



Traditional Cuisine of the Nekrasov Cossacks

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Abstract

The article is a comparative historical cross-cultural study of the traditional cuisine of the Nekrasov Cossacks – a group of Russian Old Believers known for their rich migration experience. Since the basis of the food system is fish, Nekrasovite's cuisine has many fish dishes, and at the same time the high status of cereal dishes remains. In the recipe and methods of preparation, the preservation of old Russian traditions is noticeable. In supplements to the main ration, one can see the influence of South European and Turkic cultures.

The purpose of this study is to identify the marking qualities of culinary traditions in the field of the historical dynamics of the cultural identity of the Nekrasov community.

The study shows that in the field of culinary traditions, numerous evidences of the historical path of this unique ethnosocial group have been accumulated. Despite the relative preservation of the ritual sphere, in the everyday and festive cooking of the Nekrasov Cossacks, multiple borrowings from the Danube and Mediterranean cuisine associated with complex processes of discrete inculturation have been revealed. New borrowings in the central zone of culture are explained by the fact that, with multiple migrations, it becomes more and more difficult for migrants to differentiate “their own” and “foreign” in such minute details as required by tradition, since in addition to the main cultural and genetic metropolis, a certain set of places of origin is formed in their minds.

Keywords

Cultural Interactions; Exotic Foods; Folk Cuisine; Food Base; Inculturation; Migration; Natural and Economic Adaptation; Nekrasov Cossacks; Old Russian Cuisine; Tradition



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Традиционная кухня казаков-некрасовцев

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Аннотация

Статья посвящена сравнительно-историческому кросскультурному исследованию традиционной кулинарии казаков-некрасовцев – группы русских старообрядцев, известной своим богатым миграционным опытом. Их кухня имеет ярко выраженный промысловый характер, поскольку основой системы питания является рыба, и при этом сохраняется высокий статус зерновых блюд. В рецептуре и способах приготовления заметно сохранение старорусских традиций, в дополнениях к основному рациону – влияние южноевропейских и тюркских культур.

Цель настоящего исследования – выявление маркирующих качеств кулинарных традиций в сфере исторической динамики культурного своеобразия некрасовской общины.

В результате исследования установлено, что в сфере кулинарных традиций аккумулированы многочисленные свидетельства исторического пути этой уникальной этносоциальной группы. Несмотря на относительную сохранность ритуальной сферы, в повседневной и праздничной кулинарии казаков-некрасовцев выявлены множественные заимствования из кухни Подунавья и Средиземноморья, связанные со сложными процессами дискретной инкультурации. Проникновения в центральную зону культуры объясняются тем, что при многократных переселениях мигрантам становится все сложнее дифференцировать «свое» и «чужое» в таких мельчайших деталях, как того требует традиция, поскольку помимо основной культурно-генетической метрополии в их сознании формируется некое множество мест исхода.

Ключевые слова

инкультурация; казаки-некрасовцы; межкультурные взаимодействия; миграции; народная кулинария; пищевая основа; природно-хозяйственная адаптация; старорусская кухня; традиция; экзотические продукты



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Introduction

The study of national culinary traditions has become one of the most interesting and fast-developing areas of ethnological research in recent decades. It is closely related to the cultural interaction issues and the natural and economic environment exploration. Any community that experienced long-distance migrations and long-term ethnic contacts has its combination of the original and borrowed dishes in everyday and festive life, filling the recipe with exotic products. Further, I'll consider this phenomenon using the example of the culinary preferences of the Nekrasov Cossacks.

