

Romanian Polenta between Brand and Culinary Identity

Luminița Duță
"Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău
Romania

Abstract

In the postmodern globalisation puzzle, a necessary path is represented by the search for national identity and, more and more frequently, among the features that define it, food is a component that is invoked to serve as "the main engine of human development", a significant identity landmark at both individual and national level. Seeing that there is hardly any speech on the subject of identity without some reference to the ethnic culinary component, we will dwell upon polenta as a dish which has been the Romanian's very base of the act of feeding for centuries, one for which we have been, depending on the case, stigmatised or praised, but which must now be seen from a different perspective.

The theoretical framework of our research resides on Anholt's (2007) theory of competitive identity, which suggests that we play "chess with reality against perception", meaning that we must identify those elements which help us present ourselves in front of the others with a forever new and attractive image.

Keywords: *food, brand, culinary identity, national identity*

1. Introduction

Human history has been marked by violent events such as wars and revolutions, as well as scientific and geographic discoveries that have had consequences on social, political or cultural evolution. The 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century are still governed by changes and events largely called *globalisation*. Slogans such as *Different but united* or *All under the same umbrella* emphasize the

particularities of each nation. Nowadays, globalisation is no longer perceived as a threat to cultural identity; on the contrary, it is a phenomenon meant to promote and preserve national particularities. Throughout “the postmodern globalisation mosaic”, the search for national identity is one of the features that define the ethnic identity and food plays an essential role as “the source of human development” and a significant individual, class or national identity symbol (Petrică 2013: 5).

The identity discourses within the Romanian space enhance the ethnic culinary component – “the national dishes” which we like to present to the others. The attempts to display a superior, elegant culinary status obtain the contrary effect. The traditional Romanian cuisine is characterized by simplicity which is a new trend in gastronomy. The transformations after 1989, the desire to bring exotic ingredients and *dish-uri* (dishes) the Romanian cuisine, the need to taste a simple dish which revives past times become more present and part of the gastronomic identity of the country.

When talking about the basic food of the Romanians, we should refer to Romanian gastronomy rather than *nourishment* or *food*, given that *gastronomy*, according to the dictionary definition, is the art of preparing dishes or appreciating their quality, taste and flavour that come with time. Furthermore, the Romanian culinary traditions indicate simplicity and even poverty.

2. Brand, branding and competitive identity

The main purpose of this paper is to bring into focus a traditional dish that has been emblematic for the Romanians from old times to these days. One of the premises is that this main dish, *mămăliga* (which means “polenta”), needs to be reconsidered and seen as part of the competitive identity based on Romanian culinary heritage.

The theoretical support of this paper lies in the theory of competitive identity advanced by Simon Anholt (2007). In a globalised era, as the whole world has become a great market, one needs a new

model to develop the competitive performances of the peoples. Having redefined concepts such as *advertising*, *brand*, *branding*, Anholt considers that the 21st century world has changed the meanings of these words so that it should be used metaphorically to illustrate the way in which the nations, the regions could economically compete with one another.

According to Anholt, we need to make a clear distinction between *brands* and *branding*. A part of brand strategy, positioning these benefits can have an economic character (reduced prices); this is strong positioning for consumers who are very careful with their expenses, a functional character, which refers to product performance, or an emotional nature (Amălăncei 2013: 276). A *brand* is a product or service or organization, considered in combination with its name, its identity and its reputation, while *branding* is the process of designing, planning and communicating the name and the identity, in order to build or manage reputation (Anholt 2007: 4). It is important to distinguish among four different aspects of the brand itself: *brand identity*, *brand image*, *brand purpose* and *brand equity*.

Brand identity is the core concept of the product, clearly and distinctively expressed. For commercial products and services, it is what we see in front of us as consumers: a logo, a slogan, packaging, and the design of the product itself. This aspect of brand has some parallels with the idea of national identity, but the comparison is a tricky one. The techniques of brand communication, such as graphic design, for example, do not have much relevance for countries, since countries are not single products or organizations that can be “branded” in this sense.

