

Authenticity and Cultural Heritage Connections within Food Culture¹

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Abstract

Our paper focuses on the problem of authenticity as a fundamental element in the definition of cultural heritage. From a cultural semiotic point of view, food is considered as a language, as a system of meaning in the processes of cultural communication. On the one hand, including food practices in the category of intangible cultural heritage implies their designation as authentic, as representative of the community. On the other hand, the search for authenticity is an explicit objective of ethno-anthropological research, a qualitative research whose results can be influenced by the perishability of the relational, dialogical nature of the intangible heritage. There is an important economic aim for the tourism area, trying to recover the local specificities and the tradition. Modern culinary discourse (advertising, media, and menus in restaurants) is sometimes subject to a constructivist logic of authenticity. In relation to food practices considered as a system of meaning in the process of cultural communication, this cultural semiotics of the intangible cultural heritage discovers and researches the authentic identity while preserving the relation of otherness.

Keywords: *authenticity, food practices, intangible cultural heritage, identity, alterity*

I. Food and meanings

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Anthropological and ethnological studies show that, beyond its role in the primary needs of humans, food must be interpreted as a signifying system. Simona Stano (2015) pleads for a semiotic approach to food, trying to prove that “culinary codes” are “translated” into different processes of signification. The structuralist thinking considers food as a language in a specific cultural background. In the anthropological meaning, culture is a “realized signifying system” (Williams 1985: 207), generally referring to a way of life and of living, “a specific and organized system of acted and activated practices, meanings and values” (Ibidem: 209). A set of signifying practices are present in signifying activities as food and eating can be considered. According to Roland Barthes, eating is a communicational system:

“Food [...] is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviour. Information about food must be gathered wherever it can be found: by direct observation in the economy, in techniques, usages and advertising; and indirect observation in the mental life of given society”. (Barthes 1995: 21)

As a discrete semiotic system, the units of this system will be “products, techniques, habits”. The analysis will show the process of transformation, the way in which this transformation produces differences at the signification levels. Barthes states that the variety of bread may be considered such a unit in the semiotic system of food. Consequently, the passage (transformation) from *bread* into *pain de mie*, for example, implies significant differences, even though they belong to the same category but to distinct social and cultural contexts. The analysis of these differences generates a dependable *grammar of food* in which the structural units do not define themselves as the products of the economy (the bread as a market good). Nevertheless, other characteristics, for instance, flavours like sweet and bitter as well as the consistency attributes such as *dry* or *creamy* should be considered as generating opposition in meaning. Another class of opposition takes into consideration the national

characteristics as belonging to cultural heritage, underlining the differences between the Romanian traditional cuisine and other national cooking behaviours. An important element which describes the cultural heritage is represented by authenticity, which will be discussed in the following section.

II. Authenticity and cultural heritage

In Jokilehto (2006), the notion of authenticity is explored based on the concepts of universality and relativity, within the cultural heritage perspective. As heritage is defined based on its creative diversity, authenticity becomes a significant element in order to highlight the traditions and beliefs, for present and future generations. As stated by UNESCO Operational Guidelines, the cultural heritage of humanity transcends the national and ethnic boundaries and enables the dialogue between generations and cultures. The intangible cultural heritage includes cultural processes but also their material elements:

The 'intangible cultural heritage' means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, the individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. (Convention for Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2003)

It is noticeable that the intangible cultural heritage highlights the concept of cultural identity, on which the values, beliefs and particularities of ethnic and national characters may be defined by way of interference, connection, dialogue and interactions. Different cultures and values are valued by means of cultural heritage as an expression of knowledge, culture and creativity.

According to Paul Ricoeur (1990), the identity (fr. *soi-même*) is a dynamic process, an interaction between *idem* (the same) and *ipse*

(different). The core *idem* of identity is characterized by permanence, stability, while the *ipse* identity expresses openness to variance, to difference. The two forms of identity function as two poles of a tense binomial.

Simona Stano and Jean-Jacques Boutaud (2015) analysed the culinary identity through the paradigm of narrative identity proposed by Paul Ricoeur in *Soi-même comme un autre*. In the culinary area, idem and ipse as forms of identity are opposed to the alterity, to the *other* (*alter*): other culinary aspects, other food practices, other rules or gastronomic rituals, specific for every culture, with markers of difference: food, dishes, recipes, spatial and temporal markers etc. Each culture defends and promotes, in duality this time, a food model or a gastronomic ideal against all the forms that could threaten it (*duel*). We could also observe hostility or even opposition against uniformity of taste and standardization due to globalization (Fig. 1).

