

Exploring the Intersection of Memory and Food in Syrian Christian Identity through Lathika George's *The Suriyani Kitchen* and Tanya Abraham's *Eating with History*

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Culinary memories are always a way to identify the community history because it is through food that a communities cultural identity can be shared. When we break down the ingredients in a dish we can find out different sets of stories associated with each ingredient. It is believed that the Syrian Christians traditions and beliefs are said to pass down generation after generation and it is not just limited to the food practices but also the birth, marriage and death of people in the community.

As a researcher who belongs to the Syrian Christian community of Kerala and who resides in a *taravad* house of the family she is acquainted with lots of stories or oral histories about her community from her grandparents and it is said that all the traditions are part of history. It is found in both the source texts that grandmothers are great storytellers. As food is intrinsically connected with identity, a culinary journey inevitably churns out submerged narratives, hidden and unacknowledged from mainstream culture (Lakshmi 1). Tales of family intrigues and events in Kerala were accompanied by recipes, fables and songs, all part of her repertoire of bedtime stories.

Food is central to defining the manner by which people's emotional, psychological, social, economic, political, historical and cultural realities are embodied as a lived and living history (Carolan 9). Food memories are not just individual or personal, but are always socially and

culturally grounded. Both the works of Abraham and George can be looked at as an embodiment of the cultural, social and historical realities of the Syrian Christian Community of Kerala. Both the works are a rich tapestry of culinary memories of both the writers which are passed down through generations after generations.

Palate and Synthetic Memory

Cruz Miguel Ortíz Cuadra proposed a term called palate memory which concentrates more on the emotional and intimate aspects of food memories. These concepts could be used to analyze how family recipes are passed down through generations and also palate memory could explore the emotional bonds and cultural communion experienced when family members cook and eat together. "The Suriyani Kitchen" focuses on the cuisine of Syrian Christians in Kerala, showcasing recipes that have been passed down through generations. These dishes likely carry strong palate memories for community members, connecting them to their cultural roots and family histories.

It is said that the present day Syrian Christians are a distinct community with deep connection in the culinary roots in the culture and culinary traditions of their forefathers (George 1). The cuisine of Kerala truly is a bunch of memories that are being passed by generations and it can be looked at as a celebration of the spices, herbs, seafood, meats, pulses, grains, nuts and all other edible leaves and seeds that grow in the fertile land of Kerala. Through the generations, mothers have taught their daughters how to utilise herbs and spices with exactly the perfect blend so that they can enhance the vital flavours of the dishes.

In one of the interview that the researcher took with Mrs. Babu, who belongs to the archdiocese of Pala of the Syrian Christian community fondly recalled a long-standing family tradition, where new brides would receive cookbooks as a meaningful wedding gift and remarkably, they still treasure those same cookbooks, now worn and weathered, as cherished companions in their late 70s. Babu's memories of her mother are deeply intertwined with the savory dishes she lovingly prepared. Her mother taught her the art of making traditional Syrian Christian snacks like *achappams*, *cheedas*, and *cakes*, which remain cherished family recipes.

One dessert that stands out in her childhood memories is the fruit salad, a classic Pala Syrian Christian dish made with fresh fruits soaked in a sweet and spicy sugar syrup infused with cloves. This refreshing treat was typically served chilled, accompanied by custard cream. Remarkably, Babu's family continues to pass down this beloved recipe through generations, with her daughter, Soma and seeing that she is now making it for his own grandchildren who come to visit her during their christmas holidays, ensuring the tradition lives on. So food memories can be inferred to be functioning as a distinct sense, and are intricately linked to the narratives we construct about our personal and cultural identities.

There are moments that will always be invoked by the food we make, which brings back memories of the stories that fuelled their enjoyment. David Sutton talks about a term “synthetic memory” where the senses work together to convert a sensory moment into an embodied social and cultural experience stored in memory, in concise synthetic memory looks at how multiple senses contribute to memory formation. Both authors remember their childhood experiences with food, which inspired them to write their books. They recall the delicious smells, tastes, and sights of traditional meals prepared by their mothers and grandmothers. Even the sounds of cooking, like sizzling oil and whistling steam, are memorable. These sensory memories have had a lasting impact on the authors.

