dish made from pig, sheep or cow hooves. It is typically served as a broth or soup with traditional *tonir lavash* (flatbread cooked in an outdoor open pit), heavily seasoned with garlic and salt. *Khash* always has to be led by an alcoholic drink or a beverage, such as Armenian cognac or vodka.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, on a *Khash* table it is a must to have ‘greenery appetizers’ that Armenians use with *Khash*: radish, different kinds of verdure, green onion, and of course garlic.<sup>4</sup>

The preparation of *khash* takes a very long time—for as long as its taste clings to your palate after consuming it. To prepare *Khash*, the hooves are first cleaned with a blowtorch to remove the hair and then are usually kept under running water for several hours. According to a saying, some Armenian women keep two pairs of tweezers: one pair for personal use and the other for removing the tiny and stubborn hair from the animal's legs and hooves that will be used in *Khash*. This seems to be doubtful, since in past times women were strictly prohibited from attending *Khash* parties and today such parties are still traditionally and closely associated with male bonding despite the skill and mastery required by women to clean and prepare it correctly.<sup>5</sup> The preparation of *Khash* is intensive and needs too much patient and hard work, especially the

<sup>1</sup> <https://attarmenia.com/photovideocook/singlecook?pid=4405>

<sup>2</sup> <https://news.am/arm/news/79923.html>

<sup>3</sup> Kaitlin, Fertaly. “Khash, history and Armenian national identity: Reconsidering post-socialist gender, food practices and the domestic.” *Identities* 19, no. 1 (2012): 83.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.slideshare.net/martin999999888/ss-70350957>

<sup>5</sup> Fertaly, “Khash, history and Armenian national identity ...,” 85.

hair removal process. For this reason, trotters may be bought from the local store, cleaned and made ready for the preparation of *Khash* at home.<sup>6</sup> Once the hooves or trotters are cleaned and rinsed, they are boiled in a big cooking pot with sufficient water on the heat for several hours, usually overnight. In the morning, before the *Khash* is ready to be served, the water is strained several times to remove any small bones or other impurities.<sup>7</sup> The meat of *Khash* has to be bright white, almost bleached look, and the broth it produces is judged based on the amount of fat rising to the top: the more the amount of fat, the better the *khash*.<sup>8</sup> The dish is usually eaten in two courses: first, as soup where only broth is poured over dried *lavash*, and second as a meat dish where the cooked meat is eaten alone or with *lavash*.<sup>9</sup>

Some Armenians start *Khash* preparation four days earlier before the cooking process. First, a precise calculation of the amount of meat is determined according to the number of guests. Second, the legs and bones of the animal are placed in containers filled with water for a few days. The water is usually changed once every six hours in order to make the removal of the hair easier. Furthermore, leaving hooves or trotters in the water for a few days not only makes the removal of all the bacteria and microbes from the meat and the bones possible, but it also helps the cooking process that usually is done overnight.<sup>10</sup>

*Khash* is a special Armenian dish that needs to be prepared assiduously and carefully so that it would taste right. It must also be consumed according to rules and procedures accepted among the Armenians. First of all, you need to add garlic and salt according to your liking. After that, you should take off the meat and bone from the soup and put it on another plate by covering it with *lavash* to keep it warm. Dry *lavash* is crumbled into the soup until it becomes spongy and ready to be consumed. Generally, one must eat *Khash* with one's fingers, using *lavash* like a spoon. People even say that *Khash* tastes better when you eat it that way.<sup>11</sup> Some Armenologists claim that eating *Khash* with fingers is tangible evidence that certifies *Khash's* antiquity as a traditional medieval dish, and when people started to eat *Khash* spoons were not available to the lower classes of society. There are some Armenians that even personalize this dish by engraving their names on their *Khash* bowls. These professional eaters arrive with short sleeves or rolled up log sleeves fully prepared to show the right way of eating *Khash* and also to grace the table with their no-nonsense approach.<sup>12</sup> As one can see, eating *Khash* requires certain skills. These do not only change the taste of the dish but also present culture and an entire tradition of cultural features related to it. In order to avoid gluey and sticky fingers, beside the bowl of each *Khash* eater there is a small plate with a wet cloth on it to wipe off the stickiness from grubby hands.<sup>13</sup>

