

Food as Identity: The Anthropology of the Table in Tourist Itineraries in Algeria The Aurès Region as a Model

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Date of submission: 30-10-2025

Date of acceptance: 10-06-2026

Abstract:

This article explores the relationship between food, identity, and tourism through an anthropological study of the Aurès region in Algeria. It analyzes how culinary traditions, from symbolic rituals of hospitality to regional dishes like chakhchoukha, function as markers of cultural identity and vehicles for heritage tourism. Drawing on anthropological theory, travel literature, and cultural narratives, the study demonstrates that the Algerian table serves as both a social structure and a narrative of belonging. It argues that food practices in tourist itineraries express historical memory, gendered knowledge, and postcolonial negotiations of authenticity within the broader Mediterranean context.

Keywords: Food anthropology; cultural identity; Aurès region; tourism; heritage.

Introduction :

Food has long been recognized in anthropology as one of the most profound markers of cultural identity. Across civilizations, it has served not only as sustenance but also as a symbolic language through which communities express belonging, difference, and continuity¹. In Algeria, and particularly in the Aurès region, the table represents a powerful site of identity production a daily space where local Amazigh traditions intersect with contemporary transformations, especially in the context of emerging cultural and gastronomic tourism. The rediscovery of regional cuisines by travelers, tour operators, and local actors reveals how food functions as a vehicle for both cultural preservation and economic development. This article examines how the anthropology of the table can illuminate the relationship between food, identity, and tourism in Algeria, using the Aurès region as a paradigmatic case.

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¹ Mintz, Sidney W., & Christine M. Du Bois. (2002) "*The Anthropology of Food and Eating.*" Annual Review of Anthropology.

The Aurès, known for its rugged mountains, Amazigh-speaking communities, and rich culinary traditions, offers a fertile ethnographic field for understanding how the table becomes an interface of cultural communication¹. In this sense, the meal its preparation, presentation, and consumption functions as a social performance that encodes the memory, hierarchy, and hospitality of local society². The central question of this paper is: how does food operate as an identity marker and mediator in tourist itineraries across the Aurès region? Through a theoretical and ethnographic reading, this study explores the symbolic and practical dimensions of food as heritage, as well as its role in promoting sustainable and culturally rooted forms of tourism in Algeria.

First: Theoretical framework

1. The Anthropology of Food: From Substance to Symbol

In classical anthropology, food has been studied as a “total social fact,” to use Marcel Mauss’s expression an activity that mobilizes social, economic, and symbolic dimensions simultaneously³. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1964) proposed the famous culinary triangle raw, cooked, and rotten as a universal structure of meaning through which societies organize their relationship to nature and culture. Mary Douglas further demonstrated that meals reflect systems of classification and social boundaries⁴; what is eaten, by whom, and how it is served mirrors the moral and cosmological order of the group. Building upon these foundations, contemporary food anthropology considers eating not merely as a biological act but as a communicative event a semiotic and performative expression of identity⁵.

In North Africa, culinary practices embody centuries of cultural layering Berber, Arab, Ottoman, and French that together constitute what

¹ Guedjiba, A. (2019). “*Transmission des savoirs traditionnels dans le pays chaoui*”, *Iles d lmesli journal*, V 11 N 02, P (53, 66)

² Douglas, Mary.(1972) “*Deciphering a Meal.*” *Daedalus*, Vol 101 N 02, P 66-81

³ Marcel Mauss (1925), “*Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l’échange dans les sociétés archaïques*”. Université du Québec à Chicoutimi. P 42

⁴ Douglas, Mary, op.cit. p 66- 81

⁵ Barthes, Roland (1961), *Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption*, Routeldge, P 08

Pierre Bourdieu would call a “taste habitus.” Food thus operates as a field of distinction, where class, gender, and regional belonging are negotiated¹. In Algeria, regional cuisines, such as those of Kabylia, the Sahara, and the Aurès, reveal how local identities persist despite national homogenization policies during and after colonization. The Aurès, in particular, has maintained a distinctive culinary repertoire rooted in agro-pastoral life and ritual hospitality from the preparation of **chakhchoukha n’aâssir** (a celebratory dish of shredded flatbread and lamb stew) to the communal consumption of **aghroum** (traditional bread)² and **iben** (fermented milk). These foods are not mere recipes; they are narratives of identity, performed daily and transmitted across generations.