Mrs.Varghese, a member of the Syrian Christian community from the Changanacherry diocese, shared her vivid childhood memories of her mother's cooking, which remain etched in her memory even in her late 80s. When asked about special dishes, she recalled that Sundays were distinct, with three meals that differed from the usual weekdays. Sundays were reserved for rice flour dishes at breakfast, prepared with love by the entire family after attending early morning mass. These Sundays, observed as the Lord's Day, were a time for worship, rest, and togetherness, with no one leaving for work.

She fondly recalled her mother's *idiyappam* (string hoppers) -making process, which was a delightful spectacle. After preparing the dough, her mother would fill it into the *idiyappam achu* (*Stringhopper* maker), and a playful struggle would ensue among the siblings to take turns pressing the maker. The thin strands of dough would then be carefully placed onto banana leaves, topped with desiccated coconut, and steamed to perfection. She described the entire process as a visual treat, with the hot steam rising from the idiyappam, releasing an irresistible aroma that added to its flavour.

Varghese's recollections of her mother's *idiyappam*-making process resonate with David Sutton's concept of synesthetic memory. According to Sutton, the act of cooking triggers a multisensory experience, engaging the observer's senses of sight, smell, touch, taste, and hearing. Similarly, Varghese's memories of watching her mother cook *idiyappam* evoke a rich sensory tapestry, from the visual delight of the steaming hot *idiyappam* to the tactile experience of pressing the *idiyappam* maker, and the aromatic flavours that lingered.

Therefore we can infer that multisensory experience of cooking facilitated by synesthetic memory, deeply encodes recipes in our memory, while palate memory explores the emotional bonds and cultural communion experienced when family members cook and eat together, evoking emotions, memories and stories that foster a sense of belonging, identity, and cultural heritage weaving together the threads of family history, cultural tradition, and personal experience into a vibrant tapestry of meaning and connection.

Food basically gets its true essence when it is being eaten together with the family or being having it through sharing and in the ancient Syrian Christian households it was mandatory practice of having the meals together because it is the time

when the family gathers together apart from evening family prayer time. But in these contemporary periods these types of practices are just seen in the households in which grandparents are residing other than that these kinds of practices are diminishing in the Syrian Christian households. In the cookbook memoir of Lathika George there are many evidences that showcasing these practices for example

“ Hours later , we returned to the house to find my mother and aunts still at the trestle table . There were cups of sweet tea on trays and tins of palaharams had been brought out from the storeroom . Sugary frosted *cheedas*, savoury *kuzhalappam rolls*, grainy cones of *churuttu* and thick slices of syrupy pineapple jam roll were all placed on white ceramic platters. Hot plantain fritters arrived from the kitchen, golden crisp on the outside and meltingly soft as you bit in “ (George 11).

Lathika George’s memories of these afternoons are still etched in her mind, indicating that they hold emotional significance for her. By sharing these memories through her narrative, the author aims to preserve the family's history and pass on the values of love, care and togetherness to her loved ones.

In Tanya Abraham’s work we can see that her memories about her grandmother's *Kushinya*, a portuguese term for Kitchen, is one of the inspiration to come up with work where she draws upon how her grandmother's kitchen is becoming a lived space in one of the interviews that she gave for the newspaper Malayala Manorama she stated that the *kusinchya* was indeed the heart and soul of her sprawling household, which was always bustling with family members. It was also the hub of activity when they hosted visitors, including politicians, priests, and friends, who were always fed with love and care. Her grandmother played a remarkable role in keeping the fires burning in the *kusinchya*, even during the tumultuous times of the freedom movement in Kochi. In her opinion, food was the unsung hero that nourished not just their bodies, but also their spirits and sense of community.

Communicative and Cultural Memory

The concepts of communicative and cultural memory can be related to the culinary memoirs of Tanya Abraham and Lathika George. George’s cookbook memoir demonstrates how culinary memory can straddle the boundaries between these two forms of memory. George's account of the oral history and family customs passed down through storytelling by her grandmother

represents communicative memory which is informal, disorganized and limited to a few generations. However, Abraham’s work refers to a documented family history book along with recipes which represents a more fixed, institutionalized form of cultural memory. Through her culinary memoir, George is able to bridge the gap between these two forms of memory, using the culinary as a way to record and preserve the recipes and folklore alongside the official documented history.