The Nekrasov Cossacks is a group of Russian Old Believers, who, according to a legend, are the descendants of the participants in the Bulavin uprising of 1708-1709. Escaping the Russian imperial power, the survived rebels led by the ataman Ignat Nekrasov found their refuge in the neighbouring lands. At different times, other groups of Old Believers took the same path (Prigarin, 2010). In 1911-1962, immigrants from several Old Believers settlements, who lived in the Asian Minor part of Ottoman Turkey and north-western Dobrudja, began to move back to Russia – first to the Russian Empire, and later to the USSR. Among them, the Nekrasov Cossacks made a significant part. There were also representatives of Lipovans and Dunaks forming separate communities and mixed families. They began to settle in the Don region, the Transcaucasia, and in the North Caucasus – in the Krasnodar and Stavropol Krai. The destinies of these settlements are different (Vlaskina, 2018a; Vlaskina, 2018b). At present, the communities formed by migrants of the last wave (1962), who live in the villages of Novokumsky, Malosadovy, and Kumskaya Dolina in the Levokumsky district of the Stavropol Krai, have the greatest integrity and preservation of the Nekrasov tradition.

The culinary traditions of the Nekrasovites aroused great interest among the authors who were the first to turn to the description of the “Russian subjects of Sultan”, namely V. I. Ivanov-Zheludkov (1866), M. S. Tchaikovsky (Sadyk-Pasha) (1891), Ya. I. Smirnov (1896), V. F. Minorsky (1902). As a rule, these authors noted features indicating the Russian origin of Nekrasovites' cuisine. In particular, Smirnov writes about the high importance of fish and wine in the food system. Among the usual snacks, he mentions not only carp caviar with onions but also sauerkraut and wheat bread. As the main course of the parting meal, he mentions “*kashniki*, which are rice pancakes on eggs with honey” (Smirnov, 1896, pp. 12, 28, 30).

Ethnographic and dialectological studies carried out in the Soviet and post-Soviet times in the settlements of the Nekrasov Cossacks in the Stavropol Krai included the culinary questions. It is reflected in the generalizing publications: *Dictionary of Dialect of the Nekrasov Cossacks* by O. K. Serdyukova (2005), a monograph by L. A. Yacobi (2011) dedicated to the cultural heritage of the Nekrasov Cossacks and others.

Methods

The program of ethnolinguistic expeditions of SFU – ISERH SSC RAS 2007, 2010, 2011, 2013 and the project “The Russian Connection” in 2016 (Vlaskina, 2011; Zudin & Vlaskina, 2016, pp. 16, 17, 57, 82–85, 116–122) pay special attention to the traditional food system of the Nekrasovites. In these studies, for the first time, an integrated approach to the study of the traditional heritage of the Nekrasov Cossacks was carried out, and conclusions were drawn about the hierarchical relations between categories of cultural phenomena. The authors determine that in the context of the migration activity of Nekrasovites’ communities, ethnographic facts from the field of culinary can be considered as fairly objective markers of the historical dynamics of cultural identity, the formation of which was the product of a balance between the attitude of conservatism and the need to adapt to different natural and economic conditions.

This work follows this direction. Its main source is the materials of expeditions of the SFU – ISERH SSC RAS.

In the last decade, interest in traditional cuisine has increased due to the work of the Novokumsk’s branch of the Stavropol Regional Museum of Fine Arts. In the collection of ethnographic material from the old-timers of the Nekrasov community, the recording of culinary recipes is taking an important place, and their preparation and tasting became elements of interactive excursion programs. Agafya Vasilyevna Mironova has contributed much to the development of this collecting work. She herself is a bearer of the Nekrasov Cossacks tradition and at the same time an authoritative employee of the Novokumskiy branch of the Stavropol Regional Museum of Fine Arts. She put forward the idea of creating an illustrated culinary encyclopaedia of the Nekrasov Cossacks. This project was not implemented in the form conceived by her, but the topic became popular. In 2016, the cuisine of the Nekrasov Cossacks was assigned a special page on the website of the Stavropol Regional House of Folk Art. The phenomenon received the status of an object of intangible heritage, characterizing which the compilers of the explanatory text emphasize that the dishes of the Nekrasov Cossacks cuisine are “of particular interest for the study of traditional Russian culture” (Object of Intangible Heritage. Nekrasov Cossacks’ Cuisine). This is undoubtedly true, since among everyday and festive dishes, cereal and baked goods of various types, including those based on yeast from home hops, occupy a significant place. At the same time, the cooking process has a number of qualities which are noted by experts as characteristic features of the food customs of Russians (Lipinskaya, 2005, pp. 357–366, Voronina, 2017, pp. 65–72). However, among cereals in the first place there is a porridge made from rice grain which is not too typical for Old Russian cuisine. Moreover, rice retains the Don dialect name *princh* from Turkish *pirinç* (Rybalchenko, 2001, p. 423; Degtyaryov et al., 2003, p. 614) and not the name *Saracenic millet*, which existed everywhere in Russia until the end of