IDEM conformity	ALTER differentiation
IPSE singularity	DUEL opposition

Fig. 1. Food identities (Stano & Boutaud 2015: 104)

According to Stano and Boutaud (2015), in its definition of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, UNESCO refers to the identity system as we presented before. Intangible cultural heritage is diffused from generation to generation (*idem*), recreated by the communities (*ipse*). An important characteristic is the continuity (*constancy*), as a symbol of cultural diversity and creativity (*promote*). In our approach, all these elements are defining the *authenticity* of the cultural heritage. The authenticity is threatened (*duel*) by inconstancy and versatility, which may involve the destruction of the ideals.

While scientists have been trying to come to the definition of the intangible cultural heritage, over the last years the concept has taken into account the masters in addition to the masterpieces. This new approach to the cultural heritage makes a significant difference

compared to the notion of folklore, which implies the recording and documentation of tradition. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004: 53) states that the model of intangible heritage

seeks to sustain a living, if endangered, tradition by supporting the conditions necessary for cultural reproduction. This means according value to the 'carriers' and 'transmitters' of traditions, as well as to their habitus and habitat. Whereas like tangible heritage, intangible heritage is culture, like natural heritage, it is alive. The task, then, is to sustain the whole system as a living entity and not just to collect 'intangible artefacts.

The Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity includes a great variety of cultural practices (cultural spaces, activities, festivals, performing arts, traditions, dance, music) inscribed since 2008 (Fig. 2).

Year	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Elements inscribed	90	87	48	34	32	30	38	28	42
Food practices	-	-	2	1	-	5	1	3	5

Fig. 2. Frequency of the elements inscribed on the Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage

Only 17 entries on the List refer to the food practices. The food-related elements include some dishes, staple food like bread, and beverage such as beer, wine or coffee, entire meals or diets.

In 2016, culinary practices included in the List were:

1. *Beer culture in Belgium* (11.COM)
2. *Flatbread making and sharing culture: Lavash, Katyrma, Jupka, Yufka* - Azerbaijan, Islamic Republic of Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey (11.COM)
3. *Oshi Palav, a traditional meal and its social and cultural contexts in Tajikistan* (11.COM)
4. *Palov culture and tradition* - Uzbekistan (11.COM)
5. *Winegrowers' Festival in Vevey* - Switzerland (11.COM)

In 2015:

1. *Arabic coffee, a symbol of generosity* - United Arab Emirates - Saudi Arabia - Oman - Qatar (10.COM)
2. *Oshituthi shomagongo, marula fruit festival* - Namibia (10.COM)
3. *Tradition of kimchi-making in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea* (10.COM)

2014:

Lavash, the preparation, meaning and appearance of traditional bread as an expression of culture in Armenia (9.COM)

2013

1. *Ancient Georgian traditional Qvevri wine-making method* (8.COM)
2. *Kimjang, making and sharing kimchi in the Republic of Korea* (8.COM)
3. *Mediterranean diet* (8.COM) Cyprus, Croatia, Spain, Greece, Italy, Morocco and Portugal
4. *Turkish coffee culture and tradition* (8.COM) -Turkey
5. *Washoku, traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese, notably for the celebration of New Year* (8.COM) - Japan

2011

Ceremonial Keşkek tradition (6.COM) - Turkey

2010

1. *Gastronomic meal of the French* (5.COM) France
2. *Gingerbread craft from Northern Croatia* (5.COM)

Unesco's list does not include elements of Romanian food culture. We can find on this list the elements of immaterial heritage of the Romanian culture, as follows:

- *Căluș ritual*, inscribed in 2008 (3.COM)
- *Doina*, inscribed in 2009 (4.COM)
- *Craftsmanship of Horezu ceramics*, inscribed in 2012 (7.COM)
- *Men's group Colindat, Christmas-time ritual in Romania and the Republic of Moldova*, inscribed in 2013 (8.COM)
- *Lads' dances in Romania*, inscribed in 2015 (10.COM)

- *Traditional wall-carpet craftsmanship in Romania and the Republic of Moldova*, inscribed in 2016 (11.COM).²

The above mentioned examples show that intangible cultural heritage is mainly described concerning the knowledge and skills thesaurus, rather than in terms of material products that result from the activities themselves. Intangible cultural heritage is therefore characterized as “traditional, contemporary and living at the same time”, inclusive, distributed because knowledge of traditions, skills and customs is passed on to the rest of the community, from generation to generation and belonging to the members of communities.³

III. Looking for the authentic in Romanian food discourse

The contemporary food discourse in Romania follows the food identity coordinates that are analysed in Stano & Boutaud (2015: 102). The food identity process implies history, the maintaining of tradition, in order to recognize both the past and the present (*idem*). As a component of living culture, food identity is updated in terms of gastronomic practices and actions (*ipse*). Intangible cultural heritage aims at preserving the authenticity and the difference between cultures through dialogue and the sharing of knowledge and values. Fragile, intangible cultural heritage is an important factor in maintaining cultural diversity in the face of growing globalization. An understanding of the intangible cultural heritage of different communities assists intercultural dialogue and encourages mutual respect for other ways of life. Although the system of intangible cultural heritage referring to food is dominated by tradition (*idem*), it is open to creativity because of its living attribute.

