

Socio-Cultural Meaning of Kitchen in Religious Context of Iran (Case Study: City of Qom)

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ABSTRACT: Introduction of modern architecture in Iran and its popularization in 1950s and after, brought some new concepts in everyday life of Iranian women, among which was "kitchen as heart of home-life". Younger members of current generation are grown in these modernized spaces while a bit older ones have experienced houses of traditional style. This study is designed to explore what previous concept of kitchen was and what its effects were on current housewives imagination of it. Religious social context of city of Qom was selected as a good representative of more religious majority of social context of Iran. It was found that three ranges of meanings should be considered to explain socio-cultural concept of kitchen in Iranian Muslim women's life: from personal space of special privacy (for females) to a living family space, from a utility space to a place of genuine life and from a sacred place to a profane one that has clear implications in Iranian Muslim women. It can be said that now ideal picture of a kitchen in this cultural context is a female personal space and at the same time it is a temporary private family space but not of collective living quality.

Keywords: Kitchen, Family Space, Female Space, Islamic-Iranian Culture, Sacred Space.

INTRODUCTION

The experience of modernity in Iran in everyday life as well as in architecture is seen as a complex, confusing and eclectic one (Mahmoody, 2011) but some common features emerged everywhere as its signs. It is common to analyze 'live-in-kitchen' (or 'open kitchen' in Iranian context) as pattern fitted to requirements of contemporary life style in which kitchen is the most active part of the home and is seen as the focal point of family coexistence. And yet it is interpreted as a social reaction to dark and alienated old kitchens of traditional Persian kitchens called 'Matbakh', which are also seen as downscaling of women place in traditional vision (Haeri, 2009). This reading of change in kitchen model, is to some extent a novel one, as previous analytic views were based on direct copying of modern western life in Iran and was seen stemming from out of context and external mechanism to Iranian social context. Here some considerations must be taken into account: the first is that detached kitchen from family life has been a common pattern among eastern nations, a pattern that can be traced back

to 13th century B.C (Snodgrass, 2004,) and in Iran to 7000 years ago (Malekshahmirzadi, 1995); so here is a question that if there were no considerable change in this model throughout history, then is it possible to interpret this via internal cultural forces? The second and more important point is that a main feature of modernized life is its facilitation for everyday home works specially kitchen works and very kinds of these works are displaced from home; so it may be very simplistic to say that new model of kitchen is a by-product of now important role of home works and its conductor (the wife) in Iranian lifestyle, what can be seen as an progress in women situation in comparison with traditional neglected women place in home. It is clear that every space in home is due to some human needs, but its change should not be seen as disappearing of the needs from human life, but it may change into other models or is fulfilled through other spaces. Upon this assumption, studying of contemporary socio-cultural concept of a place in home is related to previous cognitive constructs of people who have experiment whit the two models: traditional and modern kitchen.

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MATERIALS AND METHODS

Throughout the world, concepts of kitchen can be drawn in into a fourfold: from personal space of special privacy (for females) to a living family space and from a utility space to a place of genuine life. In some cultures such subjects are completely separated and everyone is specified for a unique space; for example in Victorian house of Britain, Kitchen is a mere utility space used and lived in by servants and the genius of life is current in lord's spaces; every member of the family has his or her private space – from single chambers for children to boudoir for lord's wife- and every social interaction – from family ones to ones with outsider partners has its own place (such as parlor for guests) in the house (Kerr, 2007; Madanipour, 2008). On the contrary in working class houses of middle 20th century in United States which also belongs to western culture, all of the fourfold can be found in kitchen itself (Nickles, 2002). For that psycho-cultural meaning of kitchen is of such a vast range, this study of kitchen is intended to discover its contemporary concepts in everyday life of Muslim women. Selection of case study in city of Qom is due to its religious social context; and for this special study as a qualitative research, 17 married women in different ages (from 27 to 90) are chosen. Being from more traditional family behavior or norms (upon personal familiarity with them) has been another factor for this selection. For instance, four of them are four generations of mothers and daughters who live in separate parts of the city and it seemed useful to compare their views about kitchen. The third factor of the choice was their economic levels to be of same class (middle class) in order to eliminate special features of lifestyle of high or down classes, which conceived to downscale the religious effects on characteristics of concept of kitchen. Then they are wanted to fill out a questionnaire – based on open questions and some closed ones- organized to discover psychological features of their conception about the space of kitchen. These questions were covering not only their current way of using kitchen space, but also including descriptive questions about former generation usage of the space, i.e. their mothers – her way of baking, dishwashing and dress washing. In addition to this questionnaire, literal narrations of kitchen in Iranian context for previous generation is considered to find if there is any continuous concepts from that generation to current one or not. The following analyses are based on 15 received questionnaires (out of 17) and respondents are referred to via capital- (A) for a sample made of 4 generation mother and daughters, (B), (C) & (D) for age categories (young, middle and old)- and number codes. The results from these questionnaires (which are in fact deep interviews) are used to make a comparative discussion with other cultural analyzes of Muslim women domestic life specially those deal with Iran.