the 19th century (before it was replaced by the borrowing from the Romanian languages – *ris* (Vasmer, 3, p. 485)). The observer will surely notice certain innovations in the preparation of even the most traditional dishes. For example, the archaic everyday dish of *salamata* known from ancient times to the Slavs, Tatars, and popular among the Don and Zaporozhye Cossacks (Novak, Fradkina & Movchan, 2013, p. 184; Korolyov, 2002, p. 402), in the Nekrasovite's cookery, acquired a pronounced Mediterranean flavour due to the complication of the recipe.

A. V. Mironova describes the preparation of *salamata* as follows. Flour whipped in cold water is poured into boiling water in a thin stream and boiled, stirring. Finished *salamata* can be thick or thin, sweet or salty, depending on the additives to the base. Salt and bread crumbs fried in olive oil with finely chopped onions and ground black pepper are added to the simple one. It is served with kvass. For sweet *salamata*, which is usually made thicker, crushed peanuts are fried with bread crumbs and sugar is added before removing from the heat. Then the flour base is transferred into forms in layers, sprinkling each layer with sweet fried mass. This *salamata* is washed down with *kushav* (from the Turkish *hoşaf*), which is a fruit compote (A. V. Mironova, recorded by T. Yu. Vlaskina in 2013, Novokumskoe village).

Thus, even a brief review of the materials shows that the cultural and historical significance of the Nekrasov Cossacks cuisine phenomenon is much more complicated than simply preserving old Russian recipes.

Results and discussion

All available sources, either written, dating back to the 19th century, or numerous modern memories of life in Turkey, testify that fish has always been the basis of the Nekrasovites' food system. First of all, this was due to the fishing industry dominating in their economic structure. A. K. Rabchevskaya, who worked in the Stavropol communities shortly after their re-emigration in 1962, claimed that, according to the stories, the fish menu was so monotonous that it became the cause of diseases which, in the absence of medical assistance, even led to deaths (Rabchevskaya, 2012, p. 31). Perhaps this judgment referred to a certain period or was associated with the desire of the settlers to emphasize the hardships of life in a foreign land. Similar trends can be traced in early records. According to modern interviews, the habit of a certain type of food made it an element of nostalgia:

“We didn't know any problems there about fish, but here we went crazy without fish, we got used to it. It is our main food, and nobody wants to eat meat because everyone likes fish” (Object of Intangible Heritage. Nekrasov Cossacks' Cuisine).

Not so much a lack of fish in general, as the absence of certain species created problems after arriving in the USSR. Pike, ram, carp, mullet, mackerel, catfish, pike perch, herring, flounder – the variety of fish eaten included not only river, but also species common in the Sea of Marmara and the Mediterranean (Vlaskina, 2014,

p. 153–154). It is not surprising that the fish stalls of the Stavropol Krai made a depressing impression on the Nekrasovites.

“Hake, pollock – how to cook it? Our people were fishing in Kuma, but there was no luck, there is not always water either” (T. T. Elisyutikova, recorded by T. Yu. Vlaskina in 2010, Novokumskoe village).

