Specifics of Alimentary Culture in the Russian Part of the Caspian Region as an Important Element of Cultural Security (on the Example of the Astrakhan Region)

Vladimir Palatkin[1,*]

[1] Astrakhan State University name after V. N. Tatishcheva, Astrakhan, Russian Federation

[*]*Corresponding author. Email: vladimir_palatkin@rambler.ru*

ABSTRACT.
The article aims to reveal the specifics of the alimentary culture in the Russian part of the Caspian region on the example of the Astrakhan region, that was formed under the influence of various ethnic groups living on its territory. Another objective of the article is to determine the actual state of the alimentary culture in the region. The special attention was paid to the aspects of food production and procurement because traditionally the main part of the food products consumed by the society is produced on the territory where this society lives. Due to this fact some special cultural environment which we defined as "alimentary landscape" was being formed in certain regions. Alimentary landscape of the region made a long way of formation and transformation from a traditional culture to new sociocultural practices under the influence of objective and subjective factors. The objective factors include natural and climatic characteristics of the region, the subjective ones include multiculturalism and polyethnicity of the region. It can be affirmed that many regional food practices have been preserved up to nowadays, being slightly transformed under the influence of various factors.
Keywords: *alimentary culture, alimentary landscape, multiculturalism, transformation, food, consumption, the Caspian region*

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of regional alimentary systems and the design of regional models is not only an important scientific problem, but also a burning strategy and a regional development practice. The correct assessment of alimentary systems gives many facts to understand their state and to forecast the further development of the regional communities. The scientific practice shows that the part of world science which studies processes of food production and consumption is developing exactly in this direction, and it is mainly focused on the studies of regional alimentary systems. The combination of scientific thoughts with the practical activities in the field of food production and consumption brings the most noticeable results in improving the welfare of the members of the society.

Harmonious functioning of the alimentary system is the key to the normal life of the society where all the elements are well-balanced and focused on the society's needs because food is not only a biological need but also an important factor for endo- and exo-identification. Loss of these functions leads to the cultural oblivion and disappearance of the feeling of cultural unity.

Repeated changes of cultural realities that happened in different historical periods of the Russian state, enabled the society to rapidly change the existing alimentary practices and to build-in into new institutional systems. The change of the political and social order in the 90s, the collapse of the existing economic ties lead to the partial deformation of the country's alimentary system formed during the years of the Soviet power and of the regional cultures as well. The study of these transformations and of the ways to form something new appearing at the junction of various traditions becomes the priority task for many researches.

Nowadays the scientists of different areas of knowledge pay special attention to the peculiarities of the

gastronomic traditions and practices of the population. And it is not a surprise, because the need for food is one of the basic needs of not only a human but of any biological species. But only a human has a special culture consisting of food practices and it regulates many aspects of our lives. As a result, there appears an integral system of the production (procurement), processing and consumption of food products. We have defined this system as "an alimentary culture". In our previous study [45] we explained why we did not use the concept "gastronomic culture" since this concept mainly concerns consumption (due to the semantics of the term "gastro").

In this article, we have tried to reveal the specifics of the alimentary culture in the Russian part of the Caspian region on the example of the Astrakhan region that was formed under the influence of different ethnic groups living on its territory. We also wanted to determine the actual state of the alimentary culture of the region. The alimentary culture is an important part of the cultural inheritance which in its turn is an important part of preserving the regional cultural security.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This problem received active scientific development in the end of the 20th - beginning of the 21st centuries. That contributed greatly to understanding the issues of nutrition in different cultures and societies (food habits, home-cooked food and eating out, food presented by mass media, cuisines, diets and food discourses, food policy, etc.). Both European and American researches were acutely aware of the necessity to study the phenomenon of "food/nutrition" in the interdisciplinary aspect and mainly in human and social sciences. But it was really hard to get rid of the pressure of biological, natural and agricultural sciences. It was within agricultural departments that scientists traditionally studied food. But in the second part of the 1980s there appeared a group of enthusiasts who started to study food in the interdisciplinary aspect with some tendency to human and social sciences. This group turned into Association for the Study of Food and Society, ASFS. From 1987, it started to organize annual conferences and from 1996, it started to publish a journal "Food, Culture & Society" which is now one of the main journals studying various aspects of the alimentary culture in the humanity field. From 1992, the conferences of this organization started to be held together with "Agriculture, Food & Human Values" [3]. What is more, development of this field is characterized not only by the constant accumulation of the scientific articles but also by the research centers, networks, scientific conferences and undergraduate, graduate and doctoral programs which appeared all over the world.