At the level of food practices, we may observe that particular practices are positioned in traditional style (*idem dominates ipse*), while others are more oriented towards innovation and creativity, interpreting tradition under the influence of other cultural factors (*ipse dominates idem*).

We may state that in the first case authenticity is a reality and in the second case authenticity is created and subjected to simulation.

² <https://ich.unesco.org/en/lists>, accessed on 10 July 2017.

³ <https://ich.unesco.org/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003>, accessed on 20 July 2017.

The first category includes the food practices related to religious ceremonials and rites of passage. The second category could include restaurant dishes and meals, diets, cooking shows and other media culinary products, such as specialized magazines, food blogs, and food advertising.

In Romanian traditional culture, bread is considered sacred, one of the most important elements, which has many ceremonial ritual meanings such as the religious holidays, weddings, baptisms and funerals, in different forms such as Christmas bread (*cozonac*), bread rings (*colaci*). In Christian religion, bread and wine symbolize the body and blood of Jesus Christ (Savin 2012: 186-187).

Among the research projects that study the intangible cultural heritage we mention *eCULTFOOD – Digitizing food cultural heritage. Bacău Region*. The e-CULTFOOD project aims to rediscover food-related cultural knowledge, reflected in common food practices in the Region of Bacău. Within this project, the adopted methodology implies the collection of ethnographical information from the field and the multimedia processing of the ethno-linguistic data, in order to develop an audiovisual web atlas.



Fig. 2. Home-made bread/ Pâine de casă (Răchitiș, Ghimeș)



Fig. 3. Easter meal/ Masa de Paște (Prăjești)



Fig. 4. Baking traditional potato, cabbage and pumpkin pies / Plăcinte tradiționale cu cartofi, varză și dovleac (Mîlosu)



Fig. 5. Traditional noodles / Tăiței tradiționali (Pustiana)



Fig. 6. Traditional corn pie / Mălai (Gioseni)

Fig. 7. Traditional flatbread / Turtă pe plită / Lipia di la Gioseni (Gioseni)⁴

The aim of the project is to support the preservation and protection of intangible cultural heritage in Bacău Region. Another scope consists in the dissemination of knowledge via multimedia and web applications, which contribute to the education of the new generations about tradition.

Building the authentic seems to be the strategy of many Romanian restaurants. Innovation and creativity are used in the creation of the menu, in the naming of the dishes, in the organization of the culinary scene. In their article "The Cocktail of 'Integrated' Menus" (Drugă & Savin 2009), the authors analyse the linguistic

⁴ The pictures were taken within the e-CULTFOOD project and were retrieved from the project page on facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/ecultfood>, accessed on 15 July 2017.

strategies to authenticate the menu of some restaurants. The food discourse expresses the opposition between tradition and local identity, on the one hand, and the modern life, promoted by media and the pop culture, on the other hand. The analysis reflects that both components of the menus, the traditional and the cosmopolite one, represent promoting strategies used by the restaurants to capture the attention of people who are interested in traditional food. The use of traditional and cosmopolitan names of dishes denotes phatic communion with the consumers in the context of globalization.

Another restaurant that promotes a return to tradition is “Lacrimi și sfinți”⁵, a fancy restaurant in the main old centre in Bucharest, run by the poet Mircea Dinescu. The restaurant is “an unusual Romanian” one, has “a modern/contemporary kitchen” and it has its own “story” presented on the website:

Recipes as *old* as 100 years are *reinterpreted* and *rearranged*, *lost flavours*, *invented flavours*, all in one place. Mircea Dinescu *rediscovers* and *reinvents* more than food and dishes in the Lacrimi si Sfinti kitchen, he *rediscovers* and *reinvents* a native culinary culture almost lost, or, best case scenario, a culture ignored for over a century. Every product in the menu is prepared with *local, organic ingredients* only: the fish is fresh, the birds are free range raised, the pigs and calves come from individual small farms.⁶

This presentation emphasizes the dichotomy old versus innovation and creativity. Tradition is presented by means of the old recipes, which are given new fragrances. The restaurant unites the modern culinary need to the old, native culinary culture, Romanian food habits/customs from the period preceding communism, the gastronomic sense of living of the bohemian and artistic society.

