

## Commerce, cuisine and cultural exchange in Afghanistan, west Asia and beyond

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## **Commerce, Cuisine and Cultural Exchange in Afghanistan, West Asia and Beyond<sup>1</sup>**

An important trend in recent historical work on Afghanistan has been to shed light on the country's connections to the wider world, both those pointing toward the importance of inter-Asian circuits of exchange and others that bring the country's intimate interactions with the West into vivid relief. Such work mostly attempts to track the movement of either ideas or commodities and is predominantly the preserve of historians of religion and of commerce.<sup>2</sup> What, however, can a consideration of a neglected yet powerful aspect of Afghanistan's regional and global interconnectedness – its food – tell us about the ways in which the country has influenced the daily lives of its neighbouring peoples, as well as those far beyond?

Let me start my brief excursion into Afghan food and connectivity in Saudi Arabia. Bukhari rice is a popular dish across the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: steamed with oil-a-plenty, carrots, raisins, and spices favoured in the Middle East (cardamom, coriander, cumin, and cinnamon), the delectable long-grain sela rice (mainly imported to the Kingdom from India and Pakistan) is served in restaurants on enormous platters and mostly topped with a piece of grilled

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<sup>2</sup> Notable studies include Crews, *Afghan Modern*; and Green (ed), *Afghanistan's Islam*.

chicken referred to as *dhajaj al-faham*. Bukhari rice is mostly eaten in cheap eateries dotted across the Kingdom's cities and small towns. The names of such eateries however are often far more glorious than their exteriors suggest: Al Zamarud Bukhari Rice (The Emerald of Bukhari Rice) is a restaurant in Riyadh, for example; while the Hindawiyyah Bukhari Restaurant is located in the part of Jeddah's Old city known as the Hindawiyyah. For a time, there was also a chain of restaurants called Al Hadees al-Bukhari, or Modern Bukhari. The managers and cooks in such restaurants in Saudi Arabia almost always hail from northern Afghanistan, especially Sar-e Pul province. They are largely Uzbek- and Turkmen-speakers who migrated to Saudi Arabia in the early 1980s from Afghanistan. A majority travelled to the Arabian Peninsula by way of Pakistan, a country in which they had often stayed for several years in cities such as Peshawar, Lahore and Karachi, where many had played an active role in the manufacture and trade of handwoven carpets and rugs.

Rather than merely learning how to cook Saudi's national dish, however, on their arrival in the country the restaurateurs interacted with an earlier wave of migrants that had come to the Kingdom from Afghanistan and Central Asia. As Eileen Kane and Lale Can have both shown, circulation and mobility long connected the Holy Cities of the Hejaz to Central Asia's polities, including the Emirate of Bukhara and the Khanate of Khoqand, not to mention the principalities in Xinjiang.<sup>3</sup> In the 1920s and 1930s the pilgrims and merchants who formed the backbone of such circulations were joined by families fleeing Stalin-era purges in Central Asia; after the end of the Turkestan Republic in 1949 another group of émigrés travelled to Mecca and Madina, this time often by way of the Himalayas and India.<sup>4</sup> A steady stream of

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<sup>3</sup> Kane, *Russian Hajj*; and Can, *Spiritual Subjects*. For a discussion of these community's today, see Balci, "Les Ouzbeks d'Arabie Saoudite".

<sup>4</sup> See Thum and Kashgari "The Turkistanis of Mecca".

Central Asian émigrés followed (via Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan) during the middle of the twentieth century. In Saudi, these successive waves of pilgrims, traders, and exiles established the cafes and restaurants serving Bukhari rice, as well as bakeries selling Central Asian style naan (referred to as *tamiz* in Saudi) that also became very popular across the country. Later waves of migrants who left northern Afghanistan amidst the turmoil of the Soviet invasion in the 1980s would go on to finance and manage as well as cook for these establishments.

