

# Food as carrier of social identity amongst migrants

## Introduction

A healthy, good working body is provided with healthy food, which consists of micronutrients, like minerals and vitamins, and macronutrients, like carbohydrates, protein and fat. In order to keep the body working micronutrients and macronutrients are needed, the first in a small amount, the latter in a larger amount. These nutrients make provision for the development, replacement and repair of body cells and tissues. Moreover they provide energy to keep the body warm, make it move and enable the body to work properly. The nutrients also protect the body against infections.<sup>1</sup>

Food is more than a nutrient in order to keep the biological mechanism of the human body going; food also expresses one's social identity via the taste and preparation of food and the setting and company with whom the food is shared. Yannis Hamilakis says it very apt: food is (...) "an act of incorporation involving senses, feelings and emotions."<sup>2</sup> But how important is food as an identity marker for people who live in another country or on another continent and for whom it is difficult and sometimes even impossible to obtain the food they used to eat back home? On the basis of four studies, in Peru, Canada, Durban and England, amongst refugees and migrants I will answer these questions.

## Food and social identity

The discourse of food as an identity marker started around the sixties and seventies with Claude Lévi-Strauss and the anthropologist Mary Douglas. The anthropology of food was targeted towards food in relation to the group an individual belonged to, to other groups and to the gods. In the seventies the science of food was mostly about food shortages and poverty, the production and consumption, health and social distinction and meals at special occasions. The eighties exhibited new angles, like savour, eating disorders, haute cuisine and social differences. Food as an identity marker originates from the eighties, when not only the aspect of food as an act of classification and feeding was emphasized, but also "the preparation, the organisation, the taboos, the company, the location, the pleasure, the time, the language, the symbols, the representation, the form, the meaning and the art of eating and drinking."<sup>3</sup>

According to Anne Murcott eating has a biological nature but at the same hand a socio-cultural character which is learned. She stresses that taste, literally and metaphorically, is culturally shaped and she believes that if the learned character of food and eating is researched,

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<sup>1</sup> Food and Agriculture Organisation. <http://www.fao.org/docrep/005/y4168e/y4168e05.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Y. Hamilakis, Food Technologies/Technologies of the Body: The Social Context of Wine and Oil Production and Consumption in Bronze Age Crete. *World Archaeology*. Food Technology in Its Social Context: Production, Processing and Storage (1999) Vol. 31, No. 1. 38-54. 38.

<sup>3</sup> P. Scholliers, Meals, Food Narratives, and Sentiments of Belonging in Past and Present. *Food, Drink and Identity: Cooking, Eating and Drinking in Europe Since the Middle Ages* (Oxford 2001) 3-22.

food should be treated as a subject of non-verbal communication.<sup>4</sup>

Alan Warde on the contrary, claims food is only a marginal way of communicating one's identity. He says people eat and see each other eating, but do not have any judgement against the way one eats or what one eats. He says people do not care about visual signs of fashion and categorisation and they are not able to decipher codes related to food.<sup>5</sup> The researchers Isabel Hoving, Hester Dibbits and Marlou Schrover on the other hand claim that, for migrants, food from home reduces the feeling of being displaced and being alien in an unknown environment. It expresses their own identity and gives a feeling of solidarity among the ones with whom the food is shared.<sup>6</sup>

### **Food and migrants**

If you stroll around in multi-cultural cities, integrate in communities different from your own or if you live for some time in a country with a different culture, you will experience that people who moved out of the area and community they were rooted in, will try to find and prepare the food they used to know. If the ingredients are not there, they will look for a substitute. Kenyans in Rotterdam for instance who search for Kenyan maize flour to make their Kenyan staple food ugali. Dutch people making their fritters, called *oliebollen*, at new year's eve in the desert of north Kenya with figs instead of raisins, Ghanaians in Rotterdam trying to find the ingredient to make flour for the staple food *fufu* or people from Surinam who take all kind of food from their country into the plane in order to provide their families in the Netherlands with food from home.<sup>7</sup> Or a woman in Iraq who lives in Canada and drives ninety minutes to buy her own spices in a special shop in Montreal or the people from a Vietnamese community in Canada who have a communal garden where they grow their own Vietnamese vegetables.<sup>8</sup> The Kenyans, the Dutch, the Ghanaians, the Surinamese, the Iraqi and the Vietnamese, they all want the taste and structure of the food they know from their home country.