In our opinion, there are different reasons for the interest in studying the alimentary culture. First, new challenges of the time caused by globalization of food industries, issues of food security, interest in health problems of a person. Second, there are processes of social and economic modernization of the western societies. According to C. Méndez and C. Benito the rapid changes in food practices of different countries took place because of the changes in the society after the Second World War: "the transition from the society with lack of food to the society with the abundance of food" [15]. Third, many shows, programs, cooking competitions, etc., are based on cooking and eating and that reflects and increases people's interest in this topic [13, 14, 18, 19]. All these reasons make the food studies scientifically important which results in the appearance of new research focuses, development of practical approaches and methodologies.

Nowadays the main scientific discussions are concentrated on the reasons why food should be studied [6], which methods to use for studying food culture [16], and how the studies of food products were developing through history [2, 4, 5, 9]. Moreover, some foreign scientific articles are focused on the actual state of the food studies [10; 17] and on the prospects of future studies [7, 11, 12]. These aspects together with many other aspects are described in the book "Routledge International Handbook of Food Studies" published by Ken Albala in 2013 [1].

The regional aspects of food consumption are traditionally studied by geographers [27, 28, 49]. Lately the food analysis has been attracting attention from the point of view of national security [29, 31, 35, 36, 37]. At the same time, the complex approach to the study of alimentary culture still has not been formed in Russia. The issues of alimentary identity, the importance of the development of regional brands, etc., are also not very well studied.

3. RESULTS

Taking into account the fact that in this abstract we are going to talk about food and its consumption in the regional aspect, the main attention we pay to food production and procurement, because traditionally the main part of food products consumed by the society is produced in the place where it lives. It was on the basis of this aspect that in certain regions some special cultural environment was being formed and it was characterized by certain products, specific ways of cooking, food consumption, etc. In any case, to understand regional alimentary culture it is very

important to understand such an important aspect as food production: gathering, agronomy (gardening, horticulture, etc.), hunting, fishing, and some other activities.

This combination of practices is a complex dynamic system which we call "alimentary landscape". In our opinion, we go by the concept of a cultural landscape introduced by the American geographer and anthropologist C. Sauer, who thought that "a cultural landscape is created by a cultural group from a natural landscape. Culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, the cultural landscape is the result of their interaction. Under the influence of a certain culture, which itself changes in time, the landscape also develops, passes through various phases, and in the end reaches the end of the cycle of its development" [20].

That is why as a first step we have tried to determine the historical stages of the development of the alimentary landscape in the Astrakhan region and to reveal its specifics, which was formed under the influence of different ethnic groups living on its territory. We nominally distinguished two stages of the development of the alimentary landscape of the Astrakhan region: the first one is from 1556 to 1917, the second one is from 1917 to the 1970s.

The alimentary landscape of the Astrakhan region was being formed on the basis of natural and cultural landscapes. Landscape diversity of the region creates good conditions for animals, fish and birds. The region is rich in commercial fishes (part of which (sturgeon) gained a world acclaim), birds and animals. Another peculiarity of the cultural landscape of the region was the fact that it became a place for residence of various ethnical groups. Though the Astrakhan region is populated by more than 150 ethnic groups, the peoples that had the main impact on the alimentary landscape of the region include the Russians, the Tatars, the Nogais, the Kalmyks, the Armenians, the Ukrainians, and others. The Tatars, the Nogais and the Russians should be considered the earliest residents [26].

In the 17th century, the Kalmyks who migrated from Dzungaria joined the peoples already living here [23]. In the 18th century, the migration from other regions and countries increased [47]. In the beginning of the 19th century, the Kazakhs from the Bukey Hord moved here [32]. Besides, the migration of different ethnical groups from the central part of Russia also increased starting from the 1820s, which strengthened the already mixed ethnic situation of the region [25]. Thus, by the middle of the 19th century a certain model of the ethnic coexistence had been formed in the Astrakhan region. The peculiarity of this model was the synthesis of different agricultural types: animal breeding, farming, fishing, gardening, gathering, cattle breeding and hunting, and the landscape characteristics of the region provided the peoples living here with rich and diverse recourses.

One of the main features of the Astrakhan region was huge salt reserves, which simplified the access to this recourse for all social groups. The low cost of the salt made it possible to make large reserves of food recourses: dried fish, pickled food, vegetables and fruits (for example, apples, quinces, watermelons) [40] and dried meat. Fish was a special favorite for the Astrakhan citizens. There was a great variety of fish in the rivers, lakes, and flood basins and that made fishing kind of a trademark of the region. Moreover, some ways of cooking fish, like drying fish or fish pies, have been preserved up to nowadays.

