

The Romanian Traditional Oven: Cultural Practices and Significations¹

Ioana Boghian

Petronela Savin

**“Vasile Alecsandri” University of Bacau
Romania**

Abstract

Our paper aims to respond to the cultural need of asserting cultural identity by rediscovering Romanian food-related practices and meanings in association with a traditional cooking facility: the oven. More specifically, it is an attempt to present the Romanian traditional oven as a cultural object in relation to practices of cooking food, tools used in food preparation, and the time of the day/month/year when a certain dish is made, to reveal deep meanings that are part of the traditions and identity of the Romanian people.

Our broader aim is to promote aspects of Romanian cultural life from the visible and invisible Romanian cultural heritage at an international level. The premise is that, in the area of cultural food heritage, more than in any other domain, each community has layers of popular knowledge accumulated historically, as a result of the interaction with the environment and the living conditions and many of these are supported by a solid scientific basis. Due to the cultural transmission from one generation to another, traditional knowledge is influenced by the historical continuity of using resources. Rediscovering them does not contrast with the idea of progress but, on the contrary, includes it. The research methodology combines methods of cultural and ethnographic studies: scientific documentation based on reference literature and field survey.

Keywords: *cultural practice; cultural object; oven; function; signification.*

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1. Introduction

In this paper, we shall approach the traditional Romanian oven as a cultural object, a product of the age, and its values, functions, and significations as a sign of Romanian national identity.

Cultural objects are created through gestuality programs (Greimas 1975: 99); in other words, cultural objects are the effect of the purpose of man's actions. Thus, kitchen tools and installations are the results of man's practices of preparing, cooking, and eating food. According to Greimas (1975: 100), cultural objects may function either as the subject's adjuvant (instrument) or as the subject's substitute (e.g. a seal), which enables us to establish the cultural dimensions of society, defined through as many isotopies of certain practical or mythical (food, clothing, etc.) skills (*savoir-faire*). The original version of the actor-network theory – inspired by a post-structuralist version of semiotics – proposes that objects are “an effect of stable arrays or networks of relations” and that “objects hold together so long as those relations also hold together and do not change their shape” (Law 2002: 91).

Drinking and eating are social activities that define the nature of an occasion, hence, food and drinks play certain roles in celebratory and transitional rituals:

(...) ritualistic lifestyle transitions are marked by ceremonial (either celebratory or commemorative) meals and range from major life-cycle transitions (e.g. birth, coming-of-age, marriage, and death) to life-changing events (graduation, job promotion, house-warming, retirement) [...] they are rites of passage in which each stage bears deep significance and marks the transition from one stage of life to another. (Morărașu & Drugă 2015: 107-8)

Implicitly, the tools and facilities related to eating and drinking acquire cultural ritualistic values and meanings.

Throughout history, the objects used in rituals and sacred ceremonies have had both utilitarian and symbolic meanings. The objects used in ritualistic ceremonies may be objects designed and created particularly for the purpose (e.g. statues of deities, painted images) or ordinary objects, tools, and facilities that man uses to perform everyday ordinary tasks related to his living. Objects and facilities used in households, regularly for practical tasks, may change their function on special days to serve sacred purposes, namely:

- to establish and maintain communication between the sacred/ transcendent/ supernatural realm and the profane (the realm of time, space, and cause and effect);
- to urge the divine to act or respond in a certain way, usually in the form of help, power, protection, or forgiveness for the participants of the ceremonies or persons concerned².

The relevant features of an object used in ritualistic ceremonies are its shape (e.g. an oven with a wide mouth), size, the material from which it is made (wood, brick, stone, precious or ordinary metals; e.g. gold is associated with prosperity, clay is associated with divinity), the technique of fabricating and the decorations on it (motifs, colours).