Branding is a topic that’s constantly in the media, and as consumers we are in contact with brands every day, so naturally we all have our own idea of what brands and branding are all about. Most of us think that “branding” is roughly synonymous with advertising, graphic design,

promotion, public relations (PR) or even propaganda (Anholt 2007: 3).

The *brand image* is the perception of the brand that exists in the mind of the consumer or audience – it is virtually the same thing as reputation and it may or may not match the brand identity. It includes a range of associations, memories, expectations and other feelings that are bound up with the product, the service, or the company.

These feelings are important drivers of people's behaviour, so brand image is a critical concept when we're talking about nations, cities and regions. [...] The brand image doesn't reside in the company's offices or factories, but in the mind of the consumer: in other words, in a remote location (Anholt 2007: 5).

Ideally speaking, the competitive identity theory might solve the aspect of promoting the country image abroad. Most countries communicate with the rest of the world, and so, deliberately or accidentally, create their reputation through six natural channels (Anholt 2003).

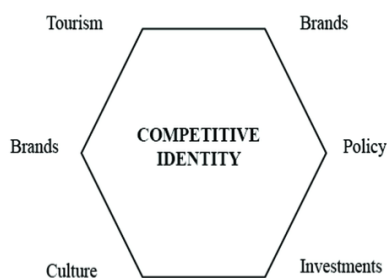


Figure 1. *Components of competitive identity (Anholt, 2003, 2007)*

Their order is not a fixed one and Anholt's concept of *competitive identity* could be seen as a nation's brand, where the components change depending on the situation. For example, the Romanians have solid bases on which to build up the competitive identity, exploiting the traditional dishes as a resourceful niche.

3. The Romanians and their polenta

The dominant geographical factor in the food domain is given by the vegetation conditions of a region, whose distribution depends on two aspects: climate and soil. Romania is situated at a crossroads of climates. One of them can be called the "maize/corn climate", an area that could be located within a somewhat limited habitat: the north of Romania, the north of the Italian Peninsula and the south of the United States of America (Claudian 1939:16).

The Romanians are reputed for a popular dish made of maize/corn acknowledged as an identity marker: *mămăliga* (polenta). The etymology of this word is questionable. Vasile Arvinte (2002: 232) considers *mămăliga* (*polenta*) a specific creation: **mamălaie* where *m* is doubled, like in *mămăligă*, followed by *măligă*. According to dictionary entries, the term *mămăliga* means 1. boiled mash or paste made of corn flour, the basic food of the countryman in most of the regions, replacing bread. 2. a fool person (Capidan, Dacor., VII, 131; cf. Graur, BL, IV, 97), cf. *mamă* and mr. *mamă* „terci pentru copii” (mash for kids), or better said in lat. *mamilla* with the diminutival suffix *-ică* or *-igă*. Terms found in some languages from the Balkan region Ngr. *μαμαλίνα*, Alb. *mamalingë*, Mag. *mamaliga*, Bg. *mamaliga*, Sb., Cr. *mamaljuga* can be explained through Romanian. There has been identified the source for the Romanian *melega* „hrișcă” (buckwheat) cf. *mălai*, *mămăruță*. The derived word *mămăligar* refers to a person who eats polenta, a countryman or a dunce (DER, 5028).

What is the history of this cereal-made culinary product and how did it become such a well-known cultural identifier? The Romanian lands have been known for centuries for their rich cereal crops. The climate helped with the cultivation of millet and maize, the

latter preferred to wheat, due to its easier preparation process (Claudian 1939: 21). The polenta is a coarsely ground corn product, while the cornmeal or grits come with a powdery yet granular structure.

