

Whoever tramples the breadcrumbs will go blind: Cultural norms regarding feeding children and eating in Bulgarian society. A conversation between Petya Bankova and Vihra Baeva

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VB: Petya, you have been doing long-term research on the subject of childhood as a sociocultural category. Could you outline some traditional cultural norms and patterns related to children and food?

PB: Sometimes you have to review hundreds of pages of academic literature, analysing a particular society and its culture, in order to find a single passage that throws some light on the world of children. The complete lack of direct observations and ethnographic descriptions of childhood in tradition usually does not allow us to comprehend who the children of that time were in their daily lives. Instead, we rather get a notion of what they should or should not have been and predominantly – what they should have become according to the perceptions of adults. This further complicates the task of the researcher

because the boundary between the actual implementation of the accepted norms of behaviour and the idealization resulting from the elapsed time perspective is too fuzzy.

Ethnography of childhood is based on the idea – an idea constantly reaffirmed by empirical research – that the conditions and forms of childhood are changeable from one community to another. They are sensitive to specific contexts and are not conceivable without detailed knowledge of the social and cultural contexts that give them meaning.

That is why I will answer the question specifically in the context of the Bulgarian society, especially within the last two centuries. This period marked a radical transition from a traditional economy, which was mainly oriented towards agriculture and cattle breeding, to a modern democratic market economy. That progressive development, however, was disrupted by the coup d'état on 9 September 1944. After the establishment of the totalitarian rule of the Bulgarian Communist Party, Bulgaria was forced to follow a political and economic regime after the Soviet model. After the democratic changes of 1989, Bulgaria has embarked on the path of modern economic development within the general European context of a free market economy and universally accepted democratic values.

VB: Yes, I completely agree. Large-scale generalizations are often misleading. So, let us start with the traditional Bulgarian village at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. What was the children's menu back then?

PB: When we think about traditional cultural norms and patterns in relation to children and food, we must keep in mind that until the middle of the twentieth century, 70% of the Bulgarian population lived in the countryside. The favourable natural conditions allowed a great number of the Bulgarian peasants to prosper and rarely face massive famine. At the same time, the processes of modernization characteristic of modern societies were running in the Bulgarian villages in this period.

According to information from the first cookbook in Bulgaria by P. R. Slaveykov, published in 1870, the everyday menu of Bulgarians in the nineteenth century consisted primarily of bread, beans, lentils, bulgur. It also included a limited number of vegetables, mainly garlic, onions, red and green peppers, eaten roasted or raw, with salt and vinegar, fresh cabbage and sauerkraut, *liutenitsa* (traditional meal made from roasted and chopped red peppers, tomatoes, carrots, aubergines, etc.), pickles and stews prepared from the above said vegetables. From the beginning of the twentieth century, with the development of modern gardening, a lot of new fruits and vegetables entered the Bulgarian cuisine and significantly enriched it.

A memory of the famous Bulgarian ethnopsychologist Ivan Hadzhiyski (1907–1944) conveys in a wonderful way the atmosphere in the traditional rural

family. With a good sense of humour, he talks about his childhood. In the rural family in which he grew up, the children used to eat together from a large bowl, usually full of stew (vegetables with vegetable oil and a small amount of meat). Everyone had their own spoon, which they used as a “weapon” to get a small piece of meat. In this “battle”, it often happened that the desired piece of meat fell on the ground and was snatched by the domestic cat, so the children remained hungry.

VB: You mentioned bread. It is a special food for us Bulgarians, isn't it?

PB: Yes, bread had a central place in the traditional diet of Bulgarians. It was not only a staple food; it was also associated with rites, rituals and beliefs, and considered sacred. Before taking a piece of bread, everyone should make the sign of the cross first. The breadcrumbs were carefully collected and eaten up. Children were taught a number of rules considering the use of bread: it is a sin to throw away bread and to trample upon breadcrumbs. The one who tramples on crumbs will go blind. You should not burn breadcrumbs, because in the netherworld you will have to take them out of the fire by hand. You should not sweep them out of the door, so that the luck of the house was not swept away. Scattering even a crumb of bread is considered a sin. According to folk wisdom, this can be punished even with the loss of parents. If you find a piece of bread, you must not throw it away, but kiss it and give it to the animals. People also believed that if in the summer the tablecloth with the breadcrumbs were shaken in the yard, the fertility of the wheat will go away with them and the house would be left without any bread. If this was done in the winter, there was no danger, because the wheat was already collected in the barns. Moreover, children were not allowed to play with bread or dough. It was believed that anyone who ate bread with unwashed hands would go blind, and if a small child ate hot bread, he or she would get sick.

