

Cultural Identity through Culinary Practices¹

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Abstract

An important component of cultural identity is represented by the food system observed through the culinary practices specific to a community. We approach the food system as a complex code that participates in the identity definition of a group from both ethnic and cultural perspectives. This paper aims to present food by means of an objective and independent definition which takes into consideration the actions and social aspects of human activity.

Keywords: *cultural identity, food system, culinary practices, ethnicity*

1. Food and cultural identity

A presentation of the kick-off of food practices is made in which food is considered as an "object" of knowledge (in Calvo 1983). This approach includes all that constitutes it in terms of matter, and also in terms of thought about human activity in order to provide an image of the food system (Marinescu 2016).

Each one of us constructs his own knowledge according to his own perception of a scientific practice phenomenon, according to the explicit or implicit axiological principles of theory.

The relation between the scientific representation of food and the food itself will lead to the consideration of food as a representation of intellectual reality. This reality, as it has been shown in research,

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takes many forms according to the scientifically observed particularities, such as nature, society and humankind. Consequently, the food reality study reveals a complex nature which incorporates a multidimensional structure, biological, anthropological and social directions. The food appears as a result of the interaction of several distinct forces, within a certain space at a certain time. The food consumption implies taking actions of variable intensity and frequency and following a succession in time as well as a social hierarchy. The food fact includes a set of heterogeneous elements, both objective and subjective, within a real context according to the logical principles. The food fact is dynamic, as nutrition is becoming a dynamic system, which aims to a state of stability and flexibility transcending to a new state.

The food fact leads to a result obtained from the logic and attitudes, behaviors and actions taken within economic, social and cultural constraints.

Bringing on stage cultural values, food becomes a central identity marker, defining personality, social class, lifestyles, gender roles and relationships, from family, to community, to ethnic groups or nationality, changing through time and place. (Boutaud et al. 2016: 1)

2. Food practices

Defining the “food practices” concept proved to be difficult (Calvo 1983). It aims to draw up a set of relations in order to reflect a complete, general reality. Sometimes, one of the components of this set of relations which define the food act finds its meaning which must be deduced according to the research area and may cover several areas and phenomena, such as biological, psychological or social.

This notion may slip to a confused state because it is dependent on the close past, where social sciences favored the study of food acts mainly referring to other concepts such as habits, behaviors and needs. Perhaps, future developments in sociology

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would ease the process of defining the concept of food act, by bringing their contributions based on social practices related to food.

The concept of “practices” is used mainly in three general contexts depending on how the subject-observer locates and considers food. At the level of the current language and the use of the word “practice”, its general meaning, the action and all the notions that are related to it or is the product, refer to acting and its result. It describes the concrete way or the level of experience acquired in the way of exercising a food activity known as the culinary practice. In the specific field of nutrition, the notion of “practice” design presents a human activity related to food and implies all actions such as preparing the food, consuming the food. It may also include a set of social actions covered by the food activity of people, with reference to the activities of everyday life.

These definitions have in their essence a common character: food practices are of a social nature, all human activity being subsumed to the social activity.

Most classifications of the food activity by the classical disciplines such as economics, sociology, geography or ethnology insert the food practice in its social context. This approach is opposite to the bio-mechanistic currents which privilege the isolated individual and its solitary actions.

In the present, we have the chances to improve the intelligibility of the food phenomena because of the interest to other manifestations related to social activities that may include the food acts.

But if gastronomy is, above all, a speech act, food represents firstly a culture act. This means that the way we understand and we relate to food, food practices, is always related to our identity, in the deepest manner. The danger that comes along with this approach is to understand these fundamental dimensions – identity, food, culture – on their ontological or essentialist dimension, shifting from identity to the

identification with the good, the best, the ideal in culinary or in gastronomy. (Boutaud et al. 2016: 1)

Doris Hayn (2009) pointed out that food practices should place themselves between simplification and (re-) valorization. In no area has the transformation of everyday life been the subject of such debate and controversy regarding food. Recent developments illustrate the amount of changes in food daily habits.