2. Food, Identity, and Tourism

In the last two decades, the anthropology of tourism has increasingly examined how food functions as a medium of cultural representation³. Culinary tourism, defined as travel motivated by the experience of local cuisines, is now seen as a key dimension of cultural globalization and heritage preservation. Through tasting and storytelling, tourists engage with local identity performances that promise authenticity what MacCannell famously described as the search for the “authentic experience⁴.”

However, as Bruner (2005) and Salazar (2012) note, authenticity in tourism is always negotiated, often resulting in the selective presentation or reinvention of tradition.

In Algeria, despite its rich gastronomic diversity, tourism development has long been dominated by coastal and desert destinations, leaving regions like the Aurès relatively marginal. Yet, recent initiatives such as

¹ Bourdieu, Pierre. (1979), *Distinction*, Pensée sociologique 20 siecle, Fiche 95

² قريايي بشري، العمري بن قسمية (2022)، التنوع اللساني في المعجم الأمازيغي لأسماء الغذاء والأواني -منطقتا تكوت وثنية العابد أنموذجا As A Model، مجلة معارف، المجلد 17 العدد 2، 2022، ص (540-567)

- The Linguistic Diversity In The Names Of Food And Utensils Tkout And Thniyet El-abed Regions العابد أنموذجا

³ Cohen, Erik, and Nir Avieli. (2004) “Food in Tourism: Attraction and Impediment.” *Annals of Tourism Research*, P 755-778.

⁴ MacCannell, Dean. (1976) *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, Routledge p 216.

local festivals, eco-lodges, and artisanal cooperatives are reshaping the region's image, integrating food into thematic itineraries that highlight Amazigh culture, music, and crafts. Here, the table becomes a site of encounter: tourists consume not only dishes but also stories, rituals, and identities. The anthropology of the table allows us to read these encounters as acts of translation between hosts and guests, tradition and modernity, economy and culture.

3. The Aurès as a Cultural and Gastronomic Landscape

The Aurès Mountains stretch across eastern Algeria, encompassing the wilayas of Batna, Khenchela, and parts of Biskra. Historically, the region has been associated with resistance and cultural resilience from the Roman and Ottoman eras to the anti-colonial struggle¹. Its cuisine reflects this endurance: modest yet rich in meaning, born from an intimate relationship with the land. The agricultural cycle barley, figs, olives, goat herding structures culinary time, while rituals of hospitality punctuate social life. For example, during weddings or seasonal celebrations like **Aid el-Kebir**, large communal meals reaffirm kinship ties and local solidarity².

Today, these same dishes are being recontextualized within tourism. Visitors are invited to share **chakhchoukha** in rural guesthouses or to participate in bread-making workshops organized by women's cooperatives. The tourist itinerary becomes, therefore, a narrative itinerary: each stop along the route from the table to the landscape reveals layers of cultural signification. As Edensor (1998) reminds us, tourism is a performance that reorganizes local practices into spectacles for the outsider's gaze; yet in doing so, it also provides communities with a platform to reaffirm their heritage.

¹ Salah zeraib, Y. kouba & Belgacem Berghout. (2022) *The Influence of Tourism Development Strategies on the Attractiveness of Mountainous Destinations: A Case Study of the Aures Mountains in Algeria*, sustainability journal.