Besides catching and processing fish, in the Astrakhan region there were traditionally gathered some species of wild plants: water nuts, mulberries, blackberries, etc. They were gathered not only for consuming but for selling as well. Besides gathering, hunting for waterfowl like geese, ducks, snipe, coots, etc., became of commercial value. Gardening and horticulture are also significant for the agricultural development of the Astrakhan region. There is some evidence that lets us think that gardening and horticultural sectors were formed in ancient times. In the cultural layers of Saksin (a medieval trade city in the Volga delta) there were found numerous "apricot, peach, cherry, grapes kernels, melon and water-melon seeds" [24] and that may serve as evidence to the development of horticulture, grape and melon growing in the Volga delta in the Saksin period.

Grape growing played an important role in the development of the region. It started in the beginning of 1613 when through the efforts of the monk, Austrian by origin, the first vineyard from the seedlings brought by the Persians from Shemakha was created in Astrakhan [44]. Thus, agricultural and cultural types [51] were presented in a following way: cattle breeding, fishing, horticulture and gardening [39]. We left arable farming aside because bread and flour products had long been included in the Russian and regional diet for.

Another feature of the Astrakhan alimentary landscape was its multicultural character since it was formed at the junction of several civilizations, representing a kind of "cultural hybrid" [8]. The Astrakhan alimentary landscape can be characterized as "something between" which means it is in the middle of different phenomena. Here a Russian cooking tradition is combined with the Turkic, the Kalmyk, the Armenian, the Persian, the Ukrainian, the German, the French ones, etc. Traditionally everyday meals of the Astrakhan

citizens consisted of the fishes of small breeds: Caspian roach (vobla), roach, zope, etc., more rarely of pike-perch, pike, sturgeon, etc., and most part of the caught fish was cooked for a long-term preservation: it was salted, dried, smoked, etc. It was not rare that this regional cultural landscape changed dramatically. As a rule, this happened when the navigation season started and when Astrakhan was flowed with people from the upper villages is search of work as bargemen.

Caviar played a special role in the ration of the Astrakhan citizens. There existed different ways to prepare caviar, especially sturgeon caviar. Everything depended on the time of its consumption and its catching. Depending on the time of catching and method of preparation, caviar was divided into grained, press and roe. Grained caviar, especially lightly-salted one, was for a prompt consumption. Press caviar was salted more in order to be preserved longer. Besides, it was pressed hard and it dried after some time, turning into a solid mass cut by a knife. Caviar of other fishes like carp and pike was also salted. A traveler A. Olearius said that the Russians eat caviar "with pepper and chopped onion; some even add vinegar, and wood oil" [43]. It is difficult to imagine this tradition of eating black caviar with onion but if we speak about pike or carp caviar, everything told by A. Olearius remains relevant up to nowadays. This caviar (carp and pike) was eaten with chopped onion [43] and sunflower oil. It is necessary to note that such way of caviar consumption is still relevant in the Astrakhan region.

Speaking about the Astrakhan alimentary landscape we cannot but mention Astrakhan markets: Bolshie isady, Selenskie isadi and Tatar-bazar. These markets were formed long before the 19th century. All the three markets (not considering several small ones) played an important role in the region's economic and cultural environment. We may even say that they were important far beyond the borders of the region because salespeople from other regions like Povolzhye (mainly from Gorky), North Caucasus, Central Asia, etc., arrived annually (up to 1917) to trade there (especially in Bolshie isady).

The October Revolution 1917 marked the second stage of the development of the alimentary landscape of the Astrakhan region. The beginning of a powerful process of unification of the regions' alimentary landscape was forming a relative unity of gastronomic and food practices. This process was especially rapid starting from the 1930s. Also, the transformation of the alimentary landscape was influenced by the civil war, changes in the social structure of the region, sedentarization (settling of the nomadic population), collectivization, hunger in Povolgye [22] and the Second World War.

Russian researches of the Soviet gastronomic culture I. Sokhan, D. Goncharov defined these processes as features of the totalitarian regime: "Formulating and standardizing the practices related to the satisfaction of the primary and inalienable human need for food, gastronomic culture turns out to be the area where the disciplinary mechanisms of power are most effectively implemented (in relation to all the other gaps in everyday life). They can be manifested in different ways: from the status representation in the declared gastronomic preferences and ways of their implementation, to the actual abuse by means of hunger when the direct, at a vital level, dependence both of an individual and of the society on the feeding government is emphasized [48].