The results are put under content analysis using key subjects (conceptual units) of the mentioned fourfold by adding a new range of meanings emerged from the qualitative analysis itself. Basically the two main meaning of kitchen in its specific

literature are considered as main categories: Female Space & Family Space. Then every of them were broken into sub-meanings using keywords of environmental-psychology: "Generally speaking, environmental psychology takes note of some principle concepts such as privacy, domain, personal space, crowdedness, etc., before focusing on a specific place such as house, school, office, etc" (Tabaeian & Einifar, 2011). For the "Female Space" three terms had considerable contents in responses: Personalization, Privacy and Intimacy, Territoriality. But for the second one (Family Space) three main labels were more evident: Territoriality, Front and Back Stage & Sacred Place. These are also ranged rationally upon below model (Fig.1):

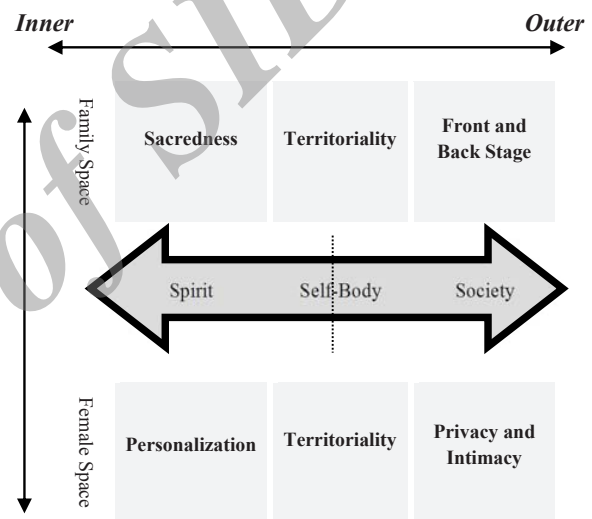


Fig.1: Logic of unit selection for content analysis of responses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

"Kitchen of an Iranian house is of less attraction compared to its other parts. In first sight is its darkness and dirtiness and has many differences with British houses. It rarely has windows, has earthy or brick floors and its walls are black and smutty. If there is any oven, it is made of brick or made by adjustment of two pieces of stone above which is placed a large stack. They put numerous pots on it for boiling of water and if Europeans live in these houses, use the boiled water for bathing" (Coliver Rice, 1987, 3-132).

This report from an English lady, who lived in Iran in 1920 decade, is a common description of kitchens of traditional kitchens of half a century ago, especially what go back to Qajar Dynasty (220 to 90 years ago). This place is all a hearth

room and ovens of which is placed within low platforms called 'Kateh' (Pirnia, 2008, 5-134) or 'Kat' (in answers of A3 (75 years old) and D1 (80 years old) about their mother's kitchen). These kitchens have been located in ground floor (A4- 96 years old), but this kind of hearth arrangement has been continued till the next generation when basement kitchens was common and after its movement from basement to inner part of living spaces – a fact that emerged in late 1940s and 50s (A2). This later change can be related to establishment of metal industry in these years due to governmental plans towards industrialization. The former historic model of kitchen (which sometimes is referred to as crypt-like kitchen at corner of traditional house plots) (Jabal Ameli, 1995), instead of a sign of downscaling of wife place at home, firstly can be seen as a functional and economic response to lifestyle of those people. In other words, fuel shortage and its considerable value (a situation that is clearly drawn in Shahri's report of old Tehran) (Shahri, 1992b, 1-300) made people of the period to save energy through various schemes. Placing of kitchen and its spatial characteristics is mostly fitted to such requirements: it is located in a place that its perimeter is enclosed because it should not directly be connected to any open space and its warmth is exploited indirectly (via walls) for adjacent living spaces. In this respect, its usual placement in Northern sides of the plan (that always was specified for winter times) can simply be a result of summer diet of traditional Iranians which has been made of unbaked or raw materials that eliminated their need for ovens of kitchen. This is while its tight enclosure without any window except a roof hole or 'Hoorno' (Pirnia, 2008, 5-134), is not only energy saving but also a cultural answer to some needs of privacy that is considered in following sections of the paper. To prove that such a reasoning is enough for this pattern of kitchen, one can see work of Hassan Fathi in New Gournia where he designed his kitchen on behavioral and energy saving basis and his way resulted in the same model of kitchen (Fathi, 2003, 2-160).