According to Unwin (2003: 14), the fireplace represents the core, the most central part of a house; he considers that the idea of place identification lies at the generative core of architecture; the process of identification of a place is illustrated as follows: let us forget, for the moment, about the word 'building', and imagine a prehistoric family advancing through a landscape unaffected by any human activity; as night approaches, they stop and light a fire and by doing so, whether they intend to stay there only for one night or for a longer period, they have established a *place*, with the fireplace at the centre of their lives. But as they accomplish their daily activities, they make more places "subsidiary to the fire": a place to sleep, a place to store fuel or food; after that, they may surround all these with a fence or cover their

² <https://www.britannica.com/topic/ceremonial-object> , Accessed August 20, 2020.

sleeping place with a canopy of leaves. Thus, starting with their choice of the site onwards, they “have begun the evolution of a house, they have begun to organize the world around them into places which they use for a variety of purposes. They have begun to do architecture.” Therefore, the fireplace is one of the basic ‘places’ of a house, together with the place where one stores fuel for the fire, the place where one stores food, and the place where one sleeps.

In the following section of our paper, we shall present the Romanian traditional oven in relation to cultural practices and significations associated with it.

2. The Romanian traditional oven: cultural practices and significations

2.1. Symbolic and cultural functions of ovens

The earliest ovens found in Central Europe and dated 29,000 BC were roasting and boiling pits with hot coals and ashes; these pits gradually evolved into hearths and, later ovens (around 3200 BC).³ During the Middle Ages, in Europe, there were used fireplaces and large cauldrons; after that, ovens have undergone various transformations over time, in terms of size, shape, and the material used as fuel: wood, coal, gas or electricity.

The oven symbolizes a privileged place: it keeps the cold away and, most importantly, warms and dries the traveler. Families draw together near it for the grown-ups to chat and for the little ones to play. Being invited to draw closer to the oven/ fireplace equals an invitation to share the warmth and comfort of the house.

The hearth as the component of the oven holding the fire has been, from ancient times, the embodiment of the soul of the house, a sacred space placed under the protection of female divinities and ancestors (Evseev 2007: 429-430); for the Greeks, the soul of the hearth was Hestia, the patron of vestals and all women, because women were

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oven> , accessed September 9, 2017.

the ones who kept the fire burning. The hearth's signification is related to that of the fire and of preparing food; therefore, it is a vital centre and a true sanctuary where gods were worshipped and homage was paid to ancestors. Not only were hearths present in every house, but also in every settlement, village, or town: here, religious life was performed, and judgments, as well as social gatherings, were held. In all traditional cultures, the home of the ancestors is linked to the hearth: this is why the hearth plays an important role in birth, wedding or burial rituals. When entering the groom's house, the bride had to make friends with the ancestors' souls; for this, she would touch the oven with her hand, or put her arms around the oven as if to embrace it, or throw a loaf of bread spread with honey into the fire from the oven (Marian 1995 I: 643).

The hearth and the chimney represented a communication channel between men and supernatural forces: for this reason, it was by the fireside that spells were cast, fairy tales, legends and riddles were told.

According to Unwin (2006), the fireplace stands at the centre of our lives, the focus (from Latin *focus* 'hearth': in architecture: any element upon which concentration is brought to bear) of our homes (Unwin 2006: 14) and a place to cook; the hearth as the place of the fire is an ancient primitive type of place (*Idem*, 53); as a primitive type of place, it has to do with the fundamental aspects of life, such as keeping warm and dry, moving from location to location, cooking, sitting and eating, socializing and story-telling. It is not necessarily specific in the architectural form to which it refers: "the concept of place links architecture to life; the places which people use are in intimate relation to their lives" and "both language and architecture exist through use".

The essential component of the hearth is fire: in its most rudimentary way, a fire identifies its own place, creating a sphere of light and heat, a column of smoke and sparks, and by this creating a place where people can occupy its sphere of light and warmth (*Idem*, 54): the first function of the walls of a house is that of containing the fire's sphere of light and warmth. In houses with central heating, the hearth is less important as a source of warmth but it may retain its role

as the focus of a place, for sitting and reading, knitting or talking, or going to sleep (*Idem*, 60).

