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RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY, AND CULINARY IDENTITY MARKERS IN FOREIGN TRAVELLERS' ACCOUNTS ON THE ROMANIAN PRINCIPALITIES

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Abstract: *The relationship between food, religion and spirituality has always displayed various complex and sensitive facets. This paper focuses on the connection between religion, spirituality, and culinary identity mirrored in some foreign travellers' accounts on the Romanian Principalities in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. The voyageurs' impressions reveal several hypostases of food consumption, rules and taboos involved in the main religious holidays (Christmas and Easter), as well as in the rites of passage accompanying weddings and funerals. Drawing on criticism in food studies (especially culinary history and anthropology), and geocritical literary studies, the analysis emphasizes the ways in which certain food items (such as bread, wine, coliva) become Romanian culinary identity markers. The specificity of these landmarks of Romanian taste is given by the overlapping religious and archaic substrates circumscribed to a particular territory.*

Introduction

Due to its vital role for life, food has always been cherished and has become a significant part of the spiritual rites and rituals of all religions. Since the earliest times, the archaic man, in his attempt to understand the organization of the natural and universal order, established certain rules meant to ensure the safety and the abundance of food sources. The variety of ritual prohibitions and interdictions regarding the food consumption usually enter under the large umbrella of the Polynesian word *tabu*, introduced in English as *taboo*, in James Cook's travel accounts.

Thus, when he visited Tonga in 1777, inviting some native chiefs on board to dinner, he was surprised to see that they refused to eat, "saying that they were *taboo avy*." Yet, "after having found that no *avy* (water) had been used in cooking a pig and some yams, they both sat down and made a very hearty meal; and, on being assured that there was no water in the wine, they drank of it also." Cook and his mates conjectured that probably they were forbidden to use water in general for cooking (due to scarce resources) or the foreigners' water in particular (Cook 11). Cook explains that *taboo* "has a very comprehensive meaning; but, in general, signifies that a thing is forbidden" (348). Usually the food taboos have functionalist explanations, taking into account certain economic, climate, geographical circumstances. For example, in Polynesia, according to E. N. Anderson, chiefs could

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establish sacred taboos for a certain period of time in order to prevent overharvesting or overfishing (157).

On the other hand, food taboos often have strong spiritual, symbolic meanings, economically unexplainable, and often involving the theory of metempsychosis or transmigration of soul. Hence, many tribes have food taboos, explained through the blood relations with that animal, which represented an ancestor. Claude Lévi-Strauss noticed that the food taboos based on totemic prohibitions can involve multiple constraints for several generations, sometimes forbidding marriage between the clans corresponding to certain cases to totems. Also, the spiritual connection with an animal or vegetal species is often made during visions, dreams or divinatory techniques, rendering it totemic (36–48). Consequently, the members of the clan are forbidden to eat it, as the ingestion of the totem is considered an act of cannibalism.

Moreover, even some anthropophagic rituals and blood sacrifices were explained through the belief in a spiritual connection with a god, with a mythical ancestor. In this regard, Mircea Eliade considered that “*in illo tempore* a divine being (...) allowed himself to be immolated in order that tubers or fruit trees should grow from his body” (101). For instance, the Maya considered that maize was the flesh of gods and blood sacrifices represented a modality to return the divine power to the gods. For the Incas, human sacrifices were also necessary to repay and content the gods, according to Tom Standage (54–55). All these rituals were believed to ensure the fertility of the soil and the abundance of the harvests.

Various religions also have strict food taboos, prohibiting certain meals or culinary practices: pork consumption is forbidden for example in Islam and Judaism, and abstinence from alcohol is required by Islam and not only. As regards the interdiction to eat pork, the literature offers multiple debates that try to identify its explanation. Thus, there are hygienic, symbolic, cultic, or economic, environmental hypotheses (Simoons 64–65). Similarly, the interpretation of the reasons for cow protection and beef taboo in India – an important feature of Hinduism – raised many debates over the time. The Hindus’ veneration for their cattle is linked to the doctrine of transmigration and almost 330 million gods and goddesses are believed to live in a cow’s body, according to Harris (48–52). However, despite the hygienic, economic or environmental initial grounds that have led to such important taboos in some of the main religions of the world, these avoidances bear now a strong metaphorical and metaphysical imprint, beyond the biological and rational level.