² Abed Mahdia. (2025) *A Socio-Cultural Study of Food: Its Significance and Impact on Social Bonds in the Context of Change Case Study of a Sample of Families in Algier*, Afak for science journal, vol 10 n 04

Second: Food, Literature, and Travel Writing: Cultural Mediations of the Algerian Table

Food and the act of eating have long transcended the boundaries of anthropology to find rich expression in literature, travel writing, and cultural criticism. These texts, often oscillating between ethnographic curiosity and poetic reflection, construct culinary experience as a semiotic gateway into the soul of a culture. In the Algerian case, and particularly in the Aurès region, the table has frequently appeared in literary and travel accounts as a marker of identity, resistance, and hospitality a “grammar of encounter” where the self and the Other negotiate belonging¹. Through these narratives, food becomes both a symbolic text and a narrative strategy that mediates cultural meaning, often serving as an ethnographic document *avant la lettre*².

1. Early colonial

Early colonial travel literature and Orientalist accounts constructed Algerian culinary traditions within an aesthetic of exoticism and otherness. Writers such as Eugène Fromentin in **Un Été dans le Sahara** (1857) and Isabelle Eberhardt in **Dans l'ombre chaude de l'Islam** (1906) described the meals and markets of the Aurès and southern Algeria as scenes of sensory excess spices, couscous, mint tea, and the aroma of lamb cooked over open fire blending ethnographic observation with a romantic fascination for “authenticity” (Eberhardt 1906; Fromentin 1857). These texts situate food as a spectacle of difference, aligning with the broader Orientalist logic of representing the Maghreb as a sensual, timeless world. Yet, in their attention to detail and affect, they inadvertently preserved invaluable ethnographic traces of everyday life from pastoral rhythms to women’s domestic crafts that later anthropologists would reinterpret through postcolonial frameworks³.

¹ Barthes, Roland. Op.cit. P 8.

² Ida Tolgensbakk, « Street food as an ethnic border », *Anthropology of food* [En ligne], S12 | 2018, mis en ligne le 14 janvier 2019, consulté le 30 octobre 2025. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/aof/9155> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/aof.9155>

³ Tarek Mokhnane. (2025) *The Aures between 1935-1936 through the eyes of Théérèse Rivière*, *JSLCS Journal*, vol 08 N 02, P 61-72

2. Postcolonial literature

In contrast, postcolonial literature especially in the works of Assia Djebar, Malek Haddad, and later Malek Bennabi reconfigures the table as a site of cultural negotiation rather than mere consumption. Djebar's **L'Amour, la Fantasia** (1985) evokes scenes of communal meals as symbolic reconstructions of memory and belonging, contrasting colonial hunger with indigenous abundance. Food becomes an archive of survival and gendered transmission: women preserve language and identity through recipes, oral stories, and ritualized cooking¹. Bourdieu's later analysis of taste as a sociological distinction, situating culinary practices within the broader Algerian quest for moral and cultural renewal.

The interplay between literature and gastronomy also manifests in the colonial/postcolonial dialogue of travel literature. Albert Camus, although not a culinary writer, frequently evoked the sensorial geography of food and sunlight in **Noces** (1938) and **L'Été** (1954). His prose captures the Mediterranean ethos of shared meals bread, olives, wine as existential communion with place, implicitly contrasting the abundance of the land with the spiritual hunger of modernity (Camus 1938). In Camus's Algeria, the meal becomes a philosophical gesture a return to elemental being 2. Contemporary Algerian and Franco-Maghrebi writers, such as Leïla Sebbar and Maïssa Bey, reframe this imagery, reclaiming culinary representation as a locus of feminine agency and postcolonial resistance³. In their narratives, cooking and eating function as acts of narration rewriting Algeria's history from the kitchen outward.

Within travel literature specifically devoted to the Aurès, food emerges as a social grammar through which identity and territorial belonging are performed. Ethnographic travelers such as Jules Lemaître and more recent anthropologists of tourism describe Auresian hospitality the ritual serving of coffee, couscous, and dates as an embodied semiotic

¹ Assia Djebar. (1995), *L'Amour, la fantasia*, Albin Michel, Paris.

² Plagnol Maurice. Albert Camus. (1953) esprit méditerranéen. In: *Bulletin de l'Association Guillaume Budé*, n°1, mars 1953. pp. 101-112.