There is a common prevalent saying among the Armenians that 'you cannot eat *Khash* alone' or '*Khash* cannot be offered alone'.<sup>14</sup> One comment about *Khash* ritual compares eating

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 83.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Fertaly, "Khash, history and Armenian national identity ...," 85.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> <https://news.am/eng/news/192793.html>

<sup>11</sup> <https://attarmenia.com/photovideocook/singlecook?pid=4405>

<sup>12</sup> <https://news.am/eng/news/192793.html>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> <https://hetq.am/hy/article/48744>

it alone to drinking alone: “Eating *Khash* without company is like drinking vodka under a blanket.”<sup>15</sup> The presence of the company at a *Khash* banquet is the reason why three special toasts are recited while eating this dish. These toasts are: “Nice to meet each other”, “Let the *Khash* be good”, “For the well-being of those who prepared the *Khash* and stayed awake the whole night”.<sup>16</sup> *Khash* plays a significant role in bringing many Armenians together and creating a festive atmosphere where everyone tastes the *Khash* and makes, at least, one toast that is addressed to the cooks or their families for serving such a delicious meal.

According to the Armenian tradition, *Khash* should be prepared and consumed during the course of the months that they have the consonant letter r, namely from the beginning of September until the end of April. During the other four months - May, June, July, and August – *Khash*, with its high calories, is not only indigestible but also harmful because of hot weather.<sup>17</sup> *Khash* has to be eaten in the morning before breakfast or instead of breakfast. This gives the consumers plenty of opportunities to burn the calories until night. Also, poor people did not have the luxury of eating three meals a day. The morning *Khash* provided them all the energy needed to be able to carry out the day’s hard work. Besides this, such energy providing food could also warm up the villagers and farmers in the early hours of the morning as they started to engage in the day’s work in the severe weather conditions of the mountains of Armenia.

Even though *Khash* has a fascinating and ancient origin as an Armenian food, and today it plays a major role in gathering many Armenians around a table, in medieval Armenia this dish was eaten by poor, illiterate, and unskillful workers. In medieval Armenia, *Khash* was not only a neglected dish but also unknown to most of the affluent and the aristocratic class. *Khash* was a popular dish among the illiterate and unskillful workers who labored in mostly physically demanding jobs such as cleaners, porters, water carriers, farmers, etc.

Among the Armenians, there is a widespread traditional story that always can be heard when people are around the *Khash* table. This story has passed from generation to generation and reached our own days. According to it, in medieval Armenia rich people slaughtered animals and kept the meaty and fleshy parts to themselves, throwing the bones and the inedible parts to the poor people.<sup>18</sup> The poor collected all the best parts of these bones, and all the remaining edible parts on them cleaned them as much as they could over several days. They boiled what was salvaged overnight, and ate the dish in the morning. This dish not only gave the poor workers energy to survive the hardships of work but also stay healthy.<sup>19</sup> According to some medical research caloric content of *Khash* is very high, but it has vitamins A, C, Calcium, and Iron, and it is very helpful for the people who have bone and joints problems.<sup>20</sup> Some Armenian historians claim that when *Khash* became a popular food among the illiterate and unskillful workers, the rich provided to their workers the vodka consumed with this dish. It was served in taverns by

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<sup>15</sup> Fertaly, “Khash, history and Armenian national identity ...,” 85.

<sup>16</sup> <https://attarmenia.com/photovideocook/singlecook?pid=4405>

<sup>17</sup> <https://hetq.am/hy/article/48744the>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.rena.am/blogpost/khash-traditions/>

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> <https://attarmenia.com/photovideocook/singlecook?pid=4405>

*humbals*.<sup>21</sup> Serving *Khash* to their workers did not cost much on them, and the workers enjoyed the food and appreciated the vodka.

