Field Note 8: The Sultan of Mutbakh: A Day in the Kitchen of a Syrian Woman in Istanbul

July 20, 2023 by Zeynep Yılmaz Hava

On July 13, 2023, we (Nour & Zeynep) paid a visit to one of our previous interviewees (P13-to be called Dunya as of now) at her home in Sefaköy to cook Syrian dishes together and to perform active participant observation as part of our project. Dunya was one of the women Nour and Maia interviewed at the EKİP cooperative. We learnt that she loves cooking and she would be happy to have us at her home. Prior to our visit, we also learnt that she is not working for EKİP anymore but she initiated a homemade cooking business on her own, mostly selling kibbeh. Hence we got more excited to learn about her story and get to know her more and we decided to visit her. As we were arranging the date/time of the visit, she wrote to Nour about what kind of dishes we would want to eat. She suggested making kibbeh and pasta with bechamel sauce. During our talks on our visit, I understood she really loves doing & eating bechamel sauce, which is not something I am very fond of especially when the weather is so hot :). Hence, I suggested we skip the sauce, then she recommended either mahshi (Syrian dolma) or kabsa. Either of them was ok for me but then we decided on kabsa the day before we went, since both Nour and I had mahshi/dolma for dinner at our homes, which was a funny and lovely coincidence I think.

When the day came, we met with Nour at 12.30 in Dunya's house, located in a pretty central neighborhood in Sefaköy. The house was on the ground floor, under the shadows of a small grapevine. It was a terribly hot day, so we were relieved to cool off a bit by the ventilator in the living room. Dunya gave us a very warm welcome and was a great host from the moment we arrived till the time we left. Immediately after we entered the house, she gave us cooled water and prepared us instant coffee (nescafe 3ü 1arada) served in Turkish type tea glasses with mini wrapped pop-cakes (market ones, not home-made). My personal note here is that I have always found it a bit odd to offer coffee in tea glasses, or drinking Turkish tea from big size water glasses. While I acknowledge that it might be resulting from the loss of a variety of serving items, I also think it might have more meaning than this. What made me think about this issue is that this practice is something I often encounter when I visit my relatives in Adana as well. It might be just a personal preference, or is it possible it has something related to cultural culinary practices that shapes serving styles? Is it something worth discussing? And if so, I wonder about the thoughts of other people.

Soon after we entered her home, we began our chat and sipped our coffee in the living room. Dunya's two boys (one was 6, the other was 11) came into the room for brief moments. I tried to talk to them a bit but they were not very talkative both because of their shyness and their Turkish was not very good. The sad reason behind this was revealed as we went on listening to Dunya's migration story. The children are unfortunately not registered to any schools now since they do not have a valid ID, hence the local authorities did not accept them. Dunya told us she tried everything and she has all the necessary files but the Göç İdaresi does not even let her inside to submit her documents. She repeatedly said that if they would just let her go in then she knows she will get a positive answer as she has all the files. Yet she was very disappointed to be dismissed from the gate of each government office. Despite all these obstacles though, she is

persistent to do anything to provide education for her children. She told us about the different places and ways she tried to enroll them to school but the efforts were fruitless. We were also very sad to hear about that and when you hear these heartbreaking stories you also want to help them and do something, so Nour and I thought of some options as well. I remembered I had met a guy from an NGO who helps refugees to fight for their legal rights, so I tried to contact him. So far, I got nothing but if I don't hear from him, I may directly connect her with the NGO itself. Here, we come across once again one of the most difficult parts of doing ethnographic research with vulnerable groups such as refugee women… The possibility of being really active in the field is a long standing discussion in academic platforms in terms of keeping a certain researcher's distance. But it is so difficult to just keep one's eyes closed to the dire problems of people whom you are interviewing for your own academic benefits. Plus, touching the lives of people while doing research means a lot, and you can also feel most of the time that most of the vulnerable people in a dead-end situation look up to you as someone who could somehow be helpful, at least giving it a chance. Considering Dunya's case, she did never mention something that would mean she was asking for help from us directly, instead she was just openly sharing her experiences with us, trying to make herself understood. That was what I felt at least, and I myself felt the need to do something that would help her in some way. And it was this urge to help which made me think about the issue of the researcher's distance, because I was not sure for a brief moment whether I should step ahead to offer help, whether she would feel uncomfortable or not, if I don't have a positive answer from my contacts would it be much worse and disappoint her and so on…