2.2. Cultural practices and significations associated with the Romanian oven

In the 20th century rural Romania, food was most often cooked inside the house only in cold weather, in autumn, spring and winter. Almost all villagers had an oven (Rom. *cuptor*) with a fireplace/ hearth (Rom. *vatră*) and a chimney (Rom. *horn*) in the room where they spent most of their time.⁴ The oven was made of brick and the hearth of brick or stone. The chimney was made of brick or stones, or twigs glued together with thick clay. The chimney was built on shelves, namely wooden laths sitting on wooden stilts, with a mantelpiece made of protuberant bricks in the middle of its height. Near either the floor or the ceiling, there was a tile, or louver, for the smoke to come out, which was covered, in winter, with a bunch of rags wrapped around a stick. At the back of the oven and on top of the hearth, near the wall, there was a nook (Rom. *cotruță*) where small children got warm or where the cat could sleep in winter. The fireplace was used both to cook food and heat the house. Green wood was kept drying on top of the hearth, to make fire the next day (Lupescu 2000: 25). In most households, there was also a stove (Rom. *sobă*) next to the oven, to heat the house in winter (Boghian 2016: 22). Today's oven is most often situated outside the house, in a more or less sheltered place, being a very simplified version of the multi-functional traditional oven, used mainly to bake bread and pies.

The facilities involved in the various stages of performing the food act occupy a special place in the Romanian popular imaginary represented on the linguistic level. The oven, a construction made from

⁴<https://www.google.ro/search?q=cuptor+traditional+romanesc&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjP9r3HnrjWAhUCDJoKHephB5UQsAQIJA&biw=1370&bih=639#imgsrc=NdDPb6I4zccqUTM>, Accessed September 22nd, 2017.

bricks, stone or metal in which various dishes are cooked, has followed the hearth in the historical evolution, relevant in this regard being the etymology of the two Romanian terms, *vatră* (hearth) belonging to the Geto-Dacian vocabulary, whereas the term *cuptor* (oven) has been inherited from Latin (*coctorium*).

Like the hearth, the oven represents the central structure of the family space; that is why it enters the set of customs related to establishing and maintaining a family. The fact that, most of the times, the oven has taken a part of the hearth's values is obvious at the level of the structures: *a-i cădea / a-i pica pe cuptor* (to fall on somebody's oven) which is said about a girl who had sex with a boy and, on these grounds, forces him into marrying her; *a aduce părinților noră pe cuptor* (to bring one's parents a daughter-in-law on the oven), with the meaning of 'to get married'. Thus, the oven, like the hearth, turns into a space of marriage regulations (Savin 2012: 118).

The oven also represents the private space for resting, close to the fire. In this context, it serves as an image of the lack of action in circumstances illustrated by expressions such as: *a trăi pe cuptor* (to live on the oven) – to be lazy; *a sta / a zăcea pe cuptor* (to stay / lie on the oven), or *a se muta de pe vatră pe cuptor* (to move from the hearth to the oven) – to idle one's time away (Savin 2012: 118).

In the county of Suceava, in order for people to live in a new home and have luck in all their doings, when the oven is built, a pot with a stone cover is placed at its base, and inside the pot a live fowl; upon returning from baptism, with the baby in their arms, the godfather and godmother lightly strike the baby's head three times against the oven, so that the child may be good, like the oven itself; however, others believe that this is not good, because the baby may grow into a retired man, since the oven occupies a more lateral position in the household space (Olt County); in Tecuci, it was believed that the woman sleeping at the back of the oven and on top of the hearth would have difficult child labour; nobody should sit on the oven to put their shoes on, or else that person's pigs would die, or their sheep would be eaten by wolves and their chicken by chicken hawks – Suceava; the bride coming to the

groom's house should not look from the first moment into the oven, because her mother-in-law would die – Suceava; for this reason, mothers-in-law would cover the mouth of the oven before the bride arrived in her husband's house – Tecuci (Gorovei 1995: 70).