VB: Do we have information about traditional eating habits in rural milieu? How many meals a day did people have?

PB: Ethnographic sources show that in the large rural family, there was a strict eating order. In the morning, only the little ones, babies and infants, had pre-prepared breakfast. They usually ate *popara* (pieces of old bread soaked in water or milk with a little cheese or cottage cheese and a lump of butter). Children after the age of 5 or 6 were engaged in the household chores and they usually went out to graze the animals, collect firewood in the forest or help the adults with some other activities. During the day, they ate what their mothers had put in the small canvas bags that they carried with them. Usually it was a piece of bread, a head of onion, a piece of *slanina* (bacon). Meals were served at home after the end of the working day. The first ones to sit at the table were the men, who had returned from the field, from the market or

from the shop. Then the older women had dinner, and finally the children and younger daughters-in-law.

Since most of the Bulgarian population constitutes of Orthodox Christians, people fasted for more than 2/3 of the year. Along with the long fasting periods of the year (such as Great Lent, Nativity Fast, etc.), Bulgarians traditionally fasted every Wednesday and Friday. Therefore, meat was rare on the menu. Sweets were also rare: for the rural child, candies and sweets were a great delicacy. Sugar was a product that was bought at the market, i.e. funds had to be set aside for it. With it, one could make homemade jams and preserves, but this happened mostly in the city. That is why most deserts were sweetened with honey, *pekmez* or molasses. If the adults went to the nearby city or town, they could bring some oriental deserts like Turkish delight or *baklava* for the children.

VB: Yes, in towns and cities there were specialized craftsmen, often Turks or Armenians, who prepared and sold desserts, mainly of oriental origin. However, were the norms for children different from the norms for adults?

PB: In general, in the Bulgarian society before modernization, there were uniform norms of nutrition regardless of age. Everyone in the household consumed common food, except for the children who were breastfed. This was applied even to the consumption of alcohol: there is abundant ethnographic information about children aged 8–12 consuming wine and *rakia* (brandy). In fact, the attitude to children's nutrition was quite different from contemporary times, when many parents, especially those who are interested in specialized literature, try to provide their children with nutrition that is adapted or healthy.

VB: Speaking about the turn of the twentieth century, I guess the diet of the children in cities was quite different from that of village kids. Is that right?

PB: Yes, the "urban" child had far more opportunities to try a variety of foods. At that time, Bulgarian cities rapidly developed and became part of the European economic and intellectual space. The process of modernization of everyday life substantially affected the cooking habits of urban citizens. As early as the end of the nineteenth century, the cuisine in the cities became more European and all kinds of artful dishes could be found there: salads, soups and broths, culinary masterpieces of beef and veal, various types of ice cream, creams, and jellies. As early as the end of the nineteenth century, special columns in the periodicals appeared that advised housewives what to cook at home. The periodicals also provided specialized advice on children's nutrition. A diverse diet was recommended, gradually introducing all fruits and vegetables, and meat in limited quantities was recommended after the age of three.

In the archives of the early twentieth century for a city like Varna, for example, we can read that on Sundays children went to a restaurant with their

parents and the family had food that they could not prepare at home. As a reward, the kids were also taken to a pastry shop and enjoyed delicacies from the East, which they found infinitely delicious: *baklava*, *kadaif*, *ashure*. Children traditionally received sugar roosters or canes as a reward for their good behaviour when they went to the city fair or tasted the cotton candy sold there. I will quote one of the common tips at the time: “It is very bad for a mother to give her obedient children candy or chocolate as a reward, because it will ruin their stomach. The best reward is mother’s kiss.”