Reconsidering Concept of Kitchen in Iranian House in Pre-Modern Era

So the social meaning of old Iranian kitchen should be understood through its context: it is clear that amount of home works for traditional Iranian wife was considerably lower than her western counterpart at the same time (Coliver Rice, 1987, 152-3 ; Shahri, 1992b, 299-310); in addition and even more important point (which is also true, even for current time) is that for Iranian woman the area of kitchen work is not restricted to the focal limited area of kitchen but these jobs are mostly performed in various areas of home: preparing raw food in porch (iwan), washing dishes beside pool in courtyard or storing food or dishes in dressers adjacent to living areas. As Jabal Ameli has mentioned (1995), many of these jobs in larger houses was conducted in a semi-closed space with roof light and a central pool called 'Houzkhaneh' or 'Sharbatkhaneh' that was used for family sittings in afternoon or another times and was

not a detached place of family life. This kind of distribution of home jobs throughout the house can be found in answers taken from three older respondents about their mothers working (cooking and washing). This spreading of kitchen works has been even more relevant when oil primuses emerged and became popular, since these cookers provided an opportunity to eliminate the need for them to restrict themselves to fixed wood hearths of old crypt-like kitchens. In three of returned answers (those are came from women of the age of 55, 58 and 46) it is mentioned that their mothers' cooking place were on these primuses at a corner of one of main living areas of home: porch, sitting- room (Se Dari), etc.:

"during those times of our childhood, kitchen was not of current form; there was cooker that put at the corner of room and in winter it was located at the center of room and [my mother] put food pot on it and cooked [the lunch]. Later, after our grown-up, the life became easier and our mother was cooking in [ordinary] kitchen on [new] ovens" (C1- of age 58).

In fact the matter of uncomfortable kitchen in Iranian old houses is mostly referred to first generation of kitchen after vast modernization of Reza Shah and semi modernized kitchens of 1950s and after. In that generation for at least three causes, basement kitchen became the main model of the period: firstly the municipal law that made it an obligation to build only one side of a town property, so the traditional detached kitchen was unpermitted. Secondly, it was civic water supply system that set forth the basement as an advantageous place for washing jobs to be gathered in one place (because of long-term problem of low pressure of water). These two in addition to popular image of kitchen as a detached place of living areas, provided ground for new model of kitchen which was not only in basements but also was on contrary to previous ones, a place of much more concentrated actions. So women of the time, should spend much more long periods of a day (especially for washings which were previously performed in open courtyard) in a place which was not psychologically prepared for long time living. And that's why the image of kitchen became a very dark one in people's mind:

"Our kitchen was at basement... I think it was an area of 12 square meter or more; along its length was a shelf that the primuse was on it and beside that was a shelf of four levels on which all corns or condiments were stored. There was no tile on walls; only plaster of cement or gypsum" (C2- age of 40; there was similar description from B1- age 51).

The distribution of kitchen-based works and related materials and appliances for three samples of three different generations are shown in Fig.1 & Fig.2. It is this concentration (Fig.1 & Fig.2) along with imitation of experimental architects from educated ones who knew only modern type of kitchen that makes utility kitchen beside living areas as common model of next generation that was located at corner of plan and near a court angle. Open or lie-in kitchen is final form of kitchen in contemporary Iranian houses which is directly imitated from plans of modernism era.