Since old times, the Dacians cultivated millet for polenta, especially on waste lands due to its early ripening and short germination period. The millet was still productive and a basic food 400 years ago. In his masterpiece, *Descriptio Moldaviae*, Cantemir describes the plains in Moldavia and their crops, recalling their growth rate:

During the rich times the wheat was twenty four times more productive, the rye thirty times, the barley sixty times, the millet three hundred times, an unbelievable fact for those who do not see it themselves.¹

It is scientifically proven that, among all the cereals, the millet grows very fast. Planted around the 1st of May, it gets ripe to 15th of June. Therefore, the importance of millet in the ordinary life of the people in Moldavia could be observed in the songs connected to superstitions: “The song I sing is like this: - You, rainmaker! Go up in the sky, open the gates and send the rain for the crops to grow, the wheat, the millet and the rest” (p.59).

Once Europe was invaded by cereals like maize, whose utility was soon found, the popularity of millet declined. The Mediterranean countries cultivated the maize by the end of the 16th century in the north part of Italy, Spain and the south of France. According to Nicolae Iorga, the maize was introduced in Romania by the beginning of the 17th century, especially in Wallachia, during the reign of Șerban Cantacuzino (1678-1688) (Cantacuzino, Mihail, apud. Claudian

¹ https://bibliotecapemobil.ro/content/scoala/pdf/Descrierea_Moldovei_-_Dimitrie_Cantemir.pdf, p. 13.

Romanian Polenta between Brand and Culinary Identity...

1939:96) and, later, in Moldavia, during the reign of Constantin Mavrocordat.

Usually called Spanish or Turkish wheat, the maize was called *cucuruz* in Moldavia, recalled by the foreign travellers as a main course of the countryman: *"The maize is the main cereal cultivated in this country and it is the main nourishment of the country people in the region called Țara Românească"* (Petrică 2013:87).

When the cultivation of the maize expanded, the advantages of it were made clear. People used maize to feed both the whole family and the animals.

Thus, maize is the source for a variety of dishes. When milky, it could be roasted as it is, the shellings are delicious, when roasted it is battered or beaten and by boiling it they prepare a sort of mash or they broil a sort of girdle cake that is eaten as bread. (Petrică 2013: 87).

According to Claudian (1939:18) even if for most peoples of Europe, bread and the meat are present in the ordinary people's diet, for the Romanian countryman, bread was a luxury during troubled times, so he used to eat polenta, even if not prepared from millet or maize. There are even documents which attest that polenta was made of corn cob (Claudian 1939:92). Not knowing the harsh reality motivating the preference for polenta, some foreigners who crossed Moldavia and Wallachia in the Medieval period reached a hasty conclusion regarding the Romanian women, thinking that it was out of laziness that they made polenta instead of bread. Thus, abbot Ignatiu Raicevich one of the first Austrian diplomats in the Principalities wrote:

They prefer the maize flour, as they have to work less to prepare bread, to prepare a mash used as bread or soup for the whole family, instead of kneading or baking the corn bread (Djuvara 2007:258).

For the poor people, polenta could be the only dish for the whole year, served with some onion, cheese or bacon. Some of the countrymen were so poor that they even shared the kitchenware to prepare polenta: „the tin kettle is not owned by each family, there are 5-6 for one” (Djuvara 2007: 240). As for the taste and consistency, Djuvara (2017: 37) notes Earl d'Hauterive first impressions of Wallachia and some references to the polenta. It is also compared to a sort of bread (a sign that this dish was not known, even if it existed in the gastronomy of other places):

This is of two types - the one made in the oven, with no glaze, hard, no grout as the one in Bulgaria, which is baked in the oven; the other one which is boiled: the flour is put in a tin kettle; when boiling it needs to be mixed until water dries out completely. The paste takes the shape of the tin kettle and can be eaten hot, and without being a food-minded like those of the region, I can tell you it is tasty. It has the taste of pastry.