An interesting area of research is also the evolution of dining etiquette. As early as the end of the nineteenth century, articles appeared in periodicals such as the *Domakinya* (Housewife) magazine concerning table manners and ways of teaching them to the children. For example, children should not be given food while walking; they should not be talked to during meals; they should not take salt from the table with their hands; the child’s serviette should be tied around their necks while the adults should keep it on their knees.

Actually, through the history and the memory of food and eating, we can get a very interesting and detailed idea of the everyday life of people from almost a century ago.

VB: Yes, food gives a very interesting, sensual perspective to people’s ways of life, values and worldviews. Yet, what you said here obviously refers to wealthy urban families. I would expect that working-class families had a very different eating routine and malnutrition was widespread among their children.

PB: That is only partially true. In the last three years, I have been the supervisor of doctoral student Radina Ilieva, whose dissertation is titled *Childhood in Bulgaria in Extra-Family Group Forms of Socialization during the Twentieth Century: Ethnological Aspects*. A specific focus in her research are children’s camps in Bulgaria, which were a widespread form of spending free time outside school for many children – not only in Bulgaria but also the rest of Europe and around the world. In the course of her work, Ilieva discovered, systematized, and analysed a huge array of archival sources, some of which related to standards in childhood nutrition. There were significant problems in the diet of children in the first half of the twentieth century, which attracted the attention of experts and public officials of the time. At the turn of the twentieth century, school doctors conducted surveys among students in the capital, registering that 20% of children “spend the school year in malnutrition and hunger.” The children’s main diet consisted of bread, onions, and cheese. Possible lunch and dinner was the stew with onions. Obviously, that menu was insufficient for teenagers. That is why the children’s camps worked towards the goal of children gaining weight and learning the appropriate hygiene habits such as washing their hands before and after meals and brushing their teeth. The weight gain of the children after the camp was reported with special punctuality.

VB: How did things change during the communist rule? Summer camps were very popular back then, weren't they?

PB: The process is extremely interesting. During the communist rule in Bulgaria, the number of summer children's camps grew significantly. Almost every child in that period visited such a camp at least once in their life. The camp canteens offered a standardized, uniform menu that was different from home-cooked meals. Children who did not like the food in the canteen were considered spoiled, fastidious and they became the object of ridicule. On the other hand, those who gladly ate the tasteless bread slices with halva or cream cheese were given as an example. This brings us to the present, where the problems are already strictly age-differentiated.

On a more general level, with the acute deficit of various foods during communism, due to the faults of so called „planned economics“, the culinary diversity of food in cities was lost. Another reason for that was the fact that quality local products were predominantly intended for exports. In my research on childhood, I found that one of the favourite topics in the memories of everyday life of urban residents until the 1960s is food, and more precisely, the “Sunday, holiday lunch”. All members of the family gathered around the table. The menu included meat, which was rare on other days. Usually the menu on weekdays was repetitive and determined by the season: vegetarian meals on Wednesdays and Fridays, cabbage on Mondays, rice on Tuesdays, sometimes – fish on Saturdays. Meals on Sundays were often taken to the city bakery to be roasted. These bakeries are vividly imprinted in the memories of the then children from the period before and after World War II. Easter cakes (*kozunak*) were baked there for Easter, lambs were roasted for St. George's Day, and pork for Christmas. Meanwhile, bakers produced bread, roasted pumpkin, and roasted chestnuts. These bakeries are absent from the memories of children who lived in the countryside, because rural houses usually had their own ovens. For today's 35- to 60-year-old citizens of Sofia, the memory of home-cooked food has changed greatly and can be synthesized in the following quote: “grandmother cooks delicious dishes, mom reheats them on the stove in the evening when parents come home from work, and we rarely gather around the table as it is tucked between the stove and the refrigerator in the small kitchen and can't hold us all at once”.

On the other hand, migrants from the countryside to the city often returned to their native places to participate in fairs and joint celebrations of calendar holidays precisely because of the rich joint meal that accompanied them.