The Romanians have also complied with such taboos. Thus, it was considered a sin to eat ox, horse, and donkey meat (as Saint Mary rode a donkey when she escaped with the Holy Baby to Egypt) (Lupescu 58, 179). Other taboos are preserved only as mere superstitions (for instance breadcrumbs should not be scattered on the ground). A foreign traveller mentions in the nineteenth century a superstition according to which one is not allowed to cut bread over the milk pot, as this can deter the cow from giving milk (von Berg 120–121). The knife menaces thus virtually the cow’s milk productivity.

The periodical taboos regarding the fasting periods are applied in the case of the Orthodox countries for animal products. In the past, many Romanian families used only two different sets of pots: one for the lent meals, and one for the common

food. Where people could not afford this, at the beginning of the season of lent, women boiled the pots, and scrubbed them well with lye and ashes, in order to clean any trace of impure grease or blood (Lupescu 30). They made thus the passage from the profane to the holy time.

Despite the differences between food taboos, between the rules governing the fasting periods, or between specific culinary practices, the importance of the relationship between culinary identity, religion, and spirituality is obvious and displays many facets, usually best revealed by *the other*. This article focuses on the connection between religion, spirituality, and culinary identity mirrored in some foreign travellers' accounts on the Romanian Principalities in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. These accounts regarding the relationship between religion, spirituality and alimentation offer novel facets of the Romanian culinary identity. Its markers belong to a specific production of space (as defined by Lefebvre, and Westphal), configured by a multifocal perspective.

Generally, these accounts belong almost exclusively to Christian travellers, so that there is a scarcity of views of believers of other religions, which could have offered interesting comparative approaches. A notable exception is Evliya Çelebi, an Ottoman seventeenth-century traveller, whose comments as regards our territories focus mainly on the abundance of nature, and not on the rituals. Most of the voyageurs expressing their opinions on the Romanian foodways are Catholic or from other Christian branches. The Orthodox testimonies are rare and, paradoxically, the most important Orthodox traveller comes from a Muslim territory (the Syrian Paul of Aleppo).

Religion, food, and the rites of passage

As food rituals of the most important rites of passage are usually impressive and interesting for foreign travellers, there are many accounts regarding mainly wedding and funeral feasts and customs. Usually the voyagers register many aspects of these events and make comparisons between the local customs and the practices of their nations or of other cultures.

Being one of the most spectacular rites of passage the travellers encounter, the wedding ceremonial is often depicted in detail, whether the spouses are peasants or nobles. Involving a "radical change in ontological and social status," according to Mircea Eliade (184), the wedding celebrates the aggregation of the bride and the groom in the new communities through ritual specific customs. Thus, at the end of the wedding ceremony in church, coins, candies, dried fruits, cereal grains, hazelnuts and walnuts are thrown over the heads of the spouses, so that their life together be blessed with abundance, sweetness and fertility – a practice frequently encountered in many cultures. The walnuts and hazelnuts are particularly noticed by two nineteenth-century travelers (one from France and one from Italy) as a reminiscence of an old tradition of the ancient Romans. The French traveller believes that this custom reminds of Vergilius' *nuces sparge marites* and Persius' *nuces relinquere*, which signify the renunciation to the innocent pleasures of the childhood (Vaillant 425). The Italian Felice Carroni also mentions *Sparge marite nuces... concubine, nuces da* (11), some lines from Vergilius and Catullus, sending to the Roman

tradition according to which at weddings nuts were scattered on the ground, in front of the spouses, as a symbol of fertility and of ending the games of childhood.

The ritual feasts, which seal the aggregation of the spouses to their new communities, have a symbolic duration (three days and three nights), but unfortunately the foreign travellers do not offer many details on the dishes characteristic for a wedding feast. They seem more interested in the beverage consumption at a wedding and they give plenty of details in this regard. Wine is generally offered with generosity to the guests. This beverage has an important Christian symbolism, reminding of the Christ's miracle at the wedding in Cana, when He changed water into wine. The spouses receive the Eucharist during the wedding ceremonial in church: wine and bread send to the Holy Communion and seal the ritual with sacredness.

Funeral rites are also connected with the integration of the sacred in human existence. Taking into account the importance and the seriousness of the funeral rites in order to ensure the proper separation, transition and insertion of the dead into the other world, they are strongly obeyed in all religions. Food always plays an important part in funeral rites all over the world, involving funeral communal meals and/or food offerings for the soul of the dead: the Mexicans celebrate the Day of the Dead in November; the Russians offer a glass of spirits and some bread as alms on the burial day and on the next commemorations (Katz and Weaver 416). The customs of food offering are usually strictly obeyed, otherwise the souls of the dead are believed that can become restless and bring misfortunes upon the family.