Similarly, Abraham’s cookbook is shown to exhibit characteristics of both communicative and cultural memory - her reliance on oral traditions and family cooks passing down recipes as stories aligns with communicative memory, while her structuring of the cookbook around the different groups of caste communities represents a more institutionalized, cultural form of memory. Therefore we can infer that culinary memory is a complex, layered space that cannot be neatly categorized into either communicative or cultural memory, but rather occupies an intersectional space between the two.

Cookbooks as Site of Memory

Pierre Nora's notion of "lieu de mémoire" which means "site of memory", can be applied to the works of both George and Abraham. More than recipe collections, these books are collections of collective food memories that synthesize the Syrian Christian community's cultural identity in Kerala. The work of George titled "The Suriyani Kitchen" is a rich collection of traditional recipes, stories and anecdotes, which can be seen as a "site of memory" that embodies the collective culinary experiences of the Syrian Christian community. This book is not just a record of recipes, but a testament to the community's history, traditions, and cultural values.

When it comes to site of memory it is important to look at the role of places in food memories in George's work we can see that she mentioning about her family visit to Fort Kochi where she describes that experience as a gastronomic expedition, where she tries out the fresh catch of the seafood and experiencing the beauty of the old boat jetty of Fort Kochi in a makeshift cafe as well the memories of having the tender coconuts while waiting for their starters in the cafe.

She mentions that all memories of that visit especially scooping out the soft, gelatinous flesh of coconut, spicy rounds of squid that melt in the mouth and the lobsters which are glistening with chilli and pepper and the fried seer fish, cooked to perfection with just the right amount of spices and over which they squeeze fresh lime juice these memories are still there in her even after several years and they pause to remember the complex history of this place which gives them a sense of belongingness to their homeland. So food memories are transmitted through sensations and articulated through sensations, challenging the notion of memory as something merely triggered by the senses (Colby, 10).

Similarly, Abraham's "Eating with History" is a culinary journey that weaves together personal stories, historical events and cultural traditions. This book can be seen as a "site of memory" that explores the intersection of food, culture, and history, highlighting the significance of culinary traditions in shaping the identity of the Syrian Christian community. Therefore through both the books the authors have preserved the collective food memories by recording the traditional recipes, stories and anecdotes and these books act as a bridge between the past and present community by highlighting the significance of culinary traditions in shaping the community's cultural identity. The act of telling stories about our food practices is what gives meaning and significance to these embodied memories. (Colby, 6).

George's memories of seafood stem from summer holidays in Kerala as she spend considerable amount of her vacation in Alleppey as her sister Shashi resided in one of the oldest mansions in Alleppey so when she visited her, mornings she witnessed fresh haul of fish that had been brought and her sister she will bid over the catch and she still remembers the journeys through the water world always associated with seafood and river fish, she also adds about the food memories of the spicy fish curry eaten at a little tea shop by the water's edge, succulent *konju* (prawns) her sister packed for the snake boat races at Aranmula and the roasted *Karimeen* (pearl spot) in banana leaf parcels at a family Christening. (George, 88). George also stated that Indu Chandok, a friend and connoisseur of fine foods stated that if a Malayali shares his *Karimeen* with you, he considers you a very dear friend indeed.

Among the Syrian Christian community, it was a long-standing tradition to share food with others during family gatherings and celebrations. In the past, a designated cook, known as "kokies," would prepare large quantities of food, often resulting in leftovers that were generously shared with neighbors and family members. This practice of sharing food was taken to heart, with not a single grain of rice going to waste. Interestingly, consuming these shared food items the next day would evoke distinct memories for the elder members of the Syrian Christian community, as the flavors and

tastes were subtly different from everyday meals, leaving a lasting impression on their culinary heritage.

The cookbooks by Tanya Abraham and Lathika George are presented as more than just recipe collections - they serve as repositories of personal, familial and communal memories. The authors weave in their own nostalgic recollections, such as Lathika George's accounts of family trips to Kerala and her mother's efforts to preserve traditional flavors. Beyond just individual experiences, the cookbooks also situate the recipes within the broader historical and cultural context of the Syrian Christian community, connecting the culinary traditions to the group's collective memory and sense of identity.