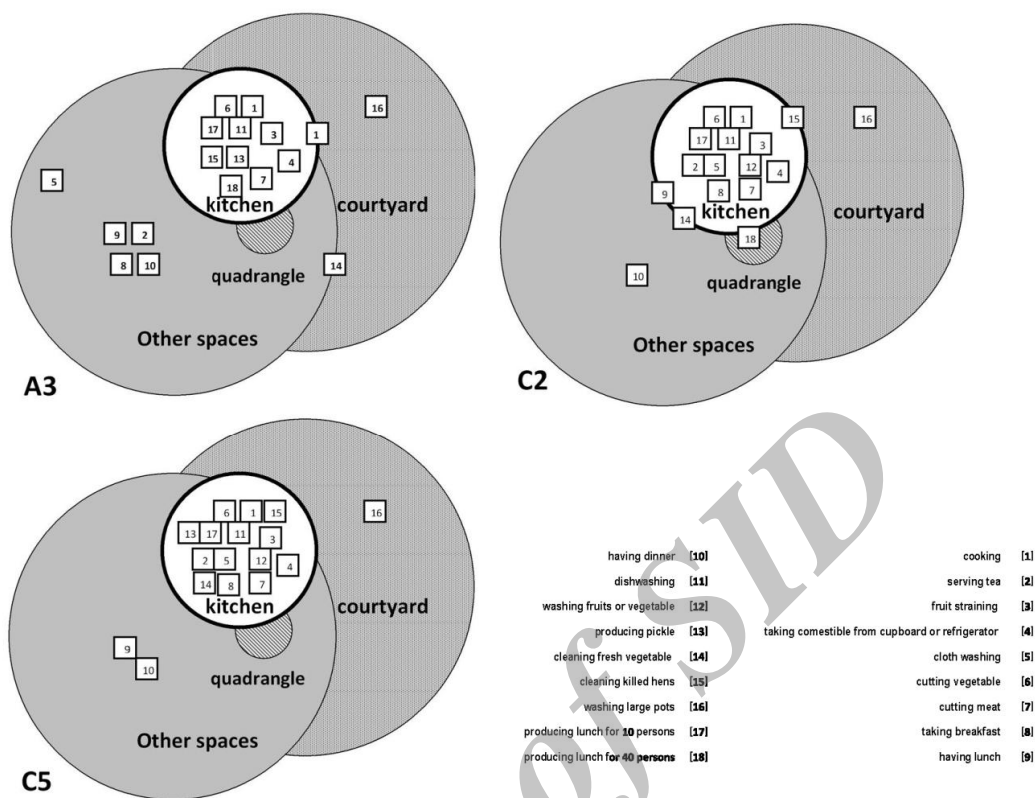


Fig. 2. Distribution of house works related to kitchen

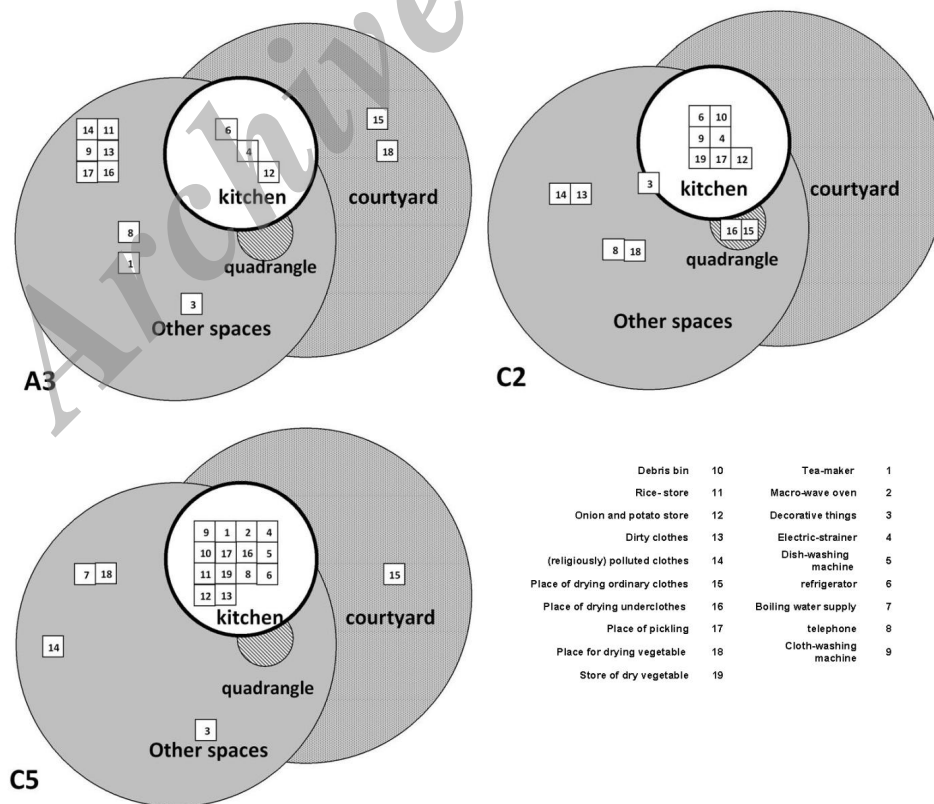


Fig. 3: Stored materials and installed appliances which relate to kitchen

In summary, this transformation from traditional wood hearth kitchens to modern open kitchen, although is viewed by some as a progressive process towards elimination of placing women as second gender, but could be interpreted more reasonably as a restrictive change in woman territorial claim on home area; this means that her mere functional presence at home was only limited to have lunch cooked and other jobs of her at home were conducted in lively spaces of home even with neighbour women; and this cannot be seen as servant-type works but as lively jobs of everyday; there, her freedom to chose jobs places around the house made her territorial claim on home very stronger. But now she is mostly restricted to limited area of modern compact kitchen. In addition, such a concentration of works which are not all clean jobs puts extra maintenance jobs of cleaning compared with previous condition of kitchen. It is notable that 100 years ago when Coliver Rice wrote her report on Iranian woman, she saw herself very busier than her in kitchen and noted that Iranian Woman "has neither bronze dishes to gloss nor any hall to clean out and make bright and no kitchen for scouring" (Coliver Rice, 1987, 153) from her comparison with English housewife).