Gradually the specifics of the alimentary environment of the Astrakhan region was losing its peculiarity more and more, dissolving in the national environment. However, in the 70s there was still a resistance of the rationality to the national unification. In many households, the beginning of autumn marked the beginning of the active preparation for winter: salting cabbage and other vegetables, which later was replaced by preservation of vegetables in glass jars, the preparation of homemade canned food from various kinds of vegetables (tomatoes or peppers). Homemade aubergine paste was an alternative to a store-bought one. Even the regional name of eggplant - "demyanki" - connected this vegetable and the regional culture with the south rather than with the rest of the country. Making fruit jams that lasted almost all summer was an important part of products preservation. They were made from strawberries, cherries, raspberries, apricots, peaches, blackberries and other fruit and berries. Apples were used to make fruit butter, though in the past, they were also used to cook fruit leather. Thick fruit butter for sweet pies was made from apricots.

Shortage of products in stores, which started in the 70s, shattered the regional alimentary landscape even more. At the same time, the Soviet government introduced new gastronomic delights like "special" salads for a holiday table. Earlier the main salads included a salad made of tomatoes and cucumbers with sunflower oil in summer, it is usually called "summer salad", and vinegretes in winter (salads with kraut and potatoes, mushrooms and potatoes, cabbage, beet and potatoes, etc.). Now a holiday table began to contain "olivier" (Russian salad), "mimosa" and "dressed herring", but they became most popular in the 1980s-1990s. The transition from vinegret to exotic salads, by standards of that time, marked a new stage in the development of gastronomic practice of the whole country. According to the studies of the Russian

historian A. Kushkova, salad "olivier" was symbolically of higher status than vinegret and was considered a festive salad while vinegret was an everyday dish [38].

4. DISCUSSION

The last three decades of the 20th century were marked by significant changes in the life of the USSR and the Astrakhan region as a part of it. In general, the existing food system of the country started to shatter. An old system of economic arrangement turned out to be not very efficient and lead to significant crisis events in many sectors of the USSR. The Astrakhan region was not an exception. Partially it concerned the products produced not in the region, but those that were transported here. To some extent, this was connected with the quality deterioration of the products for the sake of their production cheapening. Of course, it could not but lead to the decrease of the consumption and quality level. In these circumstances the importance of dachas (summer residence place usually with a garden) because in the opinion of many citizens having dacha could somehow provide the family with some food. The role of relatives living in the villages also rose because they could survive thanks to farming and help their relatives in the city. For some citizens travelling to their relatives in the village to help with harvesting became quite usual.

From the 1990s the fish population of the region began to decline, and the increased demand for fish products gave rise to such an activity as poaching. Most negatively, it affected sturgeon population, which lead to the prohibition of fishing these breeds. All the attempts to revive sturgeon population with the help of fish farms, by breeding juvenile fish and then releasing it into the water bodies of the region, cannot solve the existing problem. That is why we can definitely say that the region has lost its status of being a producer of "black caviar" and valuable sturgeon breeds [46, 50]. Disappearance of such a specialty as black caviar from the diet of the Astrakhan citizens has led to the increase of demand for other caviar types including carp and pike caviar. Due to this fact prices for these products, especially for pike caviar, which demands special processing and long-term preservation, increased.

Possibility to stock fish on their own was attractive to the Astrakhan citizens even earlier, but now this tendency grew even more. This was especially noticeable during the spawning period of some commercial fish, first of all, of the Caspian roach (*rutilus caspicus*), which seasonally occurs near the city. During this time, many Astrakhan citizens go to the banks of the rivers to catch fish. They fry Caspian roaches, cook fish soup, salt and dry fish. Dried Caspian roaches can be preserved for quite a long time and they also can be further boiled. It was the boiled dried Caspian roach that was one of the main dishes for the Astrakhan citizens in difficult times of food shortages.

Thus, the Caspian roach's spawning course in late April and early May turns into an important event for all Astrakhan citizens of all ages and genders. Men, women and children take part in it. No wonder in 1997 the Astrakhan journalist I. Belyakov, who was the press secretary of the governor A. Guzhvin, initiated the festival "Vobla". As time passed this relatively regional event became part of the information field in Russia. In 2019, "according to the experts of the national events calendar EventsInRussia.com, it entered the top of the best event projects in Russia and was awarded with the title of "National Event of the Year" [34].