Yet, when the rich people noticed how the children of the poor looked healthier and vigorous next to their children and realized that eating *Khash* had something to do with it, they started to feed their children the same dish. They discontinued throwing away the slaughtered animals' bones and inedible parts.<sup>22</sup> It was only then that *Khash* was introduced to the urban culture of Armenia and its image changed from a working-class food to a popular dish among the Armenians. Its preparation moved from the taverns to the home and it became a dish intended to share with close friends and relatives.<sup>23</sup> According to some Armenian historians, when the benefits of *Khash* were revealed, the reach not only started to keep the parts needed for *Khash* for their own use but also to give the meaty and fleshy parts of the animals to their workers and poor people.<sup>24</sup>

Over the years, *Khash's* sumptuous taste and health benefits made this dish not only popular among the rich but also a national delicacy, one that was very hard to procure everywhere. Besides that, when the benefits and curative powers of *Khash* were discovered by the rich, the dish gradually vanished from the menu of the poor, becoming an unattainable and luxurious meal for them. Furthermore, the discovery of the benefits of the *Khash* by the rich deprived the poor not only of a delicious dish but also of a healthy and powerful source of energy that their lifestyle required them to have. Therefore, if in the past the working-class used to eat *Khash* in order to tolerate hard work, or if in the past *Khash* ingredients, as thrown away waste, were easy to obtain, now the same ingredients needed for its preparation became hard to attain and even harder to find on the daily menu of the poor.

It is obvious how the health benefits and taste of *Khash* would have convinced the rich to change their previous stereotypical idea about this dish, namely that it is only for the unskilled, illiterate, and poor people. In the Middle Ages *Khash* gradually entered the national food menu of the Armenian people and eating it was even recognized as one of the characteristics of Armenian identity. The fact is that today in different Armenian communities in Armenia and abroad eating *Khash* 'like an Armenian' serves as a marker for an important aspect of Armenian identity that symbolically unites those who consume *Khash*. That marker traces the ancestry of today's Armenians to forefathers, who initiated this tradition<sup>25</sup> in their historic homeland that the ancient and Medieval Greek and Roman historians identified as Greater and Lesser Armenia.

Initially, not only the unskilled and illiterate but also rich people could not have imagined that one day *Khash* would become so popular and national food. Had both of these social classes known that one day this food would become a national dish, and serve as a marker for certain Armenian characteristics, they would certainly have treated this food differently. Moreover, had the rich known that one day *Khash* would serve as a bridge between their ancestors and the generations coming after them, and as a food symbolizing certain Armenian national characteristic, they would have considered this a worthy dish instead despising it as something that the poor

<sup>21</sup> Fertaly, "Khash, history and Armenian national identity ...," 85.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.rena.am/blogpost/khash-traditions/>

<sup>23</sup> Fertaly, "Khash, history and Armenian national identity ...," 85

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.slideshare.net/martin9999998888/ss-70350957>

<sup>25</sup> Fertaly, "Khash, history and Armenian national identity ...," 87-88.

ate. Finally, if the rich had at some earlier time become aware of the health benefits of *Khash*, they would never have thrown away its ingredients as waste.

One can make a similar statement about the poor people to the effect that they would never have dreamt that one day the rich would crave their dish, considering it a delicacy. Had they known that the meaty and fleshy meat they sought was less healthy and beneficial compared with what they ate, they would have preferred their food than the food rich people consumed. The poor did not realize that inedible parts of the animal that the rich throw away as waste can be properly treated and prepared into a delicacy, which would become a national dish someday. The poor also could not imagine that one day their despised dish could change previously formed stereotypes and cultural understanding of the rich. Furthermore, the poor could not even dream that one day they would dictate from their small kitchens their way of preparing food to their lords and masters, and even become the originators of a national dish.

In conclusion, in early medieval Armenia, nobody knew about the health benefits of *Khash*. In due time, however, the sturdy and robust frame of the poor led the rich to connect this phenomenon with the consumption of *Khash*, whose beneficial qualities became known to them. After tasting it and obtaining a taste for it, the rich not only changed their attitude towards this dish as abandoned poor people's food but also became its foremost consumers and connoisseurs. Vitamins that *Khash* contains are unique to it, especially in winter time; it warms one's insides as one enjoys it in the cold winter of Armenia. To be sure, had the rich known about the benefits of *Khash*, the poor would not have the chance to be the first tasters of this dish. But once *Khash* began to appear on the menu of the rich and the mighty as a great delicacy and nutritious food, it also became the main course at banquets in honor of privileged guests.

In medieval Armenia, the poor would have laughed if told that one day their food would be regarded as a choice dish by the rich. They would never have thought that the inedible parts of the slaughtered animals, which the riches threw away as rubbish, would become the ingredients of one of the best dishes that the rich will crave. Moreover, when the poor prepared *Khash*, they could never imagine that one day it would become a national delicacy and they would be the inventors and the first tasters of this dish.

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