Simplification on a daily basis presumes that the signification of food is reduced and furthermore its cultural and social functions are reduced as well. This area of life is restricted to food consumption and it encompasses a simplified approach. Food and catering must be affordable, cooking must be an easy process, quick and without too much effort. Meals tend to lose their character of invitation to conviviality and communication because of their structuring character and because of the rhythm of our everyday life.

Two interpretations of this simplification are possible. On one side, it is understood as “dé-domiciliation” and “dé-rythmisation” of the daily food. Food becomes less complex and it is interpreted as poor of nutritional skills, leading to a degradation of culinary culture. This is called “situational individual eating”, in which the people eat based on circumstances. On the other side, we understand this simplification as a new way of progress. It replaces the feeling of painful and hard work allowing women to reduce their sense of obligation and guilt (Kaufmann 2006, *apud* Hayn 2009).

At the same time, food becomes the means for having certain desires and emotions. It also becomes the basis for health and vitality. It ensures pleasure and joy, making the chef proud in front of his friends and family. An evolution of meaning is being observed, due to the fact that food remains an emotional part of our life. Meals served at the celebrations in a community allow experiencing social relationships and a sense of cohesion and inclusion.

The kitchen becomes a place for exercising creative hobbies and it allows us to enjoy with the friends and to relax the daily life. This attitude replaces the outdated norms and rules, allowing new

freedoms, exposing the creative acts of individuals and transforming their eating habits by creating new meanings and identities.

3. Food practices in Bacău County

The eCultfood project (*Digitizing food cultural heritage. Bacău Region*) had the purpose of identifying and presenting the food practices within the Bacău County (Savin 2018). Thirty-four rural areas have been included in a survey between November 2016 and October 2017. The main method of research was the inquiry, the semi- directive interview and the ethnographic experiment.

The ethnographic experiment presumed that the subjects have been challenged to prepare the traditional recipes within a live performance which they eventually commented on. Other aspects related to local food habits have also been described and analysed.

A multimedia database and a website have been created: <http://ecultfood.ub.ro>. Two major categories of content were collected: a catalogue of recipes and a collection of free discourses about food habits and the subsequent behaviors. The two types of discourse proved to have particularities of use according to each communication situation (Macovei & Savin 2017).

In the communication situation created by the food heritage of the local community, the field research of objective data and subjective data (have been collected) has been carried out. Objective data are related to the establishment of personal communication in the host family. The action most often takes place in the kitchen, considering the whole arsenal of gestures related to the preparation of food. The proper record of this communication situation is the familiar register.

Thus, the oral character of communication is reflected both in the macro-textual level (the overall organization of the dialogue related to recipes, codes and food behaviors) and in the microtextual level (selection of the expression formulas of the message). The coexistence of interlocutors in the host family environment determines the use of a language of the moment, marked by the context of communication (frequent personal deictic and spatial-temporal, affective language, contextual meanings of words, ellipses). The

necessity of maintaining the communication link naturally requires the use of a whole strategy of adapting and stimulating the interest towards the proposed subject. It should also be noted that the communication situation takes place in front of the camera, whose presence is well known by all the members of the dialogue group.

Subjective data are related to the personal facilities of the interlocutors, referring, first of all, to their linguistic competence, in this case idiomatic competence (knowledge of a language) and to (expressive) one, representing the speaker's ability to grasp the intention of communication. This "communication contract" involves the compatibility of the speech of the participants in the dialogue, namely, the researchers, the host of recipes, willing to share and show, the contact person who mediated the organization of the research.

We would point out the fact that local food practices follow the trends of simplification and (re-) valorization as Hayn described. However, food preserves its fundamental characteristics, though in a simplified way with modern appliances, as a mark of cultural identity (Ferréol & Jucquois 2005).

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