“The decision to call palaw (the generic Central/South Asian term for steamed rice) Ruz al-Bukhari was a strategic one,” remarked Saad to me one day in a nargileh café in Istanbul’s Zeytinburnu neighbourhood. Northern Afghan and Central Asian communities have clustered in Zeytinburnu since at least the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> “They calculated that the Saudis (who are very religious) would be attracted by the name both because of the respect with which they held the Emirate of Bukhara, and, more importantly, Imam al Bukhari [the 9th century religious scholar who compiled an especially highly regarded collection of the hadith or sayings of the Prophet Mohammad]. In the years that followed, those involved in the Bukhari rice business made great profits – the rice was so attractive to Saudi tastes that some companies even secured contracts to feed the country’s security forces three meals a day, two of the meals being Ruz-al Bukhari!”

The fact that Ruz al-Bukhari bore little resemblance to the manner in which rice is prepared with meat, carrots, onions, raisins and sesame oil in northern Afghanistan mattered little. If Saudi publics as well as those visiting the country for trade, pilgrimage and labour, consumed heaps of Bukhari rice in Afghan-run eateries, diners from Afghanistan would take up their positions in more modest cafes serving authentic northern Afghan dishes accordingly: Qabili

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<sup>5</sup> Marsden, “Beyond Bukhara.”

*palaw Uzbeki* (Uzbek-style rice with meat), *chaynaki* (meat cooked with chickpeas in a teapot), *seekh kebab* (meat grilled on skewers), and *kaala pacha* (stewed cows feet with black pepper). Such eateries are mostly located in parts of Saudi cities that are and have been for decades home to sizeable and long-standing communities of Central Asian émigrés and northern Afghans, collectively referred to as the ‘Bukharis.’ The most famous of these are the Bukhariyya neighbourhoods of Jeddah and Taif.

The story of Bukhari rice and with it an inter-Asian history of circulation and cultural exchange within which northern Afghans were prime movers, did not, however, come to a close in Saudi Arabia. Faced with severe restrictions on the ability to own independent businesses, and not infrequently seeing their hard-earned cash being usurped by the Saudi sponsors (*kafil*) whom they were required by law to work for, successful traders and merchants have often sought to prize their savings out of Saudi Arabia, even while continuing to maintain commercial operations in the country. After the introduction of a tax on the dependents of foreign residents residing in the Kingdom in 2017, many families from northern Afghanistan have also moved their wives and children out of the country.

A preferred destination since at least the early 1990s for Saudi-based Afghans has been Istanbul. Hundreds of Central Asian émigré families have relocated to Istanbul over the past two decades – some of these opened restaurants which continue to cater to the intermittent waves of Afghan migrants, health tourists, traders and refugees that have either lived in or passed through Istanbul over the past three decades. Farid – the son of a Bukharan émigré family who was born in Sar-e Pul and is now aged in his early 70s – moved his family to Istanbul from Mecca in the mid-1990s. His sons remained in Mecca (where he had lived since 1973) until 2015, running the family business. In 2015 the prospect of taxes on family based in the Kingdom presented him – as was also the case with many other large Afghan families – with little other option than to leave. In 2017 he opened a restaurant in Turkey’s

Zeytinburnu neighbourhood. The restaurant did not cater to Afghans but rather to local Turks: diners could choose between Bukhari-style rice and Uzbeki palaw - palaw branded Bukhari wouldn't sell well in Istanbul, he remarked, so in Turkey he had decided to call it 'yellow rice' instead.

The Central Asian émigré restaurateurs of Saudi also carried their cooking and businesses to the east of what Shahab Ahmed has felicitously called the “Balkans-to-Bengal regional complex.”<sup>6</sup> The UAE restaurant market was flooded by Afghan eateries in the 2000s – while the cash for such business often came from Afghanistan's post-2001 economy, the management and chefs were frequently connected to families based in Saudi Arabia. In August 2017 in Istanbul I spoke to Umar, a man in his 30s from an Andijoni Central Asian émigré family that has been based in Kunduz (northern Afghanistan) since the 1920s.<sup>7</sup> He had been selling another northern Afghan speciality (*sheer yakh* or handmade Afghan ice cream) to Afghan migrants in Istanbul since 2016. Umar told me how having lived in the famous Al Asif square in Sohrab Goth (Karachi) for most of his life, in the mid-2000s he had cooked at an Afghan-owned restaurant chain serving Bukhari rice in the city of Ras al-Khaimah in the UAE. The most well-known chain of Afghan restaurants in the Gulf (owned by an ethnically Turkmen Afghan who has been based in Saudi for decades) opened 8 restaurants in Dubai and Sharjah, and has recently also expanded operations to Lahore, Pakistan. Indeed, Saudi Arabia's so-called foreigner tax has meant that long-term migrants in Saudi from Pakistan are increasingly returning to their home cities and towns. Such returnees, as well as Pakistan's urban middle class more generally, are keen to enjoy 'Arab cuisine': three 'Arabic' rice restaurants serving 'mandi' (a Yemeni term used to refer to steamed rice)