Usually, the burial and the funeral meal are organized three days after the death, this period of time representing the transitional or liminal period – according to Arnold Van Gennep's terminology (11) –, but also a modality to avoid the possibility to bury a still living person. The travellers are generally impressed by the fact that, at the funeral meal – organized both by the rich and the poor according to their financial possibilities – strangers are also invited if they pass by. A German traveller (von Berg 117) mentions that the funeral feast is a sacred duty, which should be repeated after six weeks and six to nine months. He admires the fact that, for complying with this ritual, the Romanians do not hesitate to sell their only cow in order to get the necessary money.

On the other hand, the higher the social rank of the deceased, the richer and larger the funeral communal meals are. According to Paul of Aleppo, "If the deceased was very rich, they take all the persons present in the church to his house to table" (71). This segregation rite is thus extended to a great part of the community. Antonmaria del Chiaro, the Italian secretary of Prince Constantin Brâncoveanu, mentions the ritual food offerings repeated at certain time intervals (the third, the ninth, the fortieth, then the third months, the sixth, the ninth and one year after death), when people go to church with a big knot-shaped bread, a wax candle and a large plate with water-boiled wheat (*coliva*) from which everyone eats a spoonful saying "May God forgive his soul!" (del Chiaro 79). The same words are also uttered by the poor who are given a candle, a loaf of white bread, a cup of wine, something to eat with the bread and some money, amplifying thus the significance of the alms.

The Florentine traveller also specifies the Wallachian name of the alms (*pomana*), explaining that this is a Slavic word, which would mean in Italian *commemorazione de' morti* (del Chiaro 79). Like in the case of wedding, travellers notice the similitude between some Romanian and some Roman customs: “The Wallachs, like the ancient Romans, piously revere the *manes*, or shades of the departed. This, as among the Turks, is an abundant source of alms. On the anniversary of the deceased, the family, if able, give money and clothing to the poor, together with unleavened cakes made of meal, sugar, honey, nuts and cheese. Vessels filled with water, and sometimes provisions are placed along the road for the use of the traveller” (Noyes 176–177). In this case, food has also the archaic meaning of pacifying the wandering spirits. Therefore, *pomana* reminds of the food offerings the Romans brought to *manes*, their deities that represented the spirits of the dead in their families.

Food sharing and communion has been a common practice in European funeral rites. Felice Caronni, a nineteenth-century Italian traveller, describes that during the dead watch when people are drinking some wine and brandy they spill the first drops on the corpse, then they sip the rest of the beverages making wishes for the soul salvation. At his head apples, pears or other seasonal fruits, and two bunches of aromatic herbs are placed. After the burial people return for the funeral meal organized by the heirs who, no matter how poor they are, have to offer some fried meat, bread, wine, beer or brandy (29–31). Food is thus shared with the others and with the dead as well, establishing a sacred connection, while wine facilitates the way to ablution and purification.

The tradition of taking food and beverages to cemetery, during certain days, is a common practice in the Eastern European communities. This custom is also common in other countries. For instance, in Ukraine, on the next morning after the funeral breakfast is served at the cemetery, while in Russia, on the second day after Easter sweet bread and painted eggs are brought there (Katz and Weaver 416). Cemetery is a liminal space, so that food sharing here means that the alms are more accessible to the souls of the dead. The specific funeral observances regarding food in Christian Orthodox countries distinguish these rites from the Catholic or Protestant communities in Europe.

Among these specific food markers, *coliva* is mentioned by many travellers. Described as a kind of cake made of wheat boiled in water, with ground walnuts, and covered with powdered sugar of different colours, this is distributed to the poor after having been blessed in church (Recordon 72). It is not prepared only for funerals and for the alms in certain days of commemoration, but it is also taken to church on Sundays or on holidays. *Coliva* is the main and indispensable culinary identity marker in the Romanian funeral rites. It contains ingredients which are symbols of fertility and abundance: wheat, walnut, and honey. Thus, walnut represents a fruit of knowledge; wheat designates resurrection; and honey provides the sweetness of the afterlife.

