

CREATING A TURKISH MUSLIM FESTIVAL/IDENTITY IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

ROUGH DRAFT NOT FOR CITATION OR REPRODUCTION

ENDNOTES TO BE ADDED

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For Progressive Connexions, Prague. December 1-2, 2019

Immigrant communities have long held festivals to introduce their culture and history to their new society. Usually there is food, music, and dancing. There are crafts to make and purchase. The goal generally is to win acceptance and appreciation, to make political statements, to correct negative stereotypes, to establish local community leadership credentials, and to build tourism and support local businesses.

What are those political statements and how do they change over time? Whose traditions are celebrated (and created)? Whose maps, dances, costumes, languages, religions are presented? How are gender relations expressed? Who decides the goals of the festivals? Festivals are inherently controversial and contested.

The Turkish festivals are no exception. This paper surveys the background and context of the Southern California festivals, their impact, and their current responses to political events.

In 2008 supporters of the Hizmet religious movement held a winter retreat in Turkey to plan to festivals.¹ The movement in the U.S. had hosted trips to Turkey, conferences, publication houses, meetings, talks, and now, with immigration increasing along with businesses and other activities, the next step would be a massive festival, that would be held annually in Southern California.² It would be the largest Turkish immigrant festival by far and more were planned, to be held elsewhere in the U.S. and other countries.

The festival cost about two million dollars to organize. About 400 city fathers raised money funneled through a network of hizmet business associations.

Southern California was chosen in part because of the weather. Organizers could count on ten days without rain for set up and take down. Also, the thinking was that Southern California is a forward-looking community with a large Turkish immigrant population. Sets were designed and engineered in Turkey and shipped in containers through the Panama Canal and then constructed on the fairgrounds with many volunteer workers. The second year a large replica of Topkapi Palace was added.³

The first and second Anatolian Cultures and Food Festivals were held in May 2009 and 2010 respectively at the Orange County Fairgrounds in Costa Mesa, California, Costa Mesa. In 2011, the annual festival was held at Great Park in Irvine, also Orange County. The fourth festival was held May 6-9, 2013, back at the original fairground in Costa Mesa.

YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N7BILIBbdlo>



The festivals were billed as featuring “exhibitions, food, art craft, performances, dances and live music activities.”⁴ The first-year organizers claimed that around 30,000 people visited. Subsequent years promoters began claiming that, “45,000 people from United States and around the world attend the four-day event each year.”⁵ Visitors entered the festival grounds through the “Civilizations Path.” There were a series of gates, crafted much like stage sets. Each gate represented a different civilization located in Anatolia: Hittite; Troy, Urartu; Phrygia; Lydia; Ionia; Kingdom of Comanage; Persians; Byzantium; Roman Empire; Great Seljuk Empire; Ottoman Empire; and Republic of Turkiye.⁶



Actors dressed in costumes from each era greeted visitors as they passed through. The intended message was that “Anatolia has been a cradle for all these and many other civilizations throughout the history.”⁷



Once inside, fairgoers found huge three-dimensional replicas of five different cities of Anatolia: Istanbul, Konya, Antalya, Mardin and Van. All had panoramic backgrounds. A replica of the Grand Bazaar of Istanbul had over 100 booths. Fair organizers had recruited artisans who traveled from Turkey to demonstrate traditional handicrafts: carpet weaving, handwoven carpets, paper marbling, calligraphy, stone-carving and filigree making. Long lines formed for kebab, gyros, baklava, and dondurma (ice cream).



Crowds sipped Turkish coffee or tea at a traditional Ottoman Coffee House.



Hand-made jewelry, scarves, lucky charms and hand- woven carpets were for sale.



There was a large mosque for men and beside it a much smaller and less airy and ornate mosque for women.



An Ottoman style parade made its entrance daily.





Most non-Turkish visitors would not have wondered why there was no large portrait of Atatürk. There was a small bust in a non-conspicuous place.

Organizers made a point of including Armenian religious leaders and dancers. Turkish organizers were proud to say that Armenians had baked the simit (sesame rolls).



(Armenian music and dancers.)



There were clergy from Armenian and other faith traditions. Kurds and Alavis were represented.



There was also a bookstore with books by Fethullah Gulen and about the Hizmet movement.⁸ There was a Federal Bureau of Investigation booth with pamphlets and other items for distribution. The FBI paid for the booth.