Other traditional products used for a long-term preservation were local vegetables. Some of them were cooked in a traditional way (for example, salting cabbage) and by an almost industrial preservation method. Many houses of the Astrakhan region both in cities and in villages turned into mini-canning factories. Such vegetables as tomatoes and cucumbers needed to be processed in a special way and further to be preserved in glass jars (1- and 3-liter). Sometimes the amount of the preserved products blows the mind. A small family of 4 could preserve from 30 to 50 three-liter jars of tomatoes and 20-40 jars of cucumbers.

At the same time, it is necessary to say that in the 1990s, a significant transformation of the region's alimentary landscape took place and it even increased in the 2000s. And, strangely enough, it was connected with the agricultural character of the region. Quality of tomatoes, cucumbers, watermelons and other vegetables and fruits significantly deteriorated. Those varieties of tomatoes which were a trademark of the region, started gradually to disappear from the shelves and new varieties of a lower quality started to appear. That happened because agricultural production was mainly focused not on the local market but on transporting vegetables to other Russian regions, very often to the northern regions where there were no claims to the quality of such products. Gradually the Astrakhan citizens switched over to "technical" sorts of vegetables designed for machine harvesting. Besides such sorts of vegetables were highly productive and disease resistant.

In the beginning of the 1990s, the Astrakhan region became the center located in the path of migration flows: from Central Asia in the east, and from the Republics of North Caucasus and even from Transcaucasia (Georgia and Azerbaijan) in the south. People were leaving the regions where armed conflicts took place, and there was not chance to survive in the new conditions. The ethnic Azerbaijani were leaving Georgia, the Armenians and

the Azerbaijani who had considered Astrakhan a nice place to live in since its foundation, were leaving Azerbaijan [33, 41].

From the first days of their existence, the formed diasporas started an active process of acculturation of the new environment. The alimentary aspect played an important role here. This was revealed both on the level of food production, and on the level of distribution (logistics, food shops) and on cuisine (places for eating out with ethnic specifics). Besides the ethnic specifics, a religious (Islamic) factor was also important. It was aimed at food production, which followed certain religious rules (halal). More and more catering enterprises offer food marked as "halal". The demand for such products also increases the possibility of functioning of enterprises belonging to "ethnic economics": "Ethnicity will remain one of the methods of economic rationalization, in some cases acting as a completely self-sufficient strategy of economic behavior, in others - as an element intertwined into the motivational complex of making economic decisions, or as a cultural context influencing the socio-economic practices of business entities and participants in labor relations" [42].

It is important to understand that the hybridity of the alimentary environment of the region is formed not only on the level of the official enterprises. Cultural exchange (including the one within the framework of gastronomic traditions) is fulfilled on the personal level as well: visiting each other, interethnic marriages, etc. [21, 30]. That is why when we speak about polyethnicity of this new environment, we do not mean existence of different ethnic gastronomic traditions, but we mean that the alimentary landscape of the region is a certain blend of several ethnic traditions. It is in fact a single environment, which is formed at the crossroads of several environments. This can be shown in the form of Euler and Venn diagrams where spaces seem to exist independently, but in certain places they intersect, and these areas of intersection are common to all of them.

Of course, this situation did not develop at the last stage of the functioning of the Astrakhan alimentary environment. But since the phenomenon of such a blend exists we need to mention it. Due to the objective reasons including presence of many ethnic groups, this process continues in full, and the regional cuisine is still being enriched by new cooking traditions.

5. CONCLUSION

Thus, in our analysis we have defined that the specific features of the alimentary culture of the region include a natural landscape and a cultural diversity, which has been developing for many centuries. At the beginning of its formation, the alimentary culture in the region was mainly influenced by several objective and subjective factors. The objective factors include natural and climatic characteristics of the region: the richness of various natural recourses of the region because of the existence of different ecological areas (deserts, semi-deserts, delta, etc.). The influential subjective factors were multiculturalism and polyethnicity of the region. In fact, the population of the region represented by fishermen, farmers, and cattlemen, could get additional recourses, either by exchange, or by a temporary transition to a new agricultural activity. Besides, there was an active cultural exchange among different ethnic groups: the Russians, the Tatars, the Nogais, the Kalmyks, the Persians and many other. In the 20th century the food preferences of the citizens of the region were greatly influenced by repeated periods of hunger that significantly transformed the alimentary culture of the Astrakhan region and made it less unique and diverse. Quantity but not quality became important. The Soviet government tried to unify gastronomic practices. Modernization of the country, its industrialization and social policy, aimed to create a new socialist culture, contributed to it. The reorientation of the region towards new types of agricultural products at the beginning of the 21st century introduced new types of products to the population, but practically destroyed existing traditional ones, especially those that could be a regional brand. At the same time, we can state that many regional food practices with slight transformations have been preserved up to nowadays.

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