Tradition also stems from the connotations of local, healthy and organic food. Sustainability has become an important value of the restaurant.

⁵ <http://www.lacrimisifinti.com/en/location.html>, accessed on 20 July 2017.

⁶ My italics.

Our kitchen philosophy is based on sustainability, innovation and tradition. Each ingredient used for our dishes was chosen considering the following principles: local ingredients, seasonal ingredients, raised and cultivated organically.

For Mircea Dinescu tradition is the “rediscovery of native, local suppliers capable of bringing traditional flavours to our dishes”. As for innovation, it “comes from the inspiration of mixing ingredients that may, sometimes, seem incompatible, and from reinterpreting old recipes in a totally new manner, with new techniques”. There is no duel between these two dimensions, no incompatibility, but dialogue and interaction, a fusion.

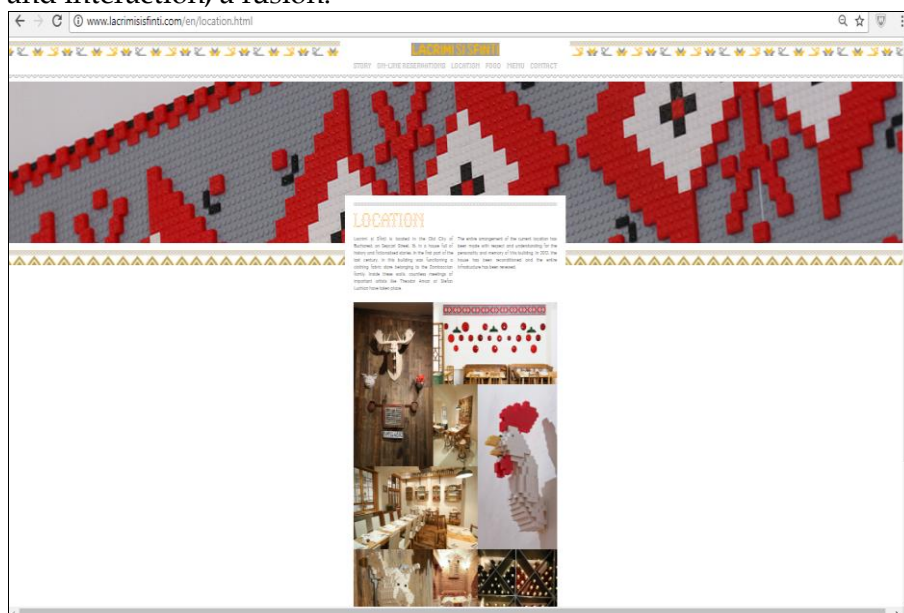


Fig. 8. Lacrimi și sfinți - website

The website is organized, visually, in both directions: tradition and innovation.

The bilingual presentation on the website is also continued in the menu. All dishes included in the menu are Romanian recipes. Each preparation has a metaphorical name, a poetic epithet. Some names are narrative, others refer to the background of the local consumer who has the nostalgia of the past. Avoiding unnecessary neologisms,

older names that have a special flavour are preferred. The entire menu is translated into English. We will give some examples:

- Shepherd's Platter / Platou de transhumanță;
- Pious croquettes / Pârjoale cuvioase;
- The Scholar's Chicarrones / Jumări universitare;
- Byzantyne Moussaka / Musaca fanariotă;
- Republican Ciulama / Ciulama republican;
- "One More" Salad / Salată "mai adu-mi una";
- Playful Trout / Păstrăv zglobiu;
- Sentimental Catfish / Somn sentimental.

In some cases, the English translation does not cover the entire semantic richness of the expression in the Romanian language. For example, the term *fanariot*/ *phanariot* has a special meaning for the Romanians, the word has historical resonances, referring to the Romanian - Turkish relations in the medieval period.

In conclusion, in the case of food heritage items, the condition of authenticity (*idem* identity) is constitutive for describing that element. Immaterial patrimony covers the knowledge passed anonymously from generation to generation in relation to a particular activity, and which is still alive by means of practice within a community.

In second-rate cultural practices, from which we analysed the discourse of restaurants, authenticity is simulated, and tradition is linguistic, social and environmental. Creativity and innovation are characteristic of this type of food discourse, which critically recovers the traditional model and interprets it as a repetition, but in the spirit of affirming the difference.

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