Female Space

Kitchen is yet a feminine space all round the world (Freeman, 2004; Bell & Kaye, 2002). But the question here is: how is imagination of Muslim women of this place and what is their expectation from it? From the viewpoint of environmental psychology this can be followed through three concepts: personal privacy, personalization of space and territoriality; the two former concepts are more individual and are surveyed here and another one is studied role of kitchen in family life.

Personalization

First evidences toward any sense of personalization among respondents are comments such as: "I like to", "My kitchen" and "I am satisfied from my kitchen and I love it" (C1- age 58). Yet it is possible to derive same results from answers to the first open question of questionnaire (describe your own kitchen): "appearance of the kitchen is rectangular that its Open [front platform] is decorated with granite slabs of green and gray overall [the surfaces of] the kitchen are formed on white tiles and white cabinets has brought an especial appearance to it and yet its sink and a steel gas appliance parades in front of the door" (C6- at age of 56).

Beginning questions with this one without further description, made it possible for them to mention subjects which were of most importance for them; for instance C1- a 58 years old woman – has referred to some features of her kitchen which are mostly decorative or of expository value for her and she has noted the exact place of them: " and on one side of it there are refrigerator and launch board and it is furnished by a 12 square meter carpet and on cabinets there is a micro-wave oven; on top of cabinets are decorating objects of dells and pastiche fruits" or B1 who said that "[my kitchen] is a delicious vast space and

has large and attractive cabinets . And two beautiful showcases are provided among cabinets". C5 who is 55 years old of a relatively low income family in response to final question about characteristics of a good kitchen writes: "be covered with glazed tiles which are stamped by figures of flower and fruit". Such a desire to have a decorative view in kitchen is considered a feminine psychological taste in various parts of the world even after long term modernization that opposed to this vision. As Nickles (2002, 34) has explained working class taste of Americans after second world war was as such and Betty Friedan in 1963 puts this forward: "Interior decorators were designing kitchens with mosaic murals and original paintings, for kitchens were once again the centre of women's lives".

Although a picture of a woman behind a sink is considered by some feminists as an alienated or slavery picture of females (Woolley, 1994; Reiger, 1987), in our study, respondent saw it as a symbol of their territorial claim on the space of kitchen. This was asked among some other subjects in question no.32; there, 7 had seen the matter of choosing type of the sink as 'very important' while 5 of 15 saw it of medium importance.

There is considerable attention paid to appearance of kitchen from respondent. Only one of them did not bother about decoration and others emphasized on its importance. Color and pattern of wall tiling were main features of 'good kitchen' in answers to the question about it: "since women spend their major time in kitchen, the best place should be devoted to it so that it takes the advantage of outward view use of tiles of relatively light colors and opaque to prevent from glare" (C2, 40 years old). A main feature of personalization of the space of kitchen in this sample is a decorative middle band in tiling of kitchens which is installed on height of 120 that must only be selected by housewives (B1, 51 years old).

In response to "features of good kitchen" that was an open question; seven have referred to necessity of existence of windows to open space. It should be mentioned that all of them have 'open kitchen' (live in kitchen); so it could not simply attached to their requirement for openness of inner space (which is a common interpretation for recent prevalence of these kitchens). In addition it could not be a mere functional subject (for example foe ventilation or lighting) as in one case which uses a kitchen with some window to adjacent alley, in response to an open question about shortcomings of her kitchen, said: "a ventilator above gas appliance is better than window; since it does not distribute food smell outward". So it can be concluded that the reason for wishing to have outward widows is due to natural scope: B1 in her description about her kitchen which has no relation with outdoor space says: "because of proximity of [glass roofed] patio and its flowers and home birds it has a delicious environment". Another respondent who lives in an apartment with a kitchen which has no window other than one that opens in an inner light-well, in her description about her ideal kitchen says: "in my view it [should] have windows to outdoor space if there are a vision of courtyard in front of it and a [flower] bed in front of it will be very desirable" (C3, 37 years

old). Such expressions show that kitchen for these housewives is not a mere functional of obligatory works and even only a center for controlling home space but here is a place of special life that should be prepared with a special kind of livelihood and that's why here is a personal space.

Privacy and Intimacy

There are special aspects of privacy which make Islamic society distinctive from others. In city of Qom with special religious context and importance of tight veiling of women by wearing 'Chador', it becomes more critical.

In some similar researches on women in Islamic societies and Islamic minorities in western countries, the role of veiling – its physical features as well as its conceptual implications in 'place making' of women – is evidence. Provisions as using curtains in front of open kitchen, transforming a bedroom to guest room to provide a detached place for welcoming non-relative male guests in home or making use of opaque glass for preventing of outlook, etc. are reported in such studies. Muslim women do them for making home space more private and 'veiled' (Hadjiyanni, 2007; Amor, 2006; Ghafur, 2002; Vahaji & Hadjiyanni, 2009).