Claudian (1939:115) defines the polenta as “the regressive food” which dominates the Romanian countryman meals, a full and cheap dish, “a compulsory nourishment” which could replace the rest. This is the reason for being considered the main dish of the poor in Romania, whereas the girdle cake, the corn meal (made of corn flour, millet or other cereals, roasted, a dish made of flour and milk (some sugar, DLLRC, s.v.) is part of the cake category.

4. Polenta, between stigma and identity marker

The link between food and identity began to take shape at an academic level towards the end of the past century, when the research in the field of culinary anthropology started to be increasingly frequent, with an essential role being played by mass-media.

The uniqueness and specificity of a product consist in the manner in which the ingredients, processing techniques and instruments are combined, transfigured, passed through the filter of one's own sensibility and culture in order to create something else, something that resonates with the identity background in which it was born (Petrică 2013: 31). Each culture is represented through its food, defining itself from the point of view of its culinary identity. We are born with certain cultural gustatory patterns, acquired ever since the foetal period (Petrică 2013: 11), patterns that we retain all thorough our life, regardless of the changes that might intervene. "Food no longer has a merely biological function, but is transfigured, more than often through an artistic act, capturing *in nuce* the human cultural specificity." (Petrică 2013: 35).

As for the culinary imagology, it has always been connected to the ethnical one. Over time, certain culinary stereotypes fixed themselves in the collective mentality, stereotypes defining ethnicity through association with a certain dish considered typical. We journey through life guided by clichés, stereotypes which form, with or without our will, an informational luggage, one we do not always get the chance to refresh as a result of personal life experiences, causing us to put labels on people and places unconsciously. Henceforth, the Italians are the "pasta-eaters", the Spanish have *paella*, the Belgian have chocolate, the French cheese, but when the socio-cultural relations were cramped, the culinary labels have been used pejoratively and the stereotypes linked to the diet of certain populations gained negative and derogatory connotations which, during periods of conflict, turned into stigmas. The Italians are called "frog-eaters", while the Chinese "dog- or monkey-eaters".

As part of the European xenophobic manifestations, Romanians have been maliciously branded "*mămăligari*" (literal meaning: "polenta-eaters"), despite the fact that there are other nations that eat polenta (prepared according to different recipes: the Italian *polenta* or the Spanish *ollapodrida*), the afore-mentioned name has not been used in association with them, although they have a similar

gastronomical product, which has become more and more common in restaurants all around the world. The Italians are not “*mămăligari*”, but “pasta-eaters”. Hristo Stoichkov, a great Bulgarian football player, following a match between the two countries, which ended in a tie, pushing our national team out of the European competition, taunted the Romanian players saying “Mămălicki, go home!”². The “*mămăligar*” label branded by foreigners bothers Romanians, even though it only alludes to their frequent consumption of polenta and not their faults of character.

This label of “polenta-eaters” is not a new stereotype in the relations of the Romanian people with other nations. Around 1670, a Catholic missionary passing through Romania noted that “the entirety of this nation feeds with corn bread” (Xenopol 1925: 56-57), while the Transylvanian Saxons nicknamed Mihai the Brave “*Mălai-vodă*” (literal translation: “cornmeal prince”), a phrase through which betrays the contempt of the bread-eating Europeans towards a nation whose traditional food was a dish of boiled cornmeal (ibid). A different ruler, a Moldavian one this time, Grigorie Calimachi (1735-1769) is nicknamed *Mămăligă-vodă* (literal meaning “Polenta Prince”), a nickname derived from his simple lifestyle, viewed as inadequate for a man of his social status.

History proves the close connection between the social and economical evolution and the more complex types of food related to social classes. During the events of 1989, on the 20th of December, in Timișoara, a protester, Ioan Chiș climbs upon the Opera balcony and shouts in front of the gathered crowd the words that have already entered the Romanian collective memory “My brothers, the polenta has finally exploded!”, a phrase that will make him famous.