The time and the way of eating and serving, is often cultural bound. The time is about the moment of the day - is it in the morning, afternoon or evening and what kind of meal does a culture normally take at that time of day? The way the food is served is another cultural expression. Examples are whether food is taken individually, like in front of the television, or communal at a table, how is the table set, are forks and spoons used or is the right hand used to scoop the food? Does everybody have its own plate or is there one plate to take the food from? According to Claude Fischler the choice of the company to share food with, expresses a sense of identity, since eating the same food gives a feeling of trustworthiness, reliability, familiarity and

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<sup>4</sup> A. Murcott, Food as an Expression of Identity, *The future of the Nation State, essays on cultural pluralism and political integration*. (London, New York, 2004) 21-38

<sup>5</sup> A. Warde., *Consumption, food and taste. Culinary antinomies and commodity Culture* (London, 1997)199-200

<sup>6</sup> I. Hoving, H. Dibbits, M. Schrover, *Cultuur en migratie in Nederland. Veranderingen van het alledaagse 1950-2000*.(Den Haag, 2009) 88-89

<sup>7</sup> I lived in Kenya, Mozambique and Angola and have friends from different cultures in Rotterdam.

<sup>8</sup> P. Bose, A. Laramée, 'Taste of home: Migration, food and belonging in a changing Vermont', *Opportunity for Agriculture Working Paper Series. Food system research collaborative*, Vol 2, No 4. (Vermont, 2013)

safety. He states that unusual food can lead to feelings of mistrust and disgust.<sup>9</sup> An example of mistrust is the fact that even in times of food shortages, people will not just eat what they are offered. Like in the eighties when there was a famine in Ethiopia and the World Food Programme (WFP) distributed yellow maize from America, which most people did not want to eat because they were accustomed to white maize. Moreover it was believed the Americans added something to the maize in order to prevent Ethiopian women of getting pregnant.<sup>10</sup>

A study of Pablo Bose and Alisha Laramée in Vermont amongst migrants and refugees confirms the importance of food as identity marker. The researchers stress that food for immigrants plays a significant role regarding the creation of a feeling of being home. They researched in Vermont the possibilities for migrants workers on farms in rural areas to obtain their own desired food. Furthermore they interviewed refugees in urban Vermont about the possibilities to obtain the ingredients they knew back home. The qualitative research of Bose and Laramée shows that for both the migrant workers and the refugees having food they know from their home country is important. They will try to get it, even if they have to go far or have to grow it themselves, as shown by the above mentioned examples of the Iraqi woman who drove ninety minutes for spices and the Vietnamese community that started its own vegetable garden. According to the outcomes of this research in and around Vermont the ingredients are difficult to get due to costs and reliability of logistics. Out of necessity the migrants and refugees take over local American eating habits and practices. Some grow their own food together, like the Vietnamese, and the migrants on the farms sometimes get a piece of land from their employer, so they can grow their own food. Often they start with their small gardens, but do not get what they are looking for, since the climate and soil in Canada are very different from the climate and soil the migrants are accustomed to in their countries. Besides that the seeds which are available in Canada can differ from the ones back home. Even if a certain vegetable can grow in Canadian soil, still the taste can differ due to a different kind of seed, the soil, less sun. So even if migrants have a place to grow their own types of vegetables, it remains difficult to get the real taste of home.<sup>11</sup>

Maheshvari Naidu and Nokwanda Nzuzwa studied the importance of food in order to maintain one's identity and researched the food culture of Sierra Leoneans in Durban. In Sierra Leone rice is a staple food, but according to the outcomes of this research, the focus group feels attached to its own rice and not just any type of rice, like the parboiled one in South Africa. Rice for them is not just part of the main food they eat, but of their culture and identity.<sup>12</sup>

Food culture can also be used to emphasize differences between groups or communities. The study of Claudia Cornejo-Happel about the preparation and consumption of food as

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<sup>9</sup> C. Fischler, Food, self and identity, *Social Science Information*. (1988) 275–92.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Country Director of WFP S. Cammelbeeck, who has worked for WFP Africa and lived in eastern Africa since the eighties.

