

The *Evvel Temmuz* festival: cooking and consuming identity

Su Hyeon Cho | British Institute at Ankara

Samandağ, which lies in the Turkish eastern Mediterranean province of Hatay, houses a great number of politically left-leaning, Kemalist, Arabic-speaking residents. Locals refer to their home by its corresponding Arabic name, Suwaydiyya. In addition to this linguistic plurality, the region is also enriched by a range of ethnicities and religious beliefs. Even though the overwhelming majority of the town's residents, estimated up to 90%, identify themselves as Arap Alevi (also Alawis or *Nusayrî*), Samandağ boasts a citizenship comprising people from an enormously broad range of backgrounds, ranging from Muslims to Christians, Arabs and Armenians, and including cultural-religious blends, such as Arab-Christians. Notably, such diversity is sometimes interpreted as a symbol of Turkey's tolerance and, conversely, at other times as grounds for suspicion.

My first visit to the region, for ethnographic fieldwork, took place in July 2014. My intention was to conduct preliminary research on the gastro-politics related to the communal dish of wheat porridge with meat known as *Hrisi* within the Arap Alevi community. Across the Anatolian region, this dish – based on a variety of recipes – is widely known as *Keşkek* and was inscribed in UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2011. Presumably, it would have been an unpleasant surprise for Armenians to learn that what they consider to be their sacred meal of *Harisa* had been recognised as a Turkish dish. In Samandağ, likewise, the Christian and Armenian communities have different traditions in terms of how this seemingly generic porridge is cooked and consumed.

Preparation of *Hrisi* is well known to be tiring. It is cooked over many painstakingly long hours and requires repetitive physical stirring and churning of the ingredients. The dish needs to be produced with patience, for a minimum of four to five hours, and sometimes cooking continues into the following day. It is customarily held that the longer the dish is cooked the tastier it becomes. Despite its popularity and adulation, no restaurant in Samandağ serves *Hrisi* on a commercial basis. Speaking of money in relation to the preparation and serving of *Hrisi* is shunned, and there is instead an emphasis on communal spirit, volunteer participation and sharing.

Every mid-July, Samandağ hosts a mammoth event for a town of just 35,000 people – the *Evvel Temmuz* festival – and this is an ideal opportunity to taste the community spirit as well as *Hrisi*. Thus the aim of my field research was to observe how the Arab Alevi identity is manifested in a culinary form and to contextualise its gastro-politics on regional and national scales. The preparation of *Hrisi* is

punctuated by a set of religious celebrations in the locals' pocket-sized, green-coloured notebooks of the Rumi calendar. *Evvel Temmuz*, referring to 'the first of July' in the Rumi calendar, falls in mid-July in the Gregorian calendar. Locals and scholars likewise consider *Evvel Temmuz* to be one of the most important holidays (*bayramlar*) of the Arab Alevi people, if not the single most important. Some argue that this religious holiday was influenced by the French mandate period or their Christian neighbours. In any case, despite these irreconcilable theories regarding the origin of the day, much like those related to the ownership of the dish itself, it is stipulated as a time for cooking and serving *Hrisi*, and the associated festival attracts Arab Alevi people from far and near.

In 2014, the swell of people at the *Evvel Temmuz* festival presented ample opportunities for participants to present a variety of political voices and spectacles – through street posters, graffiti and discussions. The normally quiet brick boulevard connecting to the *Hızır türbesi*, the sacred meeting place of the two prophets Hızır (Ar. Khidr) and Musa (Moses), soon became crowded with streams of pedestrians and vendors selling ice cream, t-shirts and handcrafted hair accessories. There was a pop-up tattoo parlour displaying Atatürk's signature and the famous sketch of his profile. Children jumped excitedly on a trampoline. Greetings to the festival, in both Turkish and (transliterated) Arabic, were posterized on the wall, with graffiti, reading 'Mother tongue first, speak to your children in Arabic' ('önce anadili, çocuğunla Arapça konuş') and 'Mum, speak to me in Arabic' ('anne, benimle Arapça konuş'), reflecting a sharp decline in the use of Arabic among younger generations and the ensuing concerns.



Hrisi.



The quiet boulevard leading to the *Hızır türbesi*.



Crowds at the festival.

The political paraphernalia at *Evvel Temmuz* were not, however, of a mere provincial sort. Along with the scribbles on the wall, I noticed a group of marching protesters who were chanting ‘Ali İsmail is immortal’ (‘Ali İsmail ölümsüzdür’). They were commemorating a university student who was beaten to death during the Gezi Park protests of 2013. The march reminded me of the anarchist movements of the Kadıköy district of Istanbul.

The narratives manifested during the festival corroborate several important premises. Primarily, the merrymaking of the *Evvel Temmuz*, the aspiration to rejuvenate language and the political activities are specific to (the history of) the Turkish state. As a growing body of scholarship suggests, the term ‘Arap Alevi’ was first coined not only to differentiate the population as ‘Arab’ or ‘Arabic-speaking’ but also to create affinity with the ‘Alevi’ population, who are said to be descended from ancient Anatolians. This argument has failed to fully convince, and locals deny that the categorisation of Alevi underpins crucial differences and a lack of similarities.

Be that as it may, it is indisputable that the resistance and demands of the community are closely related to the Turkish state. Revisiting the festival after a lapse of some years (despite frequent if intermittent visits to the region in the meantime), I spotted a noticeable state presence. Along with a growth in popularity, the festival had become more inclusive and state presence was more visible. A forum was held at the St Simon Monastery, taunting the wind turbines that surround this important Crusader archaeological site. Christians took an active role this year, introducing religious ritual and its importance at the monastery, and hosting an academic panel on the community of the Mariam Church.

Much like the previous festival I attended, musicians known for their leftist political stance and frequent invitees to Alevi festivals, like Yeni Turku, Gece Yolcuları, Cevdet Bağca and Pınar Aydınlar, graced the stage, but *Grup Yorum* was officially banned from playing. This revolutionist band, whose members are constantly being raided or on trial (with some handsome bounties on their heads), became a symbol of oppression and discontent this year. Thus there was an unprecedented significant police presence at the entrance and

around the political booths on the promenade. Entering the concert area with a piece of paper was forbidden, supposedly to prevent the distribution of propaganda. Some angry audience members shouted to the performers, ‘Sing *Grup Yorum*’s songs!’ (‘*Grup Yorum*’un şarkıları söyle!’). On the second day, a few protesters on the promenade were arrested and their camp was emptied. Some locals, who recall the good old days with fond memories of excitement, frowned upon this politicisation of the festival and were worried that the festival would be banned. A political activist also expressed her anxiety, telling me that she was worried that the *Evvel Temmuz* festival would be banned like the *Munzur* festival before it. Many, furthermore, observed that the fears triggered by the state presence this year resonate with those associated with the 1980s and the military regime that banned the celebration.

As the traditional finale, the last day of the festival was concluded with the distribution (*dağıtmak*) of *Hrisi*. Enchanted crowds flocked to the kitchen area in the vicinity of the *Hızır türbesi*, creating multiple disorderly queues. With their ambiguity of identity, both *Hrisi* and the *Evvel Temmuz* festival epitomise the complex dynamic of identities and communal memories vis-à-vis the Turkish state. My continuing ethnographical research aims to procure more stories accompanied by *Hrisi* in Hatay and to contextualise them within the wider regional and national narratives.



The disorderly queue for *Hrisi*.