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N.N. Mikloukho-Maklay Institute of Ethnography

N.I. Grigulevich

CULTURAL AND ECOLOGICAL PECULIARITIES
OF THE TRADITIONAL DIET
OF THE RUSSIANS IN AZERBAIJAN

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In recent years ethnographers in the Soviet Union and abroad focus attention on life support as an aspect of traditional culture. Out of many life supporting elements food is most essential. In many respects it is specified by the traditional ethnic environment.

It took millennia to choose from the environment the components that have formed the basis of a traditional diet. This was attended by the development of biochemical mechanisms specifically tailored to the chosen food components. During the development of the metabolic system and detoxication providing for the breakdown and evacuation from the organism of the products of metabolism, man coped with the substances from his diet, drinking water and the air.¹ A transition to industrial society manifests itself in a great number of new substances alien to man. This is a cause of the increasing number of allergic disorders.

The culture of life support and diet as its major component has already been considered in respect to individual ethnoses in the Soviet Union, and primarily, the rural population of Armenia.²

The problem area reveals several special aspects when life support of migrants is examined. Being far away from their former ethnic territory, migrants have to adapt themselves to new natural and ecological conditions and to new ethnic neighbours, so that traditional food also changes. Migration is a very important factor which has always been present in human history, but attending dietary changes have never been adequately studied.

This paper considers certain elements of the traditional diet of the Russian settlers in Azerbaijan through the prism of ethnic ecology. The notion of ethnic ecology was first formulated by V.I. Kozlov in 1983.³ We believe that the new discipline addresses the following aspects of food and diet: (a) life support distinctions of ethnic groups and whole ethnoses vis-a-vis their natural and socio-cultural conditions; (b) health as a function of established ecological interrelations; (c) ethnoses to environment relations.

It appears to be tempting to reconstruct the changing diet of isolated groups of Russian migrants in the new ecological conditions and

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to learn what was lost, borrowed or retained in the diet of the Russians in Azerbaijan.

Religion also constitutes a very important factor as far as food habits are concerned. The level of adaptation can be seen if we compare the health of newcomers with that of the autochthonic population.

The major part of the study was done during the 1986 field season at the Novogolovka village of Jalilabad district of the Azerbaijan SSR. The village was founded in 1844 by the Molokans from the Voronezh District of Russia.

Data was collected by means of using three types of original questionnaires covering the history of local diet, available food and eating habits.

The Russian settlers, mostly farmers, brought to Azerbaijan a higher agricultural culture that had emerged in the southern black-earth districts of Russia. They made a spectacular success at the new place. In addition to traditional farming, the settlers brought the entire food system of the agricultural people.

Until recently, almost every Russian house had a Russian oven which in winter was used for cooking and for warming purposes. In the yard there is also another oven, either under the roof or in the open. With the coming of gas mains the housewives gladly switched to gas ovens, using traditional oven only for bread baking and cooking traditional meals.

What are the distinctions of the daily meals of the Russians within the context of the life support of the given ethnic group?

The basis of their traditional economy has been formed by land farming with a special emphasis on grain cultivation. Bread and cereals are still very important foods. Bread has been baked in the so-called Russian ovens by traditional technology based on home-made yeast (of bran and hops) and buttermilk, milk or water as a cooking liquid.

Informants say that bread was made of barley or wheat and barley. Durum wheat was constituted by the black-ear and the yellow-ear varieties. Flour made from awnless wheat was only used for baking bread. Second-grade flour (with bran) was sifted and bran was used for yeast making. Today, manufactured yeast is used. Before World War II people made use of cornmeal to cook cornbread and mamalyga.

In addition to bread baking, the Russian oven was used to bake kachas, vatrushkas, and pyshkas. Vegetable oil is always added to the dough. Moreover, vegetable oil is used to fry doughnuts, pastry-straw, and various pancakes. Some 30 to 40 years ago wheatmeal was used to make zatirushkas. Recently, salamata, dumplings, including those filled

with curd or fruit. Recently, as commercial paste became available the above dishes are cooked only occasionally.