The reactions of mass-media are clear proof of the unanimous acknowledgement of the Romanian people regarding a common emblematic feature, namely that we are a polenta-eating nation. The

² <https://evz.ro/stoicikov-le-a-cerut-scuze-mamaligarilor-838715.html>.

metonymic, tacitly-acknowledged phrase reveals not only a conventional and stylistic identification but a real if unconscious one with what the Romanian commoner eats, in times of food shortage as well as in moments in which he wishes to show others that which defines him in terms of culinary customs. This derives from the fact that the geographical and anthropo-geographical conditions have the power of instilling certain culinary customs in a population, which tend to be preserved even when various factors cause them to cease to exist. The effects of the social and economic transformations manage to blur, and sometimes even eliminate certain characteristics of the traditional food, but the Romanian person's attachment to the polenta is still a subject to discuss. Be it that it reminds him of childhood, family members, times of illness when polenta was being used with curative purposes (hot polenta with milk for throat sores), polenta is just as much an ethnic symbol. For his foreign neighbours, the Romanian has remained a "*mămăligar*" (polenta-eater). The diet of the modern man depends on the social evolution, not on the climate conditions and the geographical factors, but, even so, this predilection of the Romanian people towards polenta becomes a matter of "ethnic taste", it is the minimal unit of the culinary identity of the Romanian peasant, our national *gustem*.

We present ourselves in front of visitors through different channels of communication, and food is one of them. Food is the first element you make contact with when traveling and the Romanian hospitality is oftentimes professed as an important feature of the Romanian people, regardless of the manifestation being the more modern offering of jam and coffee, bread and salt or polenta with onion. The daily polenta of the Romanian folk, more commonly known as "*mămăliguță*", is the piece of resistance in a multitude of restaurant menus and not only traditionally Romanian ones. The extraordinary potential this traditional food can have even gave birth to a polenta festival in the Valea Rece village, Harghita county, Ghimeș area, "*The Csango Polenta with Cheese Festival*", which got to the 13th edition, as well as a second, "*The International Polenta Festival*" of Țara

Oașului, with its first edition in 2012. Just as the title announces, the public eager to taste the traditional food is presented with two elements which have accompanied our culinary culture for centuries: polenta and cheese.

Conclusions

Desire, creativity, imagination and good taste can be the elements which transform food into a code, a language which thus gains a character of specificity for a nation. A dish can become a symbol of national identity, of recovery and assessment of one's creative identity. Seeing how "gastronomical delight" is all but traditional in Romania, we should come to our senses or else, who knows, it might be necessary for the polenta to be taken from under our noses and registered as a brand, for us to give it its rightful place among the elements which form our national brand as representative of Romanian competitive identity.

Bibliography

- Alexe, Dan (2017): *Dacopatia și alte răătăciri românești*, București: Humanitas.
- Amălăncei, Brîndușa-Mariana (2013): *New Trends in Brands Strategies*, in *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 81, 28 June, pp. 275-279.
- Anholt, Simon (2007): *Competitive Identity. The New Brand Management for Nations, Cities and Regions*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Anholt, Simon (2003): *Brand New Justice*, Oxford: Butterworth Heinemann.
- Arvinte, Vasile (2002): *Normele limbii literare în opera lui Ion Creangă*, Iași: Editura Universității „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”.
- Crăiniceanu, Gheorghe (1895): *Igiena țăranului român*, București: Lito-tipografia Carol Gobl.
- Djuvara, Neagu (2007): *Între Orient și Occident. Țările române la începutul epocii moderne*, București: Editura Humanitas.
- Drugă, Luminița; Morărașu, Nadia Nicoleta (2012): „În căutarea gustului pierdut: regăsirea identității naționale prin denumiri de mâncăruri, preparate și meniuri tradiționale” [In search of the “lost” taste: rediscovering national identity through the names of traditional foods, dishes and menus], vol. II, *Proceedings of the Communication*,

Romanian Polenta between Brand and Culinary Identity...