With these thoughts in my mind, as I was listening to Nour and Dunya talking to each other in Arabic, I was trying to grasp some meaning from the words I could catch and from their mimics & gestures. In the meantime, Nour was translating what they were talking about. During this time, Dunya told us how she migrated to Istanbul. Her first attempt was through smuggling, but they got caught near the border and were deported back to Syria. The second time, they contacted one of Dunya's aunts and she told she could help them get to Turkey, but it was only for Dunya and the children. Plus, she needed to pay a large amount to cover for the bureaucratic expenses (I forgot the exact amount, maybe Nour will remember it was approximately 1000TL I guess). So, the second time they came through a family reunion application. And later on, her husband came as well. But now they do not have any sort of valid identification. They are not registered to the system. The husband is part of undocumented labor at a textile factory. But overall, she said she is very comfortable and happy to be here in Istanbul because she suffered a lot from the terror of war and bombs with small children. As she was migrating to Turkey, her second baby was a newborn. Since she was so terrified of living in a war condition, she said she was willing to do anything to get away from that environment. So, she is happy to live in peace although she has some issues. And we understood from her remarks that her socio-economic status in Syria was lower than in Turkey. A couple of times she said she is in a much better condition here in Turkey compared to Syria. Contrary to most women we interviewed, she said her house and kitchen in Syria was smaller! The current house has two rooms plus a living room, a bathroom, and a kitchen. There is no balcony but there is a large area in front of the house covered by grapevines, where the children play and they meet with neighbors to eat or have tea & coffee. In the kitchen, there is a table for six people and even with the table the place is not cramped. The oven and the freezer are in the hallway.

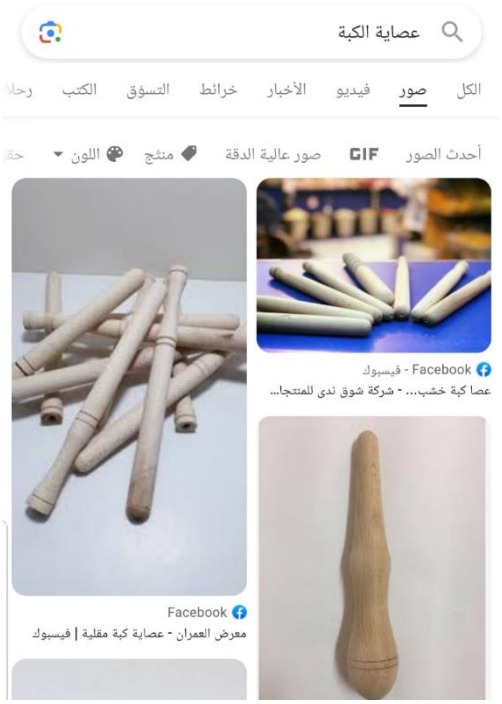
After we finished our coffee, we went shopping together. Normally we had decided we would only do kabsa but after we went there we talked about whether we could also try doing a small amount of kibbeh. So we decided to do them both -kibbeh for a small amount- and we bought ingredients for kibbeh and kabsa. The kabsa spice and rice was not available in the markets, hence we visited Syrian shops. In the first Syrian shop, there was no kabsa spice, but we bought rice there. We also found little eggplants used for makdous in Syrian cuisine. They were importing it from Hatay. I myself was happy to find them because in Istanbul they are not sold in bazaars and this type of eggplant is also very famous in Adana cuisine, which is my hometown. As I know my mother loves them a lot, I bought some as a gift to my mother, which surprised Dunya and the shopkeeper a bit :) They were like “what are you doing, what are you going to cook with that” and when I said “this is a gift to my mother” we all laughed a lot. And I must add, this was really a perfect gift to my mother because she was very happy to see them in the evening :) She reacted like “Oh, these are my eggplants, where did you find them!”

After we left this shop, we went to another Syrian shop nearby to ask for kabsa spice. Dunya said there are many Syrian shops here as well and she has no obstacle in finding the ingredients. In the second shop, we bought the spice and then went back home. Overall, the shopping part was

fun and did not take too much time. However, we got some interesting insight into the dynamics of home-made food businesses. Dunya told us that she normally doesn't have fixed prices; people or customers generally buy the ingredients themselves and she charges them only the amount of her cooking, in Turkish we say "el emeği". For instance, she said she sells one kibbeh for 7TL, while you pay 20TL in restaurants. When we got back home from shopping, Nour told me the shopkeeper guy in the first Syrian market asked Dunya if he could be a broker for her to find young male customers by finding a whatsapp group. However, Dunya rejected this offer because she felt bad to charge higher prices to young refugees who don't have a family here. Hence, she prefers to find her own customers through her own social network (neighbors, friends etc). Likewise, she said working at EKİP was not very profitable because she used to commute there to work all day long, she was both tired and was paid less. But now she can do it at home without leaving the children alone and get the same (even more) money. She also tried to sell kibbeh to restaurants for some time but didn't continue doing that because of the big amounts they requested. She said she needed at least two people to finish the orders but then it is too difficult to maintain the same quality. Once she worked with a woman and the quality of the kibbeh was different, then the restaurant didn't like it. All in all, she is now happy to do it at home.