We were quite surprised to find such ancient dishes as the salamata and kulaga which are cooked with boiled meat and wheat molt. However, while peasants in Central Russia cooked kulaga with rye molt and cranberry,⁴ in Azerbaijan rye gave way to wheat, and cranberry to pumpkin or dried fruit. Thus, a typical Russian peasant dish that partially replaced bread, survived in the new conditions, however with new components typical of the given zone.

Home-made noodles with large additions of eggs were used to cook soup with duck or turkey broth. This was a ritual dish served, like shchi, meat with potatoes and pancakes at weddings and funerals. Noodles have been gradually edged out by pilau and dolma (meat in grape leaves) borrowed from Azerbaijan cuisine and regarded to be preferable for weddings. Rice with raisins is not known to the Molokans of Novogolovka village.

Easter came with kashnik, a rice pudding cooked in an oven with much butter in it. Paskha was also cooked from sweet cottage cheese and raisins. Eggs were painted in various colours. Tarts and patties were used to decorate a festive table. For a filling they never used meat or fish (a very popular filling in the northern and central Russian cuisine). The most popular filling is mashed potatoes with fried onion or baked pumpkin of a certain variety. Moreover, cottage cheese, fruit, berries and even grapes are used for filling. It must be said that festive cuisine differs very little from daily meals.

In addition to cultivation the Russians in Azerbaijan engaged in cattle breeding (cattle, sheep, goats, and buffalos).

The Russians borrowed from their Azerbaijan neighbours, known for milk products, quite a few dairy processes. These include sour milk (gatykh), cottage cheese (shor), cheese (pendir), and airan. Some milk dishes have not entered the Russian diet, such as dovga and ovdukh, cooked from sour milk and a large number of wild herbs. Agyz and bulama, so characteristic of cattle breeders, are cooked from bestings, but they have never been made by the Russians.

As for meat, it traditionally plays a great role in the diet. Meat was used to cook broth, cabbage soups and make cutlets. According to our informants, mutton, veal and poultry are used by the Russians to cook pilau, dolma borrowed from Azerbaijan cuisine. The ban on pork is currently observed by old people only. Before the 1940s, meat-jelly with horse-reddish and kwas were a necessary attribute of any funeral.

Much meat is consumed in winter, and less in summer. A dairy-vegetarian diet seems to be rather reasonable during the hot season.

As far as vegetable products are concerned, the most important are cultural varieties of vegetables, fruit and berries. They are eaten raw and cooked as first and main dishes, or are processed for longer preservation. It must be said that a ban on onion and garlic has not been observed for a long time.

In addition to genuinely Russian forms of making supplies of vegetables for winter, such as making sourcroust, pickled tomatoes and cucumbers, the Russian settlers started preserving aubergine. They first did it by Russian technology, but later borrowed the Azerbaijani technology of pre-processing and preserving products. New information usually reaches the community via the younger generation. Thus, we saw that in one and the same family mother did everything traditionally, and her daughter used new techniques. Among the borrowings are dried fruit, pastila sweets (tursh-lavash), thick boiled grape juice (doshab).

In contrast to the Azerbaijanians, the Russians eat less herbs, such as coriandre, parsley, and water-cress grown at a house plot.

Spices are also used rather moderately. The list of spices is limited to pepper, cloves and bay leaf. Vinegar is used mainly for marinades. The Russians make vinegar like the Azerbaijanians by the fermentation of grape juice beyond the alcoholic stage. They also borrowed the technique of making a pomegranate sauce called narsharab.

Tea is the most popular refreshment of the Russians. It quenches thirst in the hot season and warms up in the cold one. It is served before and after every meal. It is always served at weddings and funerals. As was noted the Russians assimilated such Azerbaijani beverages as sour milk (gatykh) and airan which gradually substituted the Russian kwas.

Now let us consider some aspects of Russian food from the viewpoint of ethnic ecology. This is the problem of ecology vs. health.

The Russian settlers made much use of vegetable oil which was traditionally extracted from the seeds of sunflower, flax and poppy. Vegetable oil contains many valuable substances, organic acids and microelements. Today people buy commercial oil which is not so rich in flavour and less nutritious.