Field materials contain a large number of descriptions of fish dishes, some of which are included in everyday menus and others in ritual menus. Nekrasovites cook white fish *steuden* (cold soup) and doused fish (fried and stewed with onions and tomatoes) for a patronal feast and for a commemoration.

Fish dishes of the wedding were salted carp or pike caviar, whipped, with vegetable oil and lemon juice; dried pike salad with vinegar and garlic; crayfish salad. In addition to fish slices, the whole ram was fried for a wedding treat. This action was an element of wedding age and sex symbolism. Dried or dry-roasted medium-sized ram served as a traditional treat for young people during the evenings at the bride’s, along with fried watermelon and squash seeds and sweets (M. V. Beresteneva, recorded by T. Yu. Vlaskina in 2013, Novokumskoe village).

Crayfish stuffed with rice are among the complex festive dishes that do not seem to have ritual significance. A similar dish is known to the Old Russian cuisine (Levshin, 1816, p. 61) and in the Don Delta – crayfish soup with shells filled with a mixture of millet or rice groats and crayfish neck meat, which has the same obscure festive status, while being too laborious for everyday meals (Matishov et al., 2012, p. 192). In the Danube Delta, stuffed crayfish appear among the rare preserved recipes, possibly borrowed by the locals from the Cossack settlers (Stroe & Iancu, 2012, p. 76–77).

On weekdays, Nekrasovites cooked *sherba* (fish soup), fish fried in a copper-smith (cast-iron pot with a narrow bottom), baked with cabbage, in porridge, fried on *sopra* (in a large tin pan), fish heads baked with vegetables, fried *axeni* and *maranushki* (fish insides). Another dish of finely chopped fish entrails that resembles porridge is called *sal'nik*. According to the informants, *sal'nik* is a dish from childhood; it was no longer prepared in Russia. In Turkey, Nekrasov Cossacks also prepared salted fish for future use. To cook it they soaked it and baked in large chunks in a Russian oven. Dumplings with fish (usually with catfish meat, they were called catfish dumplings) are still popular. Catfish dumplings also have a ritual status: they are prepared for a special cooker’s dinner, which is prepared the day after the patronal feast (Zudin & Vlaskina, 2016, p. 121).

In the preliminary preparation of fish, regionally marked techniques can be traced. For example, the Nekrasov Cossack women prepare large fish for frying in the same way as it is done in the Lower Don region (Vlaskina, 2013, p. 279). A fish stock weighing 2–3 kg is cut along the spine, unfolding in order to remove the entrails. In the Don Delta, this type of cutting is called *na plat* (possibly, could be translated as resembling a piece of cloth). Fins, tail, ridge are separated – these parts are used to prepare fish soup. Then they make frequent cuts that reach the bones



on both halves of a fish carcass (*kuropit'*), and after that cut into portions about three fingers wide (E. I. Babayova, recorded by T. Yu. Vlaskina in 2013, Novokumskoe village).

One of the original dishes of the ritual Nekrasovite's cuisine is white or fish *steuden* (cold fish soup). It resembles a little *okroshka* with dried fish, which is known to Russian cuisine for at least two centuries (Levshin, 1816, p. 47–49), and also to the Don old-timers in the Lower, but especially in the Upper Don (field materials of the author). But in the Don region kvass is often replaced with milk whey. The Nekrasovite's recipe has fewer ingredients, but a more complicated preparation procedure. As it should be in pre-Petrine cuisine the traditions of which are honored by the Old Believers, potatoes are excluded in the white *steuden*. This emphasizes the ritual status of the dish, since in the daily meal the “sinful” vegetable took a firm place in soups. Nekrasovite's bake it with fish, chopped parsnip, carrot and onion or rice in a coppersmith. There was even a special Nekrasov Cossacks' style of cooking potatoes, frying in large slices.