<sup>11</sup> Bose and A. Laramée, *Taste of Home: Migration, Food and Belonging in a Changing Vermont. Opportunities for Agriculture Working Paper Series. Food System Research Collaborative (Vermont, no date date) Vol 2. No 4.*

<sup>12</sup> M. Naidu and N. Nzuzwa, Food and maintaining identity for migrants: Sierra Leone Migrants in Durban. *J Sociology Soc Anth*, 4(3): 193-200 (Kwa Zulu Natal 2013)

expression of social identity and intergroup relations in the Andes (Peru) during the colonial time, proofs ethno centric behaviour in connection with food. For her research she looked at three practical identities, being the traditions of food cultivation, the preparation and the culinary preferences. She states that selection of food and the preparation of it reveals someone's social and personal status, because those choices reflect a communal taste, the way of cooking, the ambiance (table, utensils) and the company. All those choices and selections lead a to a certain homogenous group and strengthens the social identity.

At the same hand shared food customs can lead to polarization. Cornejo-Happel has an interesting example in her study: she claims that the Spanish colonizer often ate the same locally available food as the indigenous people, but changed the food related customs in order to uplift the status of the food. One example she uses is the way the potato, which came from South America, was prepared by different groups. For the Peruvian indigenous inhabitants the potato was a very important staple food, for the Spanish the potato had a low status, since it was eaten by an inferior social group, being the Peruvian indigenous people. On the other hand potato was good food and easy to grow, so the Spanish started to prepare the potato in such a way that it was transformed into a different form, like dried, toasted and grind. Cornejo-Happel concludes that differences in the way food was prepared or by whom it was prepared led to a separation between social groups in the Andes during colonial times.<sup>13</sup>

The research of Naidu and Nzuzza about food an identity amongst Sierra Leoneans in Durban also touches upon ethno centric behaviour. Their research stresses ethnic centric behaviour caused by food shock. With food shock they mean the inability to identify with specific food and/or the way it is eaten. They use the example of the chewing on and swallowing of chicken bones, which is generally done by the Sierra Leoneans and is allegedly experienced by South Africans as a very strange habit. One of the Sierra Leonean interviewees said that when his South African friends saw him chewing bones, they looked at him (...) "as if I had killed a cat with my bare hands. (...) as if I was strange or mad." The South Africans thought he was chewing bones, because he was not accustomed to eat meat. The interviewee reacted: (...) "How stupid. (...) South Africans do not know how nutritious bones are." <sup>14</sup>

In the studies in Vermont, Durban and the Andes research was done amongst people who live in one place in another country and/or continent. But what happens if a group of people who share the same culture people are on the move, like the Polish refugees in World War Two who moved were exposed to many different environments within a short timeframe of about two to five years. They were on the drift and obligatory had to live in very different environments. First they were deported by Stalin who occupied the eastern part of their country and sent everybody who might be a threat for his politics to prisons, camps and kolkhozes in remote places in the Soviet Union, like Siberia. When Poland and Russia signed a pact, they were released. They could not go back to Poland, since it was still occupied and although they were allowed to stay in the

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<sup>13</sup> Claudia A. Cornejo-Happel, You are what you eat: Food as expression of social identity and intergroup relations in the colonial Andes. *Cincinnati Roman Review* 33. (Ohio 2012) 175-193

<sup>14</sup> M. Naidu and N. Nzuzza, Food and maintaining identity for migrants: Sierra Leone Migrants in Durban. *J Sociology Soc Anth*, 4(3): 193-200 (Kwa Zulu Natal 2013)