Until recently all the hydrocarbon requirements were satisfied by fruit, honey and other natural products. Now people eat refined sugar containing 99.7 per cent of saccharose. As we know, the organism gets

quickly saturated with such sugar and when the compensatory mechanisms go wrong, the diabetis risk greatly increases.

In rural Azerbaijan a tradition is retained to eat fruit, dried fruit and honey instead of sugar, but here too there is a growing tendency to eat more sugar, especially with jams and boild fruit. On the whole, in 1950-65 sugar consumption in the republic went up 5.4 fold and that of sweets more than 2.5. fold.⁵

As was noted, tea is an important diet of the Russians served with every meal. Regular use of freshly steeped tea provides the vitamin C to the liver, kidneys, spleen and adrenal glands. This facilitates their function and recovery after illnesses. This is very important in the hot climate in which vitamins are quickly decomposed.

The quality of tea depends on the water used to steep the leaves. Lack of credible data prevents us from analysing the quality of drinking water in the village of Novogolovka. We can only state that the sanitary conditions of the entire water sources in the village are sub-standard. Moreover, running water is pumped to the village rather irregularly, which involves many difficulties during hot weather and, it seems, causes gastric and intestine disorders.

Medical experts who took part in our expedition, noted that the level of health among the Russians is somewhat lower that of the Azerbaijanians. Most common are nervous and cardio-vascular disorders, and diseases of the musculo-skeletal system. We found not a single Russian above 90 years old and health of the older people is more weak.

As for traditional food being a function of man to environment interaction, the following must be said. Field data testifies to the fact that 30 to 40 years ago hunting was a valuable source of proteins. Though the Molokans observe a taboo for eating hair and boar, younger people are rather liberal in this respect.

In recent years the expansion of economic activities limited the hunting areas. Fowl was less affected.

Until recently the area around Novogolovka village was very marshy. Numerous lakes, some of which communicated with the sea, were abundant with sazan, kutum, grey millet, bream, Caspian roach. Fish-soup was cooked on site, with dill, greenonion, and spiced by pepper. Fish was fried, cooked on steam in a Russian oven, cured or smoked. Fish-jelly was very popular.

In the old days scaleless fish (e.g. sturgeon) was a taboo for the Molokans and the Azerbaijanians. Field data show that the taboo is no longer observed. Yet the older people still abstain from it. Today the number of fish is not as it used to be.

The use of wild herbs is also noteworthy. The Russians gather cornel, mirabelle, blackberries, sweetbrier, hazel-nut and walnut, which are eaten raw or cooked as jams and boiled fruit. The Russians borrowed from the Azerbaijanians the technique of making sour pastila from mirabelle, called trush-lavash. This actually is a dish rich in vitamins and microelements which are so beneficial for man in winter and spring.

In spite of many wild herbs growing around Novogolovka and widely used by Azerbaijanians, the Russians do not make use of them. They only use the cultural herbs mentioned above.

We see the process of interaction between two traditional cultures, which occurs in a step-by-step manner. In this study we can only mention one aspect of this process: the Azerbaijanian influence on the diet of the local Russians. The process goes on and that is why any conclusions would be premature. Therefore preliminary comments could only be made.

Apparently, the borrowing of food products is directed, according to S.A. Arutyunov and Yu.I. Mkrtumyan,⁶ from source materials and semi-finished products to festive and then to daily meals. Thus, certain dishes (pilau, shashlyk and dolma) are used both as daily and festive meal and gradually replace the Russian ritual foods. The case of milk products suggests that borrowings of semifinished products are also possible.

The most stable are ritual dishes, especially funeral dishes, which, as before, include cabbage soup (shchi), noodles, meat and potatoes, tea and sweets. Wedding table is served more in the Azerbaijanian style, with pilau, shashlyk and dolma. Alcohol was never used at ritual feasts of the Russian settlers.

For the reason of industrialization and wide use of commercial products, the quality of diets has declined. We have already mentioned the negative impact of refined products. Food becomes biochemically more level. If earlier it was diversified by the products of hunting and fishing now the only way out is to encourage gardening. It is also important to retain the experience of ancestors and to revive many forgotten traditions.

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