Here there were 6 cases (of 15) that referred to visual privacy in factors of 'good kitchen' which was asked through open question. In addition, there was a question that "if you have male guests what would you do to cut overlooks to kitchen?". In 10 cases – even those who were using detached kitchens- use of curtain or draped louvers (8 cases) and closing door or window of kitchen which opens to other inner spaces (2 cases) for this purpose was mentioned. In 3 other cases which such provision were unusable there were comments of prostration in providing needed privacy; a 28 years old housewife says: "we often try to lead guests to places beside kitchen in living-room from where the kitchen is less visible" (A1). Another who is 29 says: "because of kitchen form there is no way for preventing it from being overlooked and only way is to prepare for entertaining guests before their arrival" (C5). This depressive comment of a 55 years old case (C9) is noteworthy: "I wear Chador [veil] and I am so uncomfortable [during presence of guests]".

The matter of visual privacy in case of overlooking from outsiders (neighbors, passerby, etc.) is even more important in Islamic Iranian culture. Shahri's report of old Tehran culture (Shahri, 1992a, 209), suggests that in Qajar era (more than 100 years ago) a main factor of 'good house' was its tight enclosure which would not have any opening to public ways. This consists of two aspects of privacy; the first is due to female territory of house while the second is a matter of whole family. But there is a fine point in Islamic ethics which goes beyond common meaning of privacy that is not about intimacy of house dwellers themselves and its effects were of major importance in Old Iranian culture: the smell of preparing food should not reach adjacent houses. It is about privacy of neighbours, as the Holy Prophet puts this forward:

"Do you want what is right of neighbours?. And if he buy seasonal fruit he should send part of it to his neighbours and if he do not present any to them he should take it hidden [from their children sights] to his home so that their children appetite is not affected and they become depressed" (Fattal Neishaboori, 1987, chap. 61).

In this study most respondents indicated high or medium importance of preventing kitchen smells from reaching adjacent houses.

Territoriality

One aspect of this subject goes back to previous matter of female space. For instance in answers of a 49 years old woman (A2) who had a vast open kitchen (of 18 m²) without window – a matter which could make its openness of more significance for her- in characteristics of 'good kitchen' was this statement: "not be open, . Not be in center of home, be at a corner". Another respondent (55 years old) who has been living in an apartment for 10 years, in her first words for that question, says: "far from rooms and a bit large". We can compare their desire to have a detached kitchen – probably as semi personal space- with their western counterparts who work in kitchens that are centers of family life. Complaints of not having personal space in their house are partly due to such an arrangement in house: "From the master bedroom to the head of the table, the 'man of the house/breadwinner' is afforded places of authority, privacy (his own study), and leisure (a hobby shop, a special lounge chair). A homemaker has no inviolable space of her own" (Weisman, 2000, 2). One of respondents about what children do in kitchen answered: "taking food; gallimaufry" (C1). Although she was clear in expression of her heartfelt to her kitchen, she often was doing common kitchen works as preparing grasser or cutting meat out of it.

Women desire for having large kitchen is considered as a matter of territoriality (El-Rafey & Moshira, 1992). considering small optimized kitchens of modernists era and its continuity to present days in form of fitted-kitchens (Freeman, 2004), shows that just from functional point of view, a kitchen can be effectively compacted in an area of even 120cm to 300cm (about dimensions of famous Frankfurt kitchen). But we see in answers of these housewives (most of them of some long experience in house works) 'large area' is mentioned as a feature of 'good kitchen'. In addition there was no comment of disadvantageous of large kitchens (even from one who had a kitchen of 20 m²).

Family Space

Family customs are culturally specific. In Islamic culture, it is strongly advised to put special times in day life for coming members of family together. In Holy Quran (Sureh 24, Verse 58) these times is extended to all day long and only 3 exceptions are recommended. This temporal expansion of being together is matched with a spatial one in traditional Iranian house layout in which almost all spaces of house were potentially