Attendance was good, especially in the evenings for the musical performances.



Children attended in school field trips; most were from the southern California Magnolia Charter schools associated with the Hizmet movement.

<http://debsedstudies.org/gulen-schools-one-of-americas-largest-and-most-controversial-cmos/>

The Hizmet festivals were not the only Turkish immigrant festivals. A “Turkish Food Festival” was held in Northridge (part of Los Angeles) in 2018. The conveners were raising funds for their local mosque. On Facebook, inquirers were assured that the festival was not connected with the Hizmet movement.⁹

For a feast, a visit and a love we expect you, your families and friends to our festival...

festival's Photos



- 11 October 2019 (3:00 PM - 9 PM)
- 12 October 2019 (11 AM - 9 PM)
- 13 October 2019 (11 AM - 9 PM)
- 14 October 2019 (11 AM - 9 PM)

TURKISH FOOD FESTIVAL LOS ANGELES



FESTIVAL LOCATION

17330 Gresham Street Northridge
CA 91325

Comment

Share

Phone: 310-866-8336

in The backyard of Hisar Academy

Options

Send

In Los Angeles, the Turkish Food Festival

The same organization held a similar festival in Dix Hills, in New York.

Advertisements stated: “We’d like to warmly present the 4th Turkish Food Festival hosted by the UAMU (actually UAMA -the United American Muslim Association)

Don’t miss out on an opportunity to enrich your taste buds with a variety of delicious, homemade Turkish cuisines, from traditional dishes to savory sweets to Turkish coffee. With more than 30 types of dishes being offered at a reasonable price, you’ll get a sense of Anatolia brought right to your feet. Our family friendly environment makes it the best place to spend your weekend. In regards to our last event, we have enhanced the festival’s location with more space for all your concerns; parking, seating, food and animals show. We’re proud to say that our last event was a tremendous hit and we look forward to the turnout of the upcoming Food Festival. Don’t forget to share this event with family and friends! Thank you and see you soon! (please support our masjid/madrasah construction) in Dix Hills NY”¹⁰

The Hizmet movement recently held a similar food festival, also in Northridge, CA. It was a local picnic, largely for members of the community. Organizers mentioned that the earlier UAMA festival leaders had attended one of their Iftar dinners.

TASTE OF ANATOLIA

Fresh & Healthy

COMMUNITY FALL FOOD FESTIVAL

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 22 | 11 AM-2 PM
Northridge Park | 18300 Lemarsh St, Northridge, CA 91324

**POP CORN
COTTON CANDY
BOUNCE JUMPERS
FACE PAINTING
HENNA**

Delicious Turkish Doner

- Dolma: Stuffed grape leaves
- Lahmacun: Turkish style pizza
- Asure: Noah's Pudding
- Turkish Coffee & Tea
- Cig Kofte (traditional spicy raw Turkish meatballs)
- Borek, Simit, Pogaca (Hand-made pastries)
- Salad
- Various Mediterranean and Turkish food
- Ayran (yogurt drink), mesrubat (soda)

Food, fun, and games... | Great for the whole family... | Bring your energy & enthusiasm...

Turkish immigrant families from the Hizmet movement socialized and children enjoyed the activities. Very few non-Turks attended.

Conclusion

This paper argues that the Anatolian Cultures and Food festival, held in southern California, must be understood in the context of the September 11, 2001 attacks, continued hostility to Muslim immigrants in the years that followed, and the rapid expansion of the Hizmet movement worldwide. The festival carried a number of messages: Turkish immigrants are peaceful and accomplished, from a great and ancient civilizational tradition. Their roots are in Anatolia (Central Asia does not figure here). They are Muslims and embrace and advocate interfaith tolerance. They are hospitable, not hostile. They cooperate with local law enforcement. They are anxious to share their rich culture. They have much to offer.

They strive for interfaith tolerance and hope at least a few fairgoers pick up some Hizmet literature at the festival bookshop and perhaps attend later gatherings, talks, and conferences to learn more about the movement. The festival did not advertise its affiliations. It did not comment on current political or historical controversies.

The festivals are similar to the San Francisco Chinatown New Year festivities which also feature FBI officials and other local dignitaries, colorful costumes, music, dancing, and food.¹¹

For political and economic reasons, the festivals are currently suspended and the sets are in storage. Turkish immigrant communities, which remain divided, may be looking inward while they seek new ways to flourish and advance their message in U.S. society.

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