When we arrived home from shopping, we unpacked the ingredients and immediately got to work. Dunya put on a great Fairouz playlist on TV in the living room but we could hear it well from the kitchen as the two rooms were next to each other. With Fairouz playing in the background, we started to prepare our first course, kabsa. Dunya added seven types of spices (turmeric, kabsa spice, ginger, cinnamon, allspice, cardamom, and Syrian pepper) to chicken, plus onion and garlic, bay leaves and capia pepper and left it to cook. Then we began preparing the kibbeh

dough. There we learnt a precious tip for preparing a crispy kibbeh dough; Dunya was using Syrian bread instead of minced meat in the dough to make it more crispy. And she decided to do both versions: kibbeh nayeh (something like çiğ köfte in Turkish cuisine) and fried kibbeh. After we cooked the kibbeh filling with (minced meat, pepper, and walnut), we started shaping the kibbeh with a kibbeh machine. As we prepared the filling, Dunya said it was different from Turkish one because Syrian cuisine does not use tomato or pepper paste. The kibbeh machine part was really interesting for me because it was the first time I saw the use of this machine to do kibbeh. Normally in Turkish cuisine's içli köfte (the Turkish counterpart of kibbeh) there are people using the machines, but my mother and my relatives do not use it as they think it does not give the same taste and also the machine cannot produce a dough as thin as made by hand. So, it was both interesting and fun for me to see and try doing it myself. When I mentioned this to Dunya, she showed me two different versions of doing kibbeh and the second one was without the machine. She used one larger one smaller plate to give the dough a round and thin shape on a plastic cover (used for mouneh examples mentioned in our Imiscoe paper). It was a round and thin version of kibbeh (recorded in our gallery) done by a practical method when there is no machine. There was also a small stick used to straighten the oval kibbeh shape (I added the photo at the end of this file, Nour sent me the picture). Dunya and Nour said they were specially produced for doing kibbeh, it was also the first time I saw that as well. I asked Dunya whether she also bought it from a Syrian shop and she said it was one of her children's toys :) A creative solution for moms, indeed!



The preparation of kibbeh and kabsa took a really long time. In the meantime, the children were going in and out of the house, playing with their friends, watching TV and sometimes sneaking candies we bought for them from the market. :) When they turned Fairouz off, Dunya would put it on again, go back into the kitchen while humming the songs, and this would set the right mood! After we finished kibbeh preparation, we put them in the fridge for some time to get cooler before frying. Then, she cooked kabsa rice. Nour and I peeled and sliced the almonds Dunya roasted for kabsa. To our surprise, she also served us sarma, yalanci in Syrian cuisine, which was extremely delicious! Nour prepared ayran and helped to make the salad. By the time we began frying the kibbeh and were making the last preparations for setting the table, it was already 6.00 (we started at 14.30) and Dunya had never sat down for a moment since we started cooking, yet she was still so energetic and enjoyed cooking! We were saying to ourselves how happy we are to be there and share those moments.

As for the final phase, Dunya started frying the kibbeh. As she was frying them, she put on a pink apron which had the phrase “Mutfağın Sultanı" written in front, which is a good symbol of how good she is in the kitchen and how much she loves cooking. She was the participant who made homemade burgers for her children, which we also quoted in our Imiscoe presentation as an example of favoring homemade dishes instead of buying from outside. She said the apron was a gift from one of her neighbors. On this note, she told us her relationship with neighbors is good, they meet and share food with each other.

At around 18.30, we sat to dinner at a lovely table with beautifully served dishes (two shaped fried kibbeh, kibbeh nayeh, yalanci, kabsa, salad and ayran). Everything was very delicious and at the

end of the day we were both exhausted (especially Dunya) and very happy to have had this great day together. After dinner, she insisted on serving tea but it was getting late, so we had to leave. Before we left, she served us a glass of coke. Before we left, we offered to pay for the dishes to contribute to her business. I'd like to note that we were not sure at the beginning whether we should pay for the dishes when we went there, as it was part of her business now, and we would surely be very happy to contribute to it. But, we also were not sure if she would accept any payment, so we brought another gift card with us just in case. And at the end of the day, our guess was right because she didn't accept any payment. Let alone getting any payment, she made two big packages of the leftover food both for me & Nour. She was really generous and very kind to do that! And we gave her our gift card before we left. She was too shy to accept that. And she was also too shy to let us pay for the shopping expenses at the bazaar & shops. She told Nour it was so weird to let us pay like that. I remember Eman also was commenting on this in the same way. She was feeling awkward to just do the shopping and pay for nothing. But it was not an awkward style, I should mention. We just laughed about it and had a great time while shopping as well.

Final note: When we were talking about getting used to living here and about being integrated, she told us she experienced a three-phased adaptation process. In the first period, she was very homesick; in the second period, she got used to living here and was integrated into society; in the third period, she is now much more happy/settled in Türkiye and doesn't want to go back to Syria.