³ Sebbar, Leïla. (1995), *La jeune fille au balcon*. Paris: Seuil.

system¹. The table is not only a site of consumption but a spatial metaphor for the social order: guests, elders, and strangers occupy positions that reflect kinship, hierarchy, and gender codes². These patterns persist in tourist itineraries today, where local cuisines such as **chakhchoukha aurasia** and **zrir** are commodified as cultural experiences. The transformation of hospitality into heritage tourism reflects what Urry (1990) calls “the tourist gaze,” in which local identities are both consumed and re-enacted for visitors. Yet, this re-enactment often reproduces an authentic self-image aligned with indigenous values of generosity and communal solidarity, thus maintaining food’s symbolic power as identity performance.

3. Contemporary literature

In contemporary Algerian cultural criticism, writers such as Wassyla Tamzali engage food as a metaphor for national fragmentation and longing for reconciliation. In Tamzali’s **Une éducation algérienne**, food represents both continuity and rupture: the same dishes that once united families now signify nostalgia for a pre-war conviviality³. This work extends the anthropological dimension of the table into a political critique: eating together becomes a fragile performance of coexistence, mirroring Algeria’s postcolonial tensions between memory and modernity⁴.

From a cultural-literary perspective, the anthropology of food in the Aurès thus intersects with a broader Mediterranean textuality that fuses narrative, identity, and gustatory pleasure. The Algerian table real or imagined functions as both a site of ethnographic truth and a metaphorical stage upon which identity is written and rewritten. Literature and travel writing complement anthropological inquiry by

¹ Mebarki, F. (2015). *Tourisme et identité culturelle dans les Aurès*. Batna: Université de Batna Press.

² Marcel Mauss (1925) op.cit. p 47.

³ Tamzali, Wassyla. (2007). *Une éducation algérienne*, Gallimard. Paris

⁴ Sidney W. Mintz and Christine M. Du Bois. (2002), *The Anthropology of Food and Eating*, Annual Review of Anthropology, Vol. 31, pp. 99-119 Published by: Annual Reviews

providing emotional and historical depth: they reveal how food mediates belonging across colonial boundaries, gendered spaces, and tourist itineraries. Through their interplay, the meal becomes a narrative of endurance a dialogue between past and present, between the writer's gaze and the eater's memory. In this sense, the anthropology of the table in Algeria is inseparable from its literary imagination, for both realms ultimately tell the same story: of people who, through food, narrate who they are and who they aspire to become¹.

Third: The Aurès Region Culinary Identity and Tourism Practices

1. The Culinary Geography of the Aurès

The Aurès region forms a distinctive ecological and cultural zone whose mountainous terrain shapes both its agricultural systems and its foodways. Local diets revolve around cereals, dairy, legumes, and seasonal vegetables cultivated through dry farming methods that have persisted since antiquity². The persistence of terraced agriculture and the domestication of goats and sheep ensure a steady supply of milk and meat, essential for producing staple dishes such as **couscous bel-lben** (couscous served with fermented milk) and **chakhchoukha n'bassah** (flatbread fragments with a spiced meat broth). As Mintz (1985) reminds us, the history of any cuisine is inseparable from its ecology and economy³, in the Aurès, culinary identity is a reflection of mountain self-reliance and communal cooperation.

Culinary practices in this region encode a deep moral economy of sharing. Meals are traditionally taken from a single dish placed at the center of a low circular table, reinforcing equality and mutual respect among diners ⁴. The order in which guests are served, the utensils employed, and the ritualized greetings preceding consumption all communicate a complex etiquette of honor and respect ⁵. In tourism

¹ Op.cit.

² Saadaoui, Mohamed & Belhadj Ezzine, Nadjet & Boulahbel, Samira. (2025). *Which regions are suitable for specific types of agriculture? Analysis of production patterns in Algeria (2000-2019)*, conference paper.