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<sup>6</sup> Ahmed, *What is Islam?*

<sup>7</sup> Levi, *The Rise and Fall of Khoqand, 1709–1876*.

that I visited in Karachi in November 2017 were run by Central Asian Afghans who had returned to Pakistan after decades in Saudi Arabia.

The globalisation of the signature dish of Saudi Arabia's Central Asian émigrés – itself a product of centuries of commercial calculations and interactions between the cuisines of Central Asian and the Arabian Peninsula) – is not confined by the Islamicate limits of Ahmed's Balkans-to-Bengal arena, however. Afghan merchants are a vibrant feature of Chinese trading cities such as Yiwu in the country's maritime Zhejiang province where, amongst other commercial routes, they are involved in the trade in small commodities between China and Saudi Arabia, largely targeting the hajj market and low-paid labourers. These merchants also require suitable eateries at which to host their client-guests, mostly though by no means exclusively diasporic Afghans. Trading cities such as Yiwu are also home to the transient migrant-merchant populations that have grown accustomed to eating Bukhari rice during their trips for trade and hajj to Saudi and the UAE.<sup>8</sup> These were the countries to which they used to travel to buy Chinese-made commodities before purchasing such goods in Futian, Yiwu's commodity market itself. West African Muslims are amongst the most regular customers at one Bukhari-style eatery I have been known to frequent in Yiwu, as they are too in Afghan eateries located close to Dubai's murshid bazaar, a hub in the UAE for the purchase of Chinese ready-made clothing. Legends associated with Bukhari rice have travelled, then, along with merchants east to China and southwest to West Africa.

The role that Afghanistan's Central Asian émigrés play in feeding cultural others who are also travellers rather than nurturing the diaspora itself is also visible in yet another location in which Afghanistan's Central Asian émigrés have staked out their culinary presence:

Manchester's Wilmslow Road (UK). In Manchester, however, rather than feeding traders

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<sup>8</sup> See Marsden, "Crossing Eurasia."

from Africa, it is students who form the primary market of Afghanistan's Central Asian émigrés. As Ireena Ibnu has documented, giving their restaurants distinctively Arabic names (e.g. al-Taybah al-Bukhari and Al Jazeera), Central Asian émigrés in Manchester not only feed Arabs in the city but also compete with one another for the custom of Malay students by offering them free drinks. Malaysian students in turn experiment in culinary terms by eating affordable Arabic food cooked by Afghans; the thousand or so Saudi students in their city are also delighted with the plentiful supply of their national dish.<sup>9</sup>

By addressing variations in the preparation of homeland foods and the sub-groups of diaspora Afghans most involved in the transformation of homeland cuisines in Saudi Arabia, I have explored Afghanistan's global connections from a neglected but important vantage point – its foods. I have focused on one such sub-group – northern Afghanistan's Central Asian émigrés – and explored their relationship to what is perhaps a 'key symbol' of Afghanistan's cuisine today: *palaw/ruz al Bukhari*. Besides being of intrinsic interest, because of its complexity and transregional significance, the story of Ruz al-Bukhari's globalisation illuminates how Afghans lean culturally to the east and the west, the south and the north, as circumstances require. Doing so allows restaurateurs and the networks and communities to which they are attached to build the allegiances upon which their commercial and community interests in settings far away from home depend.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibnu, "Malay Students in Manchester and Cardiff".



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