

The formation of Iranian (or “Iranianate”?)
”National cuisines“ reflecting nationalist ideological
requirements
(short version)

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My starting point is, first of all, the quest for historical, early – modern and contemporary cook-books in European cultures and in the Middle East. I confine myself to these areas because of the probability that what I am objecting in this connection will possibly not valid for East Asian cultures, as Japan or maybe also China. Forgive me to interfere in your own cultural problems but I have gotten the impression that internal reflexions concerning structural changes of any kind of “authentic Japanese cuisine” throughout the last three-hundred years or more can be brought into immediate comparison with Western trends of development, at least not before the later 19th century. To clarify what I am talking about: it’s the process of standardizing and canonizing of what does belong to a “national cuisine” and what does not. This process of “standardization” and “canonization” is to be observed with a socio-cultural phenomenon which is, at least in Europe, rather typical for the period since the early nineteenth century: what I mean is the increasing abolition of illiteracy among ordinary house-wives which is parallelized by the spread of printed cook-books which aim on being used just by these literate house-wives! Connecting these two, at a first glance, different aspects may lead us to surprising conclusions.

It seems to be well-acknowledged that under the conditions of “romantic nationalism” since the early nineteenth century in many Western countries national awareness and national identity have been strongly based on “invented traditions”. In many cases, the inventive character of such traditions was not merely fictional but, was composed from various historical and cultural elements and “modules” which were put together, mixed up, transformed and eventually brought creatively into a new and artificial shape. The result should produce a collective conviction of a common “national” cultural heritage.

In many modern cultures food and standardised recipes belong to those items which people refer usually to, when they aim at describing “national” peculiarities. Early modern cookbooks – many of them having been written in nineteenth century Europe and also in non-European regions – serve as hard documentation of what a canonised “national cuisine” has to consist of.

Allow me a few words concerning some literary aspects of cookbooks. Collections of recipes have existed since centuries ago – in Europe but, also in non-European regions, e.g., in Islamic civilisations too. For a long period, they served mainly as texts written by experts for experts. In the case of Iran, Professor Iraj Afshar had published the texts of two cookbooks from Safavid times: both of them contained peculiar recipes, their authors were chef-cooks at the royal courts of Esmâ’il I and, respectively, ‘Abbâs I. Both of them were highly professional and had written their treatises not for ordinary house-wives but for their professional companions and perhaps even for their over-lords themselves.

It had happened in France as an immediate consequence to the Grand Revolution that professional – mainly courtly – cooks who had used to work at service to aristocratic or even royal households attempted to transfer their gastronomic abilities from a mainly aristocratic atmosphere towards bourgeois environments. This tendency resulted eventually in coming into existence of high quality urban restaurants, mainly in Paris and subsequently elsewhere. These new institutions offered to them the possibility to present the products of their refined profession not anymore exclusively to aristocrats but also to a bourgeois audience.

In France, there was a famous cook named Antonin Carême who had served as *patissier* to Talleyrand, and later at the courts of George IV in London, of Alexander I in St. Petersburg and of Franz I in Vienna. His books *Le cuisinier Parisien* and *L’art de la cuisine française aux dix-neuvième siècle*, marked the process of canonisation of a French “national cuisine”, which was later on completed by others like Alexandre Dumas and Auguste Escoffier.

These were the blueprints for further canonical descriptions of “national cuisines” outside of France too. In Italy Pellegrino Artusi followed Carême’s model; in Germany there were (female) authors like Henriette Davidis, later on Mary Hahn, Maria Doenning in East Prussia and Johann Rottenhöfer in Bavaria. The culinary standards of the non-Hungarian part of the Habsburg monarchy were fixed by Katharina Prato, and Magdaléna Dobromila Rettigová has been the “mother” of national Czech cuisine.

The national standardisation of Russian cuisine was inspired by Antonin Carême himself: throughout the nineteenth century a complex blending of French traditions as transmitted by Carême and his pupils with local culinary customs at aristocratic residencies all over Russia resulted in a standardized description of “Russian national cuisine” which survived even Soviet attitudes. The standardisation of Hungarian cuisine was also initiated by two French chefs, who were then followed by famous Hungarian cooks. My point is that in all these cases the creation and standardisation of a “national culture” the canonisation of a “national cuisine” was included, and this development was tightly accompanied and documented by cookbooks which were mostly devoted to bourgeois

housewives who functioned in many cases as the backbones of the culinary aspects of national cultures.