VB: In fact, that urban-rural relationship during socialism had also another dimension. Traditionally, schoolchildren from the cities were sent to spend vacations with their grandparents in the country. There, they could enjoy fresh farming products and delicious home-made dishes prepared by their grand-

mothers. But moving forward in time, could you share some observations on the contemporary situation? What are the most significant issues of modern children's nutrition according to the public and media discourses?

PB: I want to draw attention to one specific issue – the natural nutrition of the new-born, or breastfeeding. It is a global debate, but in Bulgaria, it seems that the problems have become serious lately. In traditional culture, breastfeeding has acquired ritual dimensions. There were whole ritual structures related to the act of the first breastfeeding of the new-born, a number of rules and prohibitions regarding the behaviour of the mother, so as not to lose the breast milk, and a specific time and method of weaning the child.

My work as a consultant for the *Nine Months* magazine (the first specialized journal for pregnancy and childbirth in Bulgaria) and a lecturer in the 'Schools for pregnant women' organized in Sofia, gave me the opportunity to communicate (directly or online) for nearly 14 years (1998–2012) with many pregnant women and young mothers. I have always emphasized the benefits of natural nutrition for the new-born. To our delight, most mothers have heeded our advice. Nevertheless, there is also a large number of women who give up breastfeeding for no apparent reason.

After many conversations and interviews, I found that modern mothers are afraid of and uncomfortable with breastfeeding. On the one hand, they accept it as a kind of restriction, which refers to smoking and the consumption of coffee, alcohol or certain foods that are believed to spoil the qualities of breast milk. Others decide that breastfeeding is incompatible with certain medications they take or their desire to have an active social life away from home and the new-born. What is more, social networks and communication with friends with the same social status have the strongest demotivating influence. Many young mothers share harsh comments from their acquaintances about the dangers of breastfeeding, with completely unsubstantiated criticism towards those who have chosen to breastfeed their child until at least 1 year of age. Thus, in practice, it turns out that every second mother in Bulgaria refuses to breastfeed her baby not for any objective reasons, but because of the negative opinion of others. This is yet another point that would be unthinkable in a traditional society.

VB: Yes, that is absolutely right, but I'm also observing the opposite tendency, especially in the last few years. In social media, many young mothers are sharing having met with heavy disapproval and reproach for not breastfeeding their children. So, they feel social pressure and guilt, even though they might have serious reasons for their choice of formula feeding. Certainly, the issues of children's diets go far beyond infant feeding. What about contemporary teenagers? Does the well-known teenage revolt extend to the choice of food and eating habits?

PB: In the period 2014–2016, I worked on the project „Traditional and modern children’s games“. I conducted interviews with a large number of children aged 14–18, and although eating habits were not the focus of the study, respondents shared their food-related problems as part of their daily lives. My general impression is that the children expressed their resistance to the patterns of behaviour imposed by adults precisely by refusing to eat healthily or regularly, or to follow a diet. The youth revolt was against “cooked food”, the mandatory fruits and vegetables, the restriction of sweets and fizzy drinks. All these behaviours, in fact, expressed a spontaneous protest against the control their parents were trying to impose on them. In a traditional society, this could never happen. Among the young people I was studying, there were representatives of certain sub-cultures that we observe in modern society. For example, gamers ate only fast food because they spent more than 12 hours a day in front of the computer. There were girls who definitely had a tendency for orthorexia, watching all the culinary shows about healthy eating and blaming each other if they were “caught” violating a diet that they had imposed on themselves. It was very interesting for me to communicate with the group of children who had health problems (diabetes, food allergies, etc.). It impressed me that they were the most dialogical, the most open to other people’s opinions, the most tolerant, realizing how much pleasure food can provide, and at the same time how individually specific tastes are. Another group were the athletes, who had downloaded calorie-counting applications to their phones and studied the nutritional properties of products such as buckwheat, chia, and quinoa. The media, and above all, social media, are a huge force. They have a tremendous influence on the formation of food-related habits and compete strongly with social traditions or individual preferences of parents. We have not yet learned to use this power for the good of our children.

VB: Thank you for this conversation, Petya. It was both informative and thought-provoking, and gave us a specific perspective on the vast subject of children and food.