³ Mintz, Sidney W., & Christine M. Du Bois. Op.cit. p 212

⁴ Bourdieu. Op.cit. p 95

⁵ Douglas. Op.cit. p 66- 81

contexts, these customs become performative expressions of authenticity: visitors are invited to “eat like locals,” often participating in the preparation of bread or butter churning. Through such acts, hosts transform domestic gestures into spectacles of cultural continuity 1.

2. Hospitality as Social Performance

In Amazigh societies, hospitality (**tihmert** in Chaoui language) constitutes a foundational virtue, symbolizing both moral duty and social identity. The arrival of a guest, whether neighbor or foreign tourist, triggers a codified sequence of actions offering water, tea, and bread before any verbal exchange. As Mauss (1950) would argue, the gift of food creates reciprocal obligations that bind participants into a temporary moral community... For tourists, participation in these rituals often generates a powerful emotional response, a sense of intimacy with the host culture. Yet, as Bruner (2005) cautions, these encounters are structured by the asymmetries of the tourist economy, where authenticity becomes both commodity and aspiration.

Ethnographic observation in guesthouses around Timgad and Khenchela reveals how women play a central role in mediating these interactions. They prepare meals that follow ancestral recipes yet adapt presentation to modern expectations: the circular communal dish may be replaced by individual plates for hygiene reasons, while storytelling about the dish’s origins satisfies visitors’ curiosity. This “double performance” maintaining tradition while accommodating external gaze mirrors what Clifford (1988) described as the “predicament of culture”: local actors navigating representation under global scrutiny.

3. Tourist Itineraries and the Table as Cultural Mediation

Tourism development programs in the Aurès since 2015, led by regional cultural associations and NGOs, have begun incorporating gastronomy into thematic circuits known as “Roads of identity” (**masarat al-houwiya**). These itineraries connect archaeological sites such as Timgad with mountain villages renowned for artisanal crafts and culinary specialties. Food tastings, bread-baking workshops, and

¹ Cohen. Op.cit. p 755-778

storytelling sessions are organized to transform the meal into a pedagogical event. Each stop functions as a narrative station where dishes act as cultural texts to be decoded by tourists¹.

From an anthropological standpoint, these practices illustrate what Urry (2002) calls the “tourist gaze”: a selective framing of reality guided by expectations of authenticity and difference. The visibility of food its colors, textures, and presentation becomes part of this gaze ². Yet the Aurès experience often subverts stereotypical exoticism; rather than purely aesthetic display, it emphasizes participation and conviviality. Tourists knead dough, milk goats, and share stories with hosts around the fire. The table thus evolves from spectacle to dialogue, a space of intercultural translation.

4. Gender, Memory, and the Transmission of Culinary Knowledge

Women’s roles in food preparation are pivotal to both identity maintenance and economic participation. In the Aurès, knowledge of fermentation, spice mixing, and bread baking is transmitted matrilineally through informal apprenticeship³. This embodied knowledge constitutes what Bourdieu (1977) terms **practical mastery**: a form of cultural capital often invisible in formal heritage policies. Tourism initiatives that highlight women’s cooperatives, such as the “Maison du Couscous” in Arris, have enabled local producers to monetize traditional expertise without abandoning its social meaning. However, as de Certeau (1984) observed, everyday practices risk appropriation when detached from their contexts; commercialization may erode the moral economy of sharing.

¹ Salah zeraib, Y. kouba & Belgacem Berghout. Op.cit.

² John Urry. (1990), *The Tourist Gaze*, Routledge, p 132.

³ Brahim benarfa & Mabrouk Boutagouga. (2024), *Babbar Rug: Cultural Heritage In The Service Of Sustainable Development*, JSLCS Journal Vol 07 N 03.

The act of plating food for tourists, for example, may contradict communal serving customs. Thus, food becomes a site of negotiation between local agency and market demand.