But: What about non-European countries?

In Iran, there is a fascinating example: “Tabbâxi-ye neshât” (“The cuisine of delight”, first published roughly at the time of World War I), written by a lady who bore the Qâjâr honorary title “Neshâto d-Doule” (“the delight of the state”). It deserves to shed some light on her descent.

She was the grand-daughter of a French adventurer named Jules Richard who had found a position at Nâsero-din Shâh’s court, in the fifties of the 19th century. His son was acculturated in the urban milieu of upper-class layers in Tehran but, was also educated in accordance with French standards. This man, named Yusof/Joseph Richard, usually called “Yusof-Khân”. He had a strong ethnographic attitude to Iranian cultural life – in a maybe not too negative sense he was something like a “Saidian orientalist”. He was famous for his collection of coins and of various artefacts – and he had also collected a huge amount of Iranian recipes, which were published about 1900 – together with a “French cookbook” which he had written in Persian.

Neshâto d-doule whose personal name was Josephine Richard composed her own cookbook based on her father’s recipe-collection, and by having done this she has established a thorough tradition of how to describe Iranian cuisine and how to write an average Iranian cookbook. Consciously or unconsciously all authors of Iranian cookbooks follow her pattern, until the time being.

In the case of late nineteenth century Iranian cookbooks there is a another remarkable text which deserves much more attention than has been paid to, until now: A rather extraordinary person belonging to the Nâseri Qâjâr elites, Prince Nâder Mirzâ Qâjâr had also published a huge amount of recipes which he had collected during his activities as provincial governor in various parts of the country. In comparison to Yusof Richard’s text, his collected recipes lacked obviously any structural arrangement of his material. Eventually his book fell into oblivion in due course, whilst Joseph Richard’s collection and Josephine’s restrictive arrangement emerged as the “classical” description of what we perceive in our days as national cuisine. We must not forget that “Tabbâxi-ye Neshât” was expressively addressed to urban house-wives. The number of those who made immediate use of Josephine’s text was probably limited – I remember that still in the sixties of the last century cookbooks were rather rare in Iranian households, even in an urban atmosphere. Nevertheless, “Tabbâxi-ye Neshât” witnessed numerous reprints – probably more than fifty!

This consideration results consequently in a statement: The contemporary understanding of Iranian national cuisine, its definition and its images, came into existence under quite similar conditions as national cuisines in European countries had found their

shapes throughout the nineteenth century, just maybe one or two generations earlier. This process was by no means self-evident. There are many cases in non-European (and non-Western) countries which show that standardisation and definition of national cuisines has been rather the result of any political and/or ideological designs than of cross-cultural take-overs, as in the case of Neshâto d-doule and her followers.

There are two prominent examples, both dating back into post-World-War II times. We thank Arjun Appadurai (University of Pennsylvania) for a thorough analysis in his fascinating article “How to make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India” (in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 30/1 i.e. January 1988, pp. 3-24) which deals with the political and ideological preconditions for creating an Indian “national cuisine”, and also with the prerogatives which came into use by putting the defined goal into reality. In the case of India, it became important to combine items from extremely different topographic origin all over the subcontinent and to synthesize these items in a “melting-pot” called “Indian cuisine”.

Another as much fascinating example can be easily found by looking into Google for “national cuisine Israel”. By doing so, you will immediately submerge in an exciting debate on, among others, the “Israeliness” of Falafel and Hommos. It goes without saying, that “self-delimitation” against surrounding Arab culinary traditions has been an immense incentive in this case, but not exclusively: for establishing a stable “Israeli national cuisine” integration of Jewish dishes from various parts of the world with “Mediterranean” – i.e. mainly Arab – dishes was definitely an important requirement of formation of this national cuisine.

The integrative aspect of “national” cuisine can also be observed in the case of formation of national culinary habits in Iran: Since about two generations regional and local food is given much more attention than that had been the case in earlier times: the most famous example is “Fesenjân”, a ragout composed from grinded walnut kernels, pomegranate juice and fowl (mostly chicken, originally rather domestic or wild duck) which is usually ascribed to the Caspian province of Gilan.