Before the bride brought from her house enters the bridegroom's house, her mother-in-law quickly places herself with her back to the oven, because it is not good for the young wife to look into the oven – Bukovina (Marian 1995 I: 447). Those who dream of ovens in which pies are being baked are believed to have beneficial days; it is a good sign to dream about an oven in which bread is being baked, as the dreamer will receive visits and succeed in business; a person who dreams about a burned oven squanders money, always wanting to get something that is missing; dreaming about falling in or on an oven means a fight, quarrel, death – Suceava.

On the eve of the Epiphany (January 5), girls who are in love make a little man out of wax, call it by the name of the man they love, and leave it near the oven so that the heart of the loved person may melt like the wax figure – Moldova (Marian 1995, I: 55-56). If a piece of burning coal falls from the oven into the room while fire is being made, it is a sign that a guest with a dark soul and evil intentions would enter the house – Suceava; after the bread has been put into the oven, two pieces of coal from the ones that have been drawn out of the oven should be picked up and placed on the oven, so that the bread may also rise and grow during the baking – Olt Country (Antonescu 2016: 127).

In Moldavia and Bukovina, on New Year's Eve, girls would throw cornflour into the fire from the oven, go outside naked and surround the house twice, then go inside the house and throw hemp seeds into the oven, and then go outside naked and surround the house for the third time and eventually enter the house, and if they hear the hemp seed crackling on the hearth this means that they will marry in the coming year (*Idem*, 135).

The diversity of beliefs and customs related to the oven is incredibly rich: when an oven is built in the house, it is advisable to

place in the walls pieces of broken scythes, so that rats may not multiply, as they run away from scythes, and also for the oven to give off more heat – Olt County (Golopenția 2002: 78); in Sălaj, it is believed that if the cock crows in the starry night, it means that wicked women come from the neighboring villages to steal the cattle's milk; these can be stopped by putting coals taken from the oven in their way (Antonescu 2016: 162). In Sălaj, the woman who leaves home with her infant for the first time, must first place a broom or cross over it, otherwise, the Forest-Daughter may change the child with hers; if the woman forgets about this requirement and the misfortune has happened, she may recover her stolen baby by lighting the fire in the oven, and after the oven has become hot, she places the strange child on a shovel and points it to the fire; thus, she may be sure that her baby would immediately appear, because the Forest-Daughter brings back the child in an unseen manner (*Idem*, 183).

The complex field research, conducted between November 2016 and November 2017 under the Project PN-III-P2-2.1-BG-2016-0390 eCULTFOOD⁵ that aimed to document the food heritage of the region of Bacău, revealed that the facilities involved in the various stages of performing the food act occupy a special place in the popular imaginary. The oven in which various dishes are cooked is the instrument that governs the entire preparation process. Taking care of the oven, knowing the oven, using it carefully to save resources, is the key to successful baking. The oven is the pride of the housewife, and to bake means to submit to the oven. Invited to describe or prepare recipes specific to holidays, people have built up ample accounts about the baking practices related to the oven, some of these characterized by a

⁵ The project UEFISCDI PN-III-P2-2.1-BG-2016-0390 *eCULTFOOD–Digitalization of the cultural food heritage. The region of Bacău* (Coord. Petronela Savin) was implemented between 2016 and 2018 by the “Vasile Alecsandri” University of Bacău, in partnership with the “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași and the Cultural Association “Art-Traditions-Heritage without Borders” from Bacău.

surprising vitality at the community level, and others living only in the memories of the storytellers (Savin et alii 2017: 86-87).



Photo 1. A Romanian 21st-century oven with freshly baked pumpkin and cabbage pies⁶

As revealed in the examples above, the oven and the fire from the oven is involved in Christian, pagan, and lay beliefs and rituals related to food and essential moments, events, and activities in the life of the Romanians: giving birth and raising children, marriage, work, health, relationships with family and community members, seasons etc.

3. Conclusions

Our paper was an attempt to respond to the cultural need of asserting cultural identity by rediscovering Romanian food-related practices and meanings in association with a traditional cooking facility,

⁶ Photo taken by the eCULTFOOD project team from a Romanian countryside household, the village of Mălosu, the county of Bacău, Romania, in 2017.

namely the oven. We have presented the oven as a cultural object as the key element of Romanian traditional practices and beliefs to reveal deep meanings that are part of the traditions and identity of the Romanian people.