ready for these public meetings and for private relation there were temporal alternatives, provided with operable doors for closing and so separating spaces at night time (Einifar, 2003). In this arrangement, there was no need for kitchen to be added in family meeting areas and it was tightly detached for other reasons (see above). But modern patterns of house layout which introduced completely detached rooms for family members to Iranian culture brought a habit of separateness into family life of Iranians. So when we confront with conception of kitchen as 'heart of house' in western literature (Freeman, 2004) it could not be immediately adapted to present open kitchens in Iran to interpret it as a change towards more intimacy in family relations. In comparison in social housings of early modernism in Iran and in ones which were made by people themselves with new technologies there is no sign of putting kitchen at the center of living areas or any try to inserting more openness in it toward living spaces (Haeri, 2009). There detached kitchen are placed at corners of plan. Many years later in a social inquiry of years 1987-8 (conducted by ministry of construction and housing or Islamic Republic of Iran), it has been emphasized that: "the first space that a low-income family separates from its living areas is the kitchen" (Ahari et al., 1988, 163). This study also show that at that time kitchen separable space was seen advantageous in case of social relations of family which was used for temporary dwelling for their relatives (p146) and so it is concluded that for affordable housing for these low-incomes "providing an enclosed space that it can be possible to accommodate kitchen appliances in it is a necessity" (p163). so it can be said that introduction of recent kind of kitchens is not stemmed from popular taste change Haeri (2009) has claimed) but it is due to mass housings of post war time (1980s) which put minimum dwelling pattern as a favourable model for these works as well as normative views of architects and civil engineers who admired western life style (Hodjat, 2011).

Front and Back Stage

The above argument can be interpreted in terms of Goffman (1959) as a matter of performance. But such a matter is multi-layered that concepts of backstage and front stage are interchanged for family members themselves compared with more strangers. In a party as we saw the ideal image of kitchen for these cases was a backstage. But in terms of inner family relations it could not simply be seen as front region as some have presented (Haeri, 2009). This could likely be influenced by subjects of other social contexts (especially western ones). For instance there are propositions in trade market of kitchen appliances for reinserting sense of family atmosphere in kitchens of western countries even by using large monitors associated with internet (Bell & Kaye, 2002). But it cannot be the case in Islamic or Iranian context in which family relations and customs are yet of high significance that deserves family meals as an important activity of everyday life.

In this study non-functional use of kitchen space was rare and limited to having breakfast and family meals always were had

in living area that is an old custom in the east and is not vastly changed. It is noteworthy that even such works as preparation of grassers that is a lively and cooperative work in more traditional families may be conducted in living area.

One aspect of impossibility of effective adding kitchen into liveable areas for Iranian families is due to kinesics routine of this culture. Sitting on ground as a custom has special results in design of living areas compared with western culture of sitting on chairs and after tables. Modern kitchens with cabinets all round it do not have any place for leaning and for a viewer sitting on ground it provides some shallow space with unpleasant visions. In addition a living area in this culture should have carpets on its floor because people move with bare foot in inner part of home. In current study it was asked that if you use any kind of carpet on kitchen floor and if yes what the reason is. There was no negative answer from respondents and all covered kitchen floor. Their reasoning consisted of phrases such as "to keep floor dry", "to prevent from slipping" and so on. If we compare these with the mentioned culture of sitting, these can be interpreted as a result of its adjacency to living spaces not its being a real living space. There was no comment of having family meals on kitchen ground. So kitchen in this sense is an extension of living areas that should psychologically show this continuity. There were some clear statements in answers about this psychological sense: "because I don't like floor kitchen to be bare" (C3) or "when there is carpet on kitchen floor it looks neater" (A2).

If kitchen becomes a 'front' region it may require much more hardworking for ordering and cleaning has been a subject of feminist's criticisms in western culture (Friedan, 2000) what has no precedent in traditional life style of Iranians (Coliver Rice, 1987). This is obvious in some answers (4 cases) that saw using carpets on kitchen floor as a means to facilitation of cleaning the kitchen, so it may be more easily used as an extension to living areas.

Sacred Place

There is a sense of respectfulness towards kitchen space in some culture: it is symbolic place of sacred fire in west (Cooper, 2000), preparation of sacred bread in some parts of America (Snodgrass, 2004) and place of sacred foods in Hindu's (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 1999). In Islamic Instructions bread is saw of such a sacredness as Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) has said: "Bread is blest, for it the Great God Created the sky to rain sorely and the earth to vegetate; and it is for bread that you are able to pray" (Hakimi et al., 1984, 291). Shahri's report of mason's traditions of previous century shows this sense of sacredness for kitchen and the place of hearth in it. It was placed so that housewife would not have her back to holy Mecca during cooking (Shahri, 1992a, 1-200).

If we consider such respectfulness for food and its preparation place, the undesirability of an action such tooth brushing in kitchen (that was very obvious in answers) can be related to unpleasantness of what is released from body (spit is a sign of

insult) comparing with sacredness or respectfulness of what is absorbed in body (note that it has no major real difference with dishwashing from the point of dirtiness). Among 4 categories of kitchen works – preparation, cooking, eating and cleaning- the first and recent which include more polluted works have been done in places other than kitchen in traditional Iranian home (as we saw in opening discussions of current text). In present study it was shown a concentration of works in kitchens due to modern layout of all houses. But even in such conditions, people tried to separate ‘dirty’ works from main stream of kitchen life: debris is stored in patios adjacent to it or at least in cabinets so that it would not be visible. Selecting cabinets located under sink basin is in coordination with its feeling of dirtiness.