There is something remarkable about this “modern”, canonised Iranian “national cuisine”: originally strongly inspired by the organizing concept of a strongly French influenced lady and by her semi-French father, “Iranian national cuisine” has developed not so much due to an external “strong political or ideological will” but rather by fashions and trends that did come into existence in and by middle-class urban and modernising layers of Iranian society – and I stress the word “urban” with particular intention!

Let us concentrate on further “Persianate” (or “Iranianate”) spheres of our globe and start with Iran’s probably most close neighbour, Afghanistan.

The hitherto first cook-book of Afghanistan (in a modern sense) I could catch information about was printed in the late twenties of the last century. A high general in the

Afghan army who made his career under the reign of Amânollâh, a certain Seyyed Mahmud Sâmî, published a huge compendium of recipes under the title “*Tabx-e ta’âm barâye maktab-e fonun-e harbiye*”. General Sâmî was “*modîr-o mofattesh-e ‘omum-e makâteb-e ‘askariye-ye Afghānestān*” and one of the most influential military functionaries in the modernising Amâni period. At his order every recruit to the Afghan army was obliged to submit one recipe from his originating region “mother’s home-cooking” preferred. This voluminous encyclopaedia was organised completely different in comparison to the Iranian pendant, using different categories and following geographical (regional) concepts. Later attempts to describe Afghan cookery used Sâmî’s great work as an ample source for various ways to define national Afghan cuisine. A few years later, General Sâmî was executed by Bacha-i Saqqâ’s (“Habibollâh II”) non-legitimized forces. His “*tabx-e ta’âm*” is still a unique and much too less analysed ethnographic source for Afghan everyday culture.

Not a few Iranianate regions witnessed their way into modernity under the auspices of Soviet power. It deserves therefore to throw a fresh and comparative look on culinary circumstances in the republics of Azerbaijan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. As one may expect it is not a matter of surprise that according to the general mood of shaping “socialist (i.e. Soviet) national” cultures for various Soviet republics and ethnic groups, defining and describing “national cuisines” followed a more or less joint pattern.

The most interesting case is the national culinary culture of contemporary Azerbaijan: It goes without saying that up to the aftermath of World War I urban food in Baku and other (today) “Azerbaijani” cities and regions was by far similar to the corresponding customs in Tabriz and even in Tehran, enriched by local and regional elements.

From the twenties onward, and particularly after World War II, Azerbaijani cookbooks followed the same organisational structure which was typical for Russian cookbooks, in general. As a particular feature of this structure I may point to the Russian habit, to differentiate “first” and “second” (“*pervyi*” and “*vtoroi*”) dishes, hors-d-oeuvres disregarded. This practice has dated back to the pattern of the already mentioned Antonin Carême which had been then maintained by his Russian followers, while later French authors – in the 20th century – had refrained from obeying this habit – just in the opposite to Artusi who obtained “*primi*” and “*secondi*” from Carême as obligatory for Italian cuisine (until today). In all Soviet “national” cookbooks, this concept remains irresistible and is accepted even in post-Soviet times as well. By stressing a number of regional peculiarities and neglecting a number of common features, Azerbaijani cuisine has found a rather distinct layout, in comparison to Iranian culinary matters.

Just allow me to give you a simple example: We know quite well the Iranian category of the dish called “*chelou-kabâb*”, which can be “*barg*”, “*soltân*” and “*kubide*” (also famous as “*kabâb-e lule*” or, in a turkified version and rather as an argot-expression, “*lule-*

kabâb). In Baku, the category “*chelou-kabâb*” (the category – not necessarily the dish itself) is inexistent, whereas “*lüle-kâbab*” is perceived as a basic and famous, typically Azerbaijani dish, maybe one of the national identification dishes. It is not necessarily served with plain rice and can be accompanied by various pilavs, or by salad or by bread. “*Kuku*” – Azeri “*Kükü*” – is by far not restricted to “*Sabzi-Kuku*” but, belonging to the “*zakuski*”, can be prepared from any vegetables, and even from leftovers from meat or fish. Fesenjân is regarded as a typical Azerbaijani dish, with an allusion rather to Georgia than to the Iranian province Gilan.