Our study led us to a first conclusion: the Romanian practices and beliefs associated with the oven are numerous and diverse, impossible to present exhaustively in one paper. Moreover, some of these practices and beliefs differ slightly from region to region, others are specific to one region only.

Another conclusion refers to the great importance and relevance of the place occupied by the oven in the Romanian house and family: the oven is the centre of a Romanian household universe. Our work on this paper revealed the oven as fulfilling a wide variety of functions, some of which are related to survival, and others to the spiritual dimension of life. The main function of the oven related to survival is that of providing the heat needed to warm the house and cook food. Other functions include:

- an oven is a tool used to forecast weather: soot burning at the mouth of the oven indicates a worsening of the weather conditions;
- the oven is an indicator used to anticipate family relationships: soot burning at the mouth of the oven anticipates quarrel among the family members (Gorovei 1990: 89; 265);
- the oven is a powerful decisive factor regarding the health and number of coming babies: a pregnant woman should not blow into the bread oven because she would give birth to a child with speech disorder – Suceava (Antonescu 2016: 245); a pregnant woman should not blow into the oven and hearth fire at the same time because she would give birth to twins – Olt Country (*Idem*, 262);
- the oven is an adjuvant in a very important life matter, marriage, namely it acts as a matchmaker: on New Year's Eve, girls gather wooden sticks from 9 fences and make a fire in the oven; when there are only embers left, a girl separates the embers into two,

using a knife, and drawing half of the embers into the hearth of the oven; the girls sit around these embers; while one of them casts a spell that invokes fire to find their fated one, the other girls look into a mirror (Bogdan 122-123);

- the oven also functions as protector of the house and family against various types of evil: in Ialomița, crickets are regarded as evil, dirty creatures; if found inside the house, the cricket is wrapped inside a piece of cloth and hidden behind the oven of another house, to relocate it, although it is a pity to do such harm to another person (Gorovei 1995: 105);
- the oven is a protector of the family's health and wealth: after weaning the child, if there is still milk in the woman's breasts, she will milk herself into a piece of cloth which she will either burn or bury in a small pit behind the oven, so that the milk may stay in the house and be available for possible future babies – the Olt region (Golopenția 2002: 105-106; Gorovei 1995: 164);
- the oven is one way to Heaven: in Suceava, after taking the freshly baked bread out of the oven, the housewife throws a piece of wood or a wisp of straw in its place to pave her road to Heaven (Antonescu 2016: 357).

Our third and final conclusion is that the Romanian cultural food heritage is so rich and diverse, and studying it reveals layers of popular knowledge accumulated historically, as a result of the interaction with the environment and the living conditions, many of these supported by a solid scientific basis. Rediscovering them supports in authentically understanding Romanian national identity, while promoting them at a national and, especially, international level allows for comparative studies on the cultural heritage of several countries, with the possibility to highlight differences, similarities, and common aspects.

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Ioana Boghian

affiliation: “Vasile Alecsandri” University of Bacău

position: PhD Lecturer

email: boghian.ioana@ub.ro

research interests: cultural and literary studies, didactics of foreign languages

Selected publications:

(2018): *Houses in Victorian Novels. A Semiotic Approach* (Ioana Boghian), 2nd edition. Iași: LUMEN.

(2018): *Methodological Guide for Language Students and Language Teachers. English, French, Romanian* (Ioana Boghian), Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință.

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Petronela Savin

affiliation: “Vasile Alecsandri” University of Bacău

position: PhD Associate Professor

email: savin.petronela@ub.ro

research interests: cultural studies, phraseology, terminology, didactics

Selected publications:

(2018): *Bucate din bătrâni. Frazeologie și cultură românească* (Petronela Savin), Iași: Institutul European.

(2012a): *Romanian Phraseological Dictionary* (Petronela Savin), Iași: Institutul European.

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