Another question in this respect was about cloth-washing in kitchen which is a very recent phenomenon in Iranian kitchen. When we consider religious emphasize on pollution of some human disposals, it would be a cultural challenge to keep clothes with such a mental as well as physical pollution in place of making respectful food. In responses, there was no sign of doing this job in place of food making for mothers of previous generation; that was true even for mother of a 29 years old respondent (C5) who exceptionally had washing machine past times. Among respondents themselves 9 cases installed their washing machine out of kitchen (for example in the bath). In 6 other cases that have it in kitchen, no one kept polluted clothes (those of religious pollution) in kitchen space and used bathes, balconies, patios, etc. for this purpose. There was seen more flexibility about not religiously polluted clothes that in 3 cases they stored these dirty clothes in kitchen environment.

A clearer sign of sacredness in perception of kitchen for Iranian housewives has been old custom to separate food disposals from other debris especially in terms of using independent

swage system (even specified swage well) for dishwashing which might consist of some remainders of food (specially bread and rice). It has been recommended in old Islamic texts, among which is Sheikh Sadoogh’s authentic book of 10th century A.D that has referred to this subject (1988, V.1, verse 416). It was asked in the questionnaire to make comparative statements about certain topics and this separation of swages was one of them. Only in two cases, it was seen unimportant. If we add to this the fact that 13 of 15 emphasized on necessity of not turning back to Holy Direction of Mecca (Qiblah- although it is not regarded in new house designs), it can be concluded that even now kitchen has some strong aspects of sacredness in imagination of these Muslim housewives.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of current text, kitchen meaning was interpreted via a fourfold of two directions: from personal space of special privacy (for females) to a living family space and from a utility space to a place of genuine life. Here it can be turned into a three directional model (Fig.4) by addition of a direction of sacred and profane that has clear implications in Iranian Muslim women (as well as men) life style:

This study showed some ambiguity in cognitive image of kitchen due to first presented model. It is also true about interpretations which see past concept of Iranian kitchen (Matbakh) as a mere functional of limited activities. As a result it can be said that now ideal picture of a kitchen in this cultural context is a female personal space (when family members are taken into account) and at the same time it is a temporary private family space but not of collective living quality. So in terms of three noted directions, kitchen for all members of the family but housewife is mainly a functional as well as respected space that should be adapted with requirements of a personal space

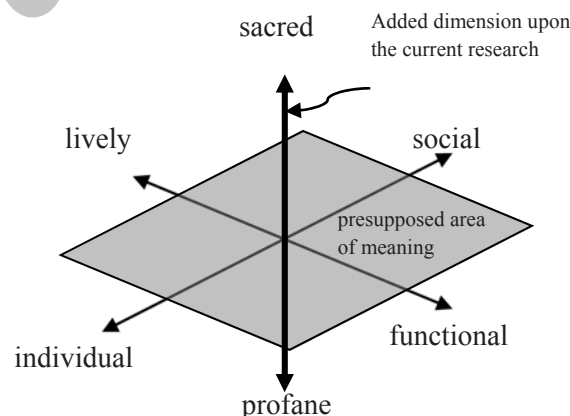


Fig.4: modified conceptual model for exploring meaning of kitchen.

of a woman and in studied context there is no necessity for place identity except that belongs to housewife. So it prevents kitchen from being used as sitting or even dining room. Only in exceptional situations that family meals is reduced from a family custom to an obligatory everyday duty (so become a mere functional act) this pattern is neglected. In addition the current concept of a cleanable area that should accommodate all washing activities (washing clothes or tooth brushing as well as dish washing) does not match with its sense of sacredness stemming from Islamic tradition of Iranian family. This although contradicts with expectations of these housewives for having a lively atmosphere of non-unpleasant works and a personal space. Contemporary image of kitchen for studied Islamic context is neither a 'front' region for family nor a mere 'backstage'. It is not 'front' because privacy of housewife should be maintained and it should serve as a preparing area for family custom and at the same time it is not a 'backstage' since here is a personalized place with its etiquettes and it has surrounded with an aureole of divine aspect of human bodily functions. So there can be some matters to be revised in kitchen design for Islamic-Iranian context: functional concentration of activities especially dirty ones in kitchen, locating kitchen at end corners of plan where there is no outside view or direct sunlight, concept of open kitchen, cloth-washing in kitchen, deleting backyards or balconies from kitchen and even house layout; these are common features of modern Iranian house that are in contradiction with current cultural meaning of kitchen.

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