Culinary practices for various religious holidays

Each religious holiday requires certain dishes and characteristic culinary practices (for instance, the painted eggs in the Orthodox countries for Easter, or

matzo, the unleavened bread for the Jewish Passover). However, before the joyful time of holidays, the Romanians comply with the strict rules of fasting, in order to purify themselves. Fast and feast are recurrent in many religions and it is believed that they go back to ancient times, when food abstention followed the seasonal rhythms of nature, according to Carolyn Walker Bynum (34). The most important fasting intervals mark the transition to the seasons of the year, allowing the bodies to adapt better to the changes of food patterns.

Lent meals are another manner of adapting Christian practices to seasonal transitions. Many travellers are impressed by the Romanian's rigour in observing the long fasting seasons which cover more than half of the year. Two nineteenth-century travellers notice in this regard that "the punctual observance of a vast number of fast-days, during the year, is prescribed with severity" (Wilkinson 152) and that "little animal food is eaten, on account of the fasts which are rigorously observed, although every other law be broken. Meat, eggs, and milk are then forbidden, and their scanty food is prepared with salt and water; great debility is caused thereby, and sometimes even death" (Noyes 166). These restrictive culinary practices are believed to have a negative impact on health and to weaken and endanger the health, especially when people abstain from any other food except for bread and water for several days.

A German traveller, Carl von Berg, even tries to explain that the apparent laziness of the Romanians is in fact caused by the massive lack of meat and animal products, as sources of energy, due to many fasting periods. These represent up to 200 days (comprising Wednesdays and Fridays) when people usually eat mainly beans, maize porridge (*mamaliga*), onion, nettle and other vegetables (112). His conclusion is that too much fasting was not good for health and economy, and he suggests that a better diet would lead to an increase of the Romanians' efficiency. Despite the objective tone of the description, it is clear that the Protestant writer views Romanian Orthodox practices from a biased perspective, which includes a judgmental attitude.

During the fasting periods, people avoid all kind of animal grease, using often flaxseed oil (Caronni 25) and eating vegetables such as cabbage and beans (Vaillant 19). However, the meals of the rich contain more diversified items. Thus, in the seventeenth century, Patriarch Macarius receives as Lent provisions "a barrel of oil, and one of lemon-water, a bag of rice, another of barley, another of lentils, one of batches, one of beans, and one of millet" (Aleppo 64). At the same time, the interdiction to eat meat is somehow relieved by the possibility to eat fish (or other aquatic creatures such as crabs and fish eggs in certain days during the fasting season). In this way, the trade of such food was also influenced. Taking into account the fact that the fasting days were so numerous and so strictly complied, a significant quantity of meat was available for export. This reveals how the relationship between the culinary identity and religion can influence the economic patterns, creating a specific profile of the trade.

Food practices during Easter, Christmas, and Easter Holidays were both similar and different from their western counterparts. After the long and strict fasting seasons, Easter and Christmas are overwhelmed with joy. According to François Recordon, people organize feasts and visit the friends and relatives to make them the

respective wishes: Christ is Risen! (Recordon 66) Commensality is thus important to reiterate the sacred original time of these holidays in all religions. However, Eastern specificity is revealed in the details of the food rituals.

The main Romanian culinary identity markers for Easter are represented by the painted and decorated eggs, the sweet bread (*cozonac*) and the lamb. Antonmaria del Chiaro mentions (in the eighteenth century) that on Easter days women gave as gifts to those who enter their houses to make them the ceremonial wishes two eggs strangely (“*bizzarramente*”) decorated with golden flowers. He specifies that this is an art in which the Romanian ladies excel (51). Easter eggs connote the Christian resurrection and eternal life, but eggs are also an ancient symbol of fertility and of cosmic creation.

The Easter eggs and cake are always taken to church to be blessed. According to Paul of Aleppo, “On this day they brought to the church many trays full of eggs, dyed and painted with various figures and colours; hog’s flesh,¹ bread with butter of the boar,² and sweet herbs, according to their custom; and the Patriarch having said over them the Prayer for Eggs and Cheese, distributed them to the congregation” (76). The sacred relationship with food is also mirrored in the act of praying and blessing the food before starting to eat.

The Easter vigil mass at midnight is followed by the festive dinner (Ghica, 242) with lamb, painted eggs and cake. The traditional dishes for this holiday vary according to the country. Thus, in the Mediterranean countries lamb is preferred, while in the northern European countries ham is largely eaten (Civittello 49). The sweet bread (*cozonac*) is made up of ingredients symbolizing abundance and fertility (wheat flour, milk, honey and eggs), celebrating together with the red eggs nature and Christ resurrection.