- Context, *Interdisciplinarity Congress*, Târgu-Mureș: Editura Universității "Petre Maior", pp. 141-150.
- Drugă, Luminița (2017): „Creativitate lingvistică și variație stilistică în denumirea unor preparate culinare tradiționale de fruct/dulce sau de post adaptate la spațiul urban moldovenesc”, in *Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on Onomastic "Name and Naming" Sacred and Profane in Onomastics*, edited by Oliviu Felecan, Cluj-Napoca: Editura Maega, Editura Argonaut, pp. 768-781.
- Maior, George (1906): *Politica agrară la români*, București: Institutul de Arte Grafice.
- Montanari, Massimo (2003): *Foamea și abundența. O istorie a alimentației în Europa*, Iași: Polirom.
- Morărașu, Nadia-Nicoleta; Drugă, Luminița (2015): “The Symbolic Functions of Culinary Practices Shaping Romanian Gastronomic Identity”, in *Cultural Perspectives* 20/2015, pp. 98-115.
- Petrică, Virginia (2013): *Identitate culinară românească din perspectiva călătorilor străini*, București: Editura Academiei Române.
- Olins, W. (2004): *Noul ghid de identitate*, București: Editura Comunicare.ro.
- Xenopol, A., D. (1925): *Istoria românilor din Dacia Traiană*, vol. I, ediția a III-a îngrijită de I. Vlădescu, București: Editura Cartea Românească.

Internet sources:

- Mălin Bot, “Ziua Libertății: Omul care a lansat expresia ‘a explodat mămăliga’”,
https://adevarul.ro/locale/timisoara/ziua-libertatii-omul-lansat-expresia-a-explodat-mamaliga-1_50abe5f17c42d5a663820981/index.html
- [https://bibliotecapemobil.ro/content/scoala/pdf/Descrierea Moldovei - Dimitrie Cantemir.pdf](https://bibliotecapemobil.ro/content/scoala/pdf/Descrierea_Moldovei_-_Dimitrie_Cantemir.pdf)
- <http://www.gustarte.ro/gustory/mamaliga-de-la-arta-la-traditie-20-de-lucruri-inedite-despre-unul-dintre-cele-mai-populare-preparate-din-lume-16069610>
- <https://evz.ro/stoicikov-le-a-cerut-scuze-mamaligarilor-838715.html>
- <https://www.google.com/search?q=festivalul+mamaligii+ghimes&oq=festivalul+m%C4%83m%C4%83ligii&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j0l5.8767j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>

Luminița Drugă

affiliation: The Faculty of Letters, “Vasile Alecsandri” University of Bacău, Romania

position: PhD associate professor

email: lumidrugă@yahoo.com

research interests: comparative linguistics, history of Romanian language, onomastics

Selected publications:

- (2017): “Creativitate lingvistică și variație stilistică în denumirea unor preparate culinare tradiționale de fruct/dulce sau de post adaptate la spațiul urban moldovenesc” (Drugă, Luminița), in *Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on Onomastics “Name and Naming” Sacred and Profane in Onomastics*, edited by Oliviu Felecan, Cluj-Napoca: Editura Maega, Editura Argonaut, pp. 768-781.
- (2016): *Considerații lingvistice asupra Povestirilor lui Vasile Voiculescu* (Drugă, Luminița), Cluj-Napoca: Editura Casa Cărții de Știință.
- (2016): *Considerații lingvistice asupra prozei lui Mihail Sadoveanu* (Drugă, Luminița), Cluj-Napoca: Editura Casa Cărții de Știință.
- (2015): “The Symbolic Functions of Culinary Practices Shaping Romanian Gastronomic Identity” (Morărașu, Nadia-Nicoleta, Drugă, Luminița), in *Cultural Perspectives. Journal for Literary and British Cultural Studies in Romania*, 20/2015, pp. 98-115.