Soviet Union, most of them did not want to stay in the Soviet Union, because they did not trust the Russians. The ones who had a family member who joined the Red Army in order to fight against Germany, were allowed to leave Russia and go to Uzbekistan, from where they would be brought to camps in Persia. From Persia they were finally deported to British Territory, like Eastern Africa and New Zealand, where they could stay in camps until the end of the war.<sup>15</sup> Monica Janowski investigated the importance of the Polish food culture amongst those Polish refugees. She interviewed seven Polish women who currently live in Essex, England, and claims that those Polish refugees did try to prepare, smell and eat their home food in order to feed their memories about the Polish homeland where they stayed before they made their complicated harsh exoduses. She talked to the interviewees about the many different environments they had to live in. Four of them went to Eastern Africa, two went to Palestine and one joined the army. The most difficult place to live for the Polish women was the Soviet Union, in their case Siberia. One of the women claim that her mother tried to keep up the Polish standards everywhere they went, but in Siberia it was impossible, because “You were hungry, you ate what you found.” Russian food was seen as not eatable, although it was quite similar to the food in Poland and according to another interviewee Russian soup was seen as dirty, whereas soup made by Polish people with ingredients from the forest was seen as clean soup. The food in Siberia resembled the Polish food and it was only in Uzbekistan that the interviewees encountered new things to eat, like flat bread. Due to the shortage of food they ate whatever was available. In Persia, on the contrary, food was abundant, but also alien and some refugees refused to eat it. The four women who ended up in Eastern Africa remember the efforts their mother took to find ingredients to make food that could resemble Polish food. Like the mother of one of the interviewees who stayed in a camp in Tanganyika (present Tanzania) and walked to town to buy meat for the preparation of a proper Polish meal. Janowski ends her research with the conclusion that home food played an important role for the Polish refugees and claims it contributed to “both psychological wellbeing and to chances of emotional as well as physical survival.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Ambiance of food consumption**

The way food is served, with whom it is eaten, whether it is eaten with a fork, spoon and knife or scooped with the right hand and whether everybody has its own plate or one big plate is shared, are all part of food culture. Janowski claims that for the Polish the ambiance was important. Her interviewees told her that the Polish always tried to eat in an atmosphere and with the company which would resemble the food culture in Poland. Janowski claims that the women, who were the ones in charge of gathering food and cook it, emphasised to have a family meal, being in a group and sitting at a table, as often as possible. She says this proves the importance for the Polish refugees of bonding family ties via food consumption. Where there

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<sup>15</sup> T. Piotrowski, *The Polish Deportees of World War II. Recollection of Removal to the Soviet Union and Dispersal Throughout the World* (North Carolina, London 2004)

<sup>16</sup> Janowski, Food in traumatic times.

was no family meals were consumed with a wider Polish family, that was apparently formed in the camps.<sup>17</sup>

The Sierra Leonean migrants in Durban also feel very well and safe in an ambiance which reminds them of home. In the study one of the interviewees told the researchers that he found a Nigerian restaurant in Durban, which he recognized as being something from his part of the world, since the tablecloth on the tables were the same as the ones he knew from Sierra Leone. He said the tablecloth made him to trust the food in the restaurant. "When I saw that place and I touched the tablecloth, it was like I was at home, like I was in the sitting room at home or something. When they served me cassava it was like I was in heaven." Naidu and Nzuzu claim that many of the interviewed Sierra Leoneans found it very comforting to go to restaurants which resemble home.<sup>18</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Food is an important building block to keep the body moving and working. But food and food culture is also a building block for social identity. The choice of the ingredients for food and the preparation, the company to share the food with, the choices of the ambiance of having it, like at a set table or in front of the television, using individual plates or a communal one and eating with utensils or with the right hand are all expressions of food culture. For migrants and refugees getting, preparing and eating food which they recognize of being from their home country, is very important. They will search for it and even if they have to drive far, they will go to specialized shops to buy their ingredients. If the food or the ingredients of the food they grew up with is not available, they will try to grow it and if it is really not obtainable, they will search for substitutes. In that perspective migrants and refugees put a lot of effort in order to find the taste and texture they know from their home country. Food it is a metaphor for the atmosphere in their country of origin, the smell and the climate in their country of origin, the people with whom they used to prepare and eat the food, the stories that were told while eating. Food is a carrier of their social identity. Food brings them home.

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<sup>17</sup> Idem.

<sup>18</sup> Naidu and N. Nzuzu, Food and maintaining identity for migrants.

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