While the lamb is the food marker for the Romanian Easter, the pork is specific for Christmas, being sacrificed on St. Ignatius (Aleppo 119). Paul of Aleppo also mentions for the seventeenth century the custom of the royal hunt on Easter and Christmas Eve in Wallachia at Matei Basarab’s court and considers it as having oriental origins (119). The game meat is served for the sovereign’s festive dinner. The motif of the ritual hunt is ancient; it also appears in the Romanian carols and symbolizes sacrifice.

Another occasion for ceremonial feasts is to celebrate the saint who protects the house which reunites friends and relatives. This holiday is celebrated by all means, in order not to upset the house protector (von Berg 117–118). In spring, an American traveller mentions a strange holiday, celebrated by a feast: “In the beginning of May, the proper month for planting, they devote an entire week to unmitigated idleness, making it almost an object of worship, under the supposition that their fruits will thereby be protected from the late frosts” (Noyes 165). The first of May is not connected to religion, but has an ancient spiritual symbolism, being known as the day of wormwood wine, or Arminden (a deity of vegetation) and marking in fact the beginning of spring.

¹ Probably lamb.

² Probably sweet bread (*cozonac*).

Culinary identity markers involved in aggregation rites

An indispensable food for all the important rites of passage and religious holidays, bread takes various forms: knot-shaped bread (*colac*), unleavened bread (*prescură*), white bread or brown bread, sweet bread (*cozonac*). During the fasting periods, bread represents the basic food, together with the maize porridge (*mămăligă*), similar to the Italian *polenta*. Moreover, bread is also a key element of the Eucharist ritual, being used when a child is baptized, when the spouses are getting married and when a person is on his deathbed. Similarly, bread is involved in various superstitions in many Eastern European cultures. For instance, in Georgia bread is believed to protect a child from evil spirits, while in Armenia it is offered for the deceased during a special ceremony (Katz and Weaver 414). In many countries commensality of salt and bread means establishing a sacred connection, an unbreakable friendship.

In this regard, the foreign travellers mention in the Romanian Principalities the use of bread in the ritual of aggregation for the blood brotherhood, which involves oaths made on cross, bread and salt. As Noyes observes, “When the Wallachs engage themselves in an indissoluble friendship *in life and death*, they put a cross in the vessel, or the cup from which they eat or drink, swearing thereby everlasting fidelity. This ceremony is never to be slighted. (...) if robbers release a man by whom they fear being apprehended, they condemn him to silence with an oath by the cross, the salt and the bread, which they call *giurar pe cruce, pe pita, pe sare*” (Noyes 168). These oaths are considered inviolable.

For Greeks and Arabians salt is a symbol of friendship and hospitality but also of the given word and incorruptibility (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 190–191). In the cases described by the foreign travellers, the ritual of swearing on bread and salt is sanctified by the presence of cross, which seals the blood brotherhood.

Another ritual of aggregation which involves food for establishing friendship is the offer of a spoonful of confiture and a glass of fresh water, then a cup of coffee to the guests entering a boyar’s house (Ghica 36–37). According to the archaic beliefs, the strange forces have to be tamed, so that the ritual of food offering, then of commensality, ensure the benevolence of a stranger and his integration into the community.

Thus, this ceremonial of receiving guests has a role of purification: the hands are washed with water and essence of roses, and incense is burnt. All the senses are activated: the tactile sense through ablution, the olfactory through incense and coffee flavor, the visual through the colours of confiture, the auditory through the clink of the glasses and of the spoon, and the gustatory through the contrast between sweet and sour.

Conclusions

The above-mentioned foreign travellers’ accounts reveal multiple facets of the Romanian culinary identity, which interacts on multiple levels with the religious and spiritual elements. Even if various food items or practices can be also met in the religious and/or spiritual rites of other cultures, they become Romanian culinary identity markers when are enriched with the symbolism specific to the place, and

reflect a cultural experience that is defining for the respective values and traditions. Religion, spirituality, and culinary identity appear, thus, to be intrinsically connected, creating food products and practices modified according to particular spatial and temporal circumstances. The travellers' different perspectives, which engage in a dialogue across time, generate a specific production of space and taste and create a multi-layered construct of the Romanian culinary identity. Their observations configure certain landmarks of the Romanian taste, characterized by the overlapping religious and archaic substrates circumscribed to a particular territory.

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