Furthermore, the books document the contributions of unsung women who have played a central role in shaping the community's cuisine, preserving their stories and ensuring their recognition. The cookbooks also incorporate oral traditions, folktales and cultural practices that have been passed down over generations, helping to safeguard this intangible culinary heritage. In essence, the cookbooks serve as rich tapestries that weave together personal recollections, communal histories and the embodied memories encoded in the recipes themselves, offering a multifaceted exploration of the Syrian Christian food culture in Kerala.

The cookbooks include oral traditions, folktales and cultural practices that have been passed down, helping preserve these intangible cultural memories by emphasizing how food memories as an embodied sense have the capacity to season the narratives we tell about ourselves and our cultures. The stories we tell about our food practices ultimately define our social and cultural subjectivities. The cookbooks incorporate the authors' own nostalgic recollections and memories, such as Lathika George's accounts of family trips to Kerala and her mother's attempts to maintain traditional flavors even in their Bombay home. These personal narratives connect the recipes to the authors' lived experiences and family histories

Cookbooks as Keepers of Community History

The cookbooks can serve as valuable records of traditional cooking methods, utensils, and ingredients, helping preserve knowledge that might otherwise be lost. This ensures the continuity of culinary memory and practices within the community. The recipes become vessels for the authors' personal experiences, as well as the shared memories, cultural traditions, and collective identity of the Syrian Christian community. This narrative approach elevates the cookbooks from simple recipe compilations to treasured archives of personal, familial, and communal memories, weaving together the threads of history, culture, and tradition.

The inclusion of the oral narratives and cultural practices in the cookbooks facilitates the transmission of this intangible knowledge to future generations, ensuring the continuity of the community's culinary traditions. By documenting stories like "Big Sister Dove and Little Sister Dove," authors like Lathika George safeguard the community's shared cultural memory, passing it down to younger generations. The cookbooks also meticulously record traditional cooking methods, tools like the "*chembu*," and cultural rituals surrounding food, such as the "Pesaha bread" and vegetarian diets during lent periods. This comprehensive approach ensures the transmission of embodied knowledge, skills, and cultural identity to future generations fostering continuity and preserving the ephemeral aspects of their food culture. Ultimately, these cookbooks become a treasure trove of the community's culinary legacy, safeguarding its integrity and vitality for years to come.

David M. Kaplan's perspective that 'food affects our identities and relationships with others' and that we are 'shaped by the food evolution, geography, history and culture' of the communities we belong to. According to E.N. Anderson, food is a fundamental form of communication and eating is often a social activity that occurs daily. This inherent significance of food in human culture makes studying the culinary traditions of communities like the Syrian Christian community particularly fascinating.

Conclusion

Literature, particularly culinary memoirs have employed the culinary as a lens to explore issues of identity, longing, and the socio-cultural contexts of the author's experiences. Through the texts, we can infer that for George, who is settled in Bombay, her culinary memories serve as a strong connection to her homeland and community, evoking a sense of belonging. In contrast, George's work highlights the diverse culinary traditions passed down by her grandmother, showcasing the rich variety of Syrian Christian cuisine. Therefore culinary is a rich site for exploring memory and identity. Tanya Abraham stated that "For me, food is also memory-memories of a family and its happenings...." Therefore whenever a person thinks of food the first thing that always comes to our heart is memories of loved ones and feeling of warmth and togetherness.

The exploration of memory and food in "The Suriyani Kitchen" and "Eating with History" reveals the profound connection between culinary traditions and cultural identity. These works demonstrate how food serves as a powerful vehicle for preserving and transmitting cultural memory, personal nostalgia and historical narratives. By examining the intricate relationship between taste, aroma and memory, both George and Abraham highlight the significance of palate memory in maintaining connections to one's heritage and personal history. The book also underscores the role of traditional recipes and cooking methods as living archives, preserving cultural knowledge and familial bonds across generations. These cookbooks not only preserve cultural knowledge but also allow for the exchange and appreciation of diverse food cultures across global audiences effectively transmitting cultural memory through food preparation and storytelling.

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