In Transoxiana – Uzbekistan and Tajikistan – there is no need of avoiding such allusions to Iranian matters because there had never been such ties in pre-Soviet times. Differentiating Tajik from Uzbek cuisine is a rather fruitless task, despite from insisting on local peculiarities. Nevertheless, the publication of “republican” cookbooks in these countries had been rather ample, particularly in Uzbekistan – and also in Uzbek language, just the opposite from Tajik matters: Before the republican independence, there had been a respectable number of books on Tajik cuisine but, most of them were published in Russian. I got hold of but one single title in Tajik, and even this one was published about almost sixty years ago (“*Taomi tojikî*”, Stalinabad 1961).

As rice is perceived a decisive item in describing Uzbek or Tajik cuisine, it deserves also to throw a glance on this category. In comparison to Iran and Afghanistan, among the rice eaters in the former Soviet Union there is one specific feature to be mentioned – the almost total absence of long-grain rice of the Basmati type, as the latter is more or less indispensable in Iran and may be to a slightly lesser extent in Afghanistan too.

As a consequence to the Japanese military activities in continental East Asia in the early thirties of the last century, up to two millions of Soviet citizens of Korean ethnicity had been deported from the Far Eastern Ussuri regions into more central parts of the Soviet Union as a precautionary measure – this must have been probably one of the earliest ethnic deportations under Stalin’s rule. Mainly in Central Asia, displaced Koreans attempted in due course growing rice thus making Soviet rice-consumers independent from any imports from outside. These Korean rice-farmers followed their own culinary customs and grew almost exclusively round grain rice instead of the Indian “Basmati” type of long grain species which had been common among Central Asian rice-eaters, before (as in Iran and Afghanistan). In due course, the Uzbek-Tajik “*pulau*” or “*palau*” (“*plov*” in Russian) has been prepared by short grain rice throughout the Soviet period, and in our times replacing this type of rice by any Basmati-like species will be immediately perceived as an offence to nowadays “sacred” national (Tajik or Uzbek) culinary customs. Here, and also in cook-books from Turkmenistan, the varieties of “*pulau*” differ strongly from any Iranian “*polou*-dishes” and resemble analogous Afghan traditions only along a very limited scale. As in Azerbaijani cook-books, the all-Soviet way of describing dishes and presenting recipes has

been perfectly obeyed in the cases of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, too. Also the particular flavour of cotton-seed-oil was inscribed into the specific character of Central Asian dishes, in opposite from ghee in Afghanistan and various animal and vegetable kinds of fat in Iran. The composition of a Soviet (and also post-Soviet) ethnic cook-book resembles Stalin's motto concerning national cultures, in an inverse and paradoxical manner: "Culture must be national by shape but, socialist by content". In the case of Soviet national cook-books, they had to contain standardised local peculiarities but, should be presented in a coherent and compatible Soviet style of cuisine or, of "*kulinariya*" in Russian (a famous cook-book from Baku is titled "*Azərbaycan kulinariyası*"). In all these cases we recognize the importance of the ethnographic collectors' activities as preconditions for writing such cookbooks. The "national cookbooks" had to fit into a compulsory overall Soviet pattern of writing such texts but, they should also serve as testimonials of the rich culinary diversity of ethnic popular culture in the USSR.

Anyway, what Iranian and Iranian (and Russian) cuisines have in common is a *hors-d-oeuvres* dish named "*Salade Olivier*", elsewhere in our world rather well known well known as "Russian Salad". Iranians regard this as a typical Iranian dish, and particularly for diaspora Iranians ("*irâniân-e khârej az keshvar*") it belongs to the items which initiate immediate home-sickness. Many of them explain its name by reference to the obligatory decoration with olives. In fact, this dish was imported from Russia via Baku and Tiflis as early as in the late nineteenth century, and "*Olivier*" does not at all refer to any decorative olives – it refers immediately to its inventor – Lucien Olivier, a Belgian maître at the once famous restaurant *L'Ermitage* in Moscow; he invented this dish ("salade russe") about 1860, and it is named after him exclusively throughout the whole Ex-Soviet Union – and also in Iran, where people are scarcely aware of its Russian origin.