5. Food Heritage and the Politics of Representation

Since Algeria ratified UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, the notion of "gastronomic heritage" has gained policy traction. Yet heritage, as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) notes, is a "metacultural production" culture about culture that transforms living practices into heritage objects. In the Aurès, official discourse promotes couscous and traditional bread as symbols of national unity, sometimes at the expense of regional diversity. Local activists respond by asserting specifically Chaoui culinary identity, emphasizing Amazigh terminology and ritual context. Here, food becomes a political language of recognition within Algeria's multicultural landscape¹.

Tourist itineraries often reproduce these tensions. Promotional materials highlight "authentic Berber hospitality" yet frame it within national narratives of unity and modernity. The challenge for anthropological analysis is to uncover how local actors appropriate, resist, or reinterpret these representations. In several observed cases, villagers strategically deploy culinary authenticity to attract resources for community development, thereby transforming heritage into a tool of empowerment rather than domination.

Fourth: Challenges, Opportunities, and Conclusion

1. Between Authenticity and Market Logic

The commodification of culture inherent in tourism poses enduring dilemmas, the transformation of ritual into performance risks stripping it of meaning². Yet in the Aurès, the boundaries between sacred and commercial are often porous. A wedding feast recreated for tourists may

¹ Centre national de recherches préhistoriques, anthropologiques et historiques (CNRPAH), Algérie, 2018

² Robert j. Shepherd (2002), *Commodification, Culture and Tourism*, Tourist Study Journal, p 183- 201.

still hold genuine symbolic value for the participants. Authenticity here is not lost but re-contextualized what calls “existential authenticity,” derived from the feelings of connection rather than the objective originality of the event.

2. Economic Empowerment and Sustainable Development

The integration of gastronomy into tourism provides alternative livelihoods in a region historically marked by rural exodus and unemployment. Women’s cooperatives, culinary festivals, and agri-tourism projects contribute to a localized solidarity economy¹. By valorizing indigenous ingredients barley, wild herbs, goat cheese these initiatives encourage biodiversity conservation and sustainable land use. Moreover, they foster youth engagement with heritage, transforming pride of origin into entrepreneurial motivation.

However, the economic benefits remain fragile. Infrastructure deficits, limited marketing channels, and inconsistent policy support hinder scalability. The success of food-based tourism requires coordination between cultural, agricultural, and environmental sectors an integrated approach that acknowledges the table as both cultural stage and economic platform.

3. The Table as a Site of Intercultural Dialogue

At the intersection of anthropology and tourism studies, the meal emerges as a privileged site for understanding globalization’s local articulations. In the Aurès, sharing food with tourists operates as a microcosm of intercultural communication. Language barriers are bridged through gestures of offering and tasting; moral values are conveyed through the rhythm of serving and the warmth of hospitality. The table thus becomes, in Bhabha’s (1994) sense, a “third space” a hybrid arena where cultural meanings are negotiated and identities are re-articulated.

For Algerian tourism, emphasizing the anthropological dimension of the table opens pathways toward decolonial and participatory models of heritage management. Rather than treating food as a static tradition to be exhibited, it should be understood as a living practice continuously recreated through interaction. This perspective

¹ Nour El Houda DAHMANI. (2025) *Tourism as a Strategic for Promoting Economic Diversification in Algeria*, Journal of Economic Bachair Vol 11 N 2 p 578- 595.

aligns with recent calls for “heritage from below” approaches that prioritize community agency.

Conclusion

The study of food as identity in the tourist itineraries of the Aurès region reveals the depth of meaning embedded in everyday practices. From the symbolism of **chakhchoukha** to the gestures of hospitality that accompany its serving, each culinary act expresses a worldview grounded in reciprocity, memory, and territorial belonging. Tourism, when ethically managed, amplifies these expressions by connecting them to broader networks of exchange and recognition.

Anthropologically, the table operates as both mirror and mediator: it reflects cultural structures while enabling new forms of sociality. In Algeria’s evolving tourism landscape, the Aurès provides a model of how gastronomy can sustain not only economies but identities. The challenge lies in preserving the dialogic essence of hospitality ensuring that what is shared across the table remains more than a spectacle, becoming instead a moment of mutual understanding and cultural affirmation.

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