For fish *steuden*, fresh pike is cleaned, washed thoroughly and placed in brine for 10 days to 2 weeks. Then the fish is dried, but not until cooked, and baked in a Russian stove. During the baking process, it should turn brownish in color.

“When the fish is baked, the stove must be heated hot, but burn out so that there is no more fire, and almost extinguished embers remain in the stove ... then it absorbs the smell of haze ... and gives off the smell of damp fish. Then the *steuden* will not smell of dampness,” A. V. Mironova emphasized (recorded by T. Yu. Vlaskina in 2013, Novokumskoe village).

In her collection of materials on cooking, which she made up after a consultation with the most authoritative old cooks, Agafya Vasilyevna paid close attention to such details, trying to achieve the complete identity of the taste, appearance and smell of each dish. While the fish is being baked, water is boiled in a cauldron over a fire in an open hearth. Then the baked fish is placed in boiling water for about 10 minutes, so that it becomes soft enough, after which it is taken out of the cauldron, cooled and taken apart by hand into fibers. Separately, with a very sharp knife, the lemon is cut together with the zest, garlic and dill as small as possible. In order for the dish not to taste bitter, you need to take lemons of thin-crust varieties. All ingredients are mixed, poured with white bread kvass and allowed to brew for two hours.

Despite the importance of fish, the priority and variety of pastries, it is difficult not to notice the abundance of vegetables and spices in the diet of the Nekrasov Cossacks. The most popular are several types of pepper – sweet bell pepper, bitter, pungent, allspice. Beans, peas and other legumes, eggplants, tomatoes, cucumbers, cabbage, corn – these and other garden crops have significantly diversified the fish menu. The same can be noted about Mediterranean fruits, among which are the already mentioned lemons, and besides them figs, grapes, pomegranates, oranges. They used two varieties of squash in cooking: squash-*tambulka* (*Cucurbita*

pepo, from the Turkish *tombul* – round (Serdyukova, 2005, p. 285)) and squash-*rustyanka* (possibly can be translated as Greek squash since in Nekrasovites' dialect *rustyanka* means 'a Greek woman') or *ruskanka* (*Cucurbita moschata*). The squash called *tambulka* is the basis of several colorful dishes. In addition to the pulp of the fruit, squash seeds are eaten, from which, as well as from peanuts, and various nuts halva is prepared, and sauces for sweet dishes. *Nardek*, which was previously well known in the Don region, is sweet syrup brewed from watermelons. Nowadays, when preparing first and second courses, Nekrasovites use more sunflower oil, but they emphasize that olive oil is better and in Turkey they usually use it, which of course influenced the taste of the dishes. Onions and garlic, indispensable in modern Russian cuisine, are consumed by the Nekrasovites in much larger quantities than is usual. There is even an appetizer of onions cooked whole together in beans. The finished onion is removed from the bean broth not allowing it to be boiled, and served as a separate dish. Such attention to onions and garlic corresponds to both oriental tastes and medieval customs of the Russian peasantry. According to experts, "These two potions were essential in the diet of Russians," apparently solving not only nutritional, but also therapeutic and prophylactic problems. (Lipinskaya, 2005, p. 355).

The composition and methods of using herbal products, the peculiarities of the combination of ingredients and spices provide a variety of information for analysis. The author defines three types of perception of culinary innovation by Nekrasovites. First, this is the replacement of inaccessible products with local ones. Such a model, apparently, is the earliest, forced measure when adapting to new natural and economic conditions. Then Nekrasovites began to add previously unused ingredients to traditional dishes, first of all spices, which may indicate changes in taste: slightly bland Russian dishes in exile acquire the pungency and aroma of the East. And finally, a number of exotic dishes are included in the diet practically unchanged, the use of which does not contradict the religious and food taboo of the community. Sometimes exotics retain foreign-language names, which, however, may undergo certain distortions. For example, *plyaschinda* is a puff pie made from unleavened dough with squash filling, popular on the festive table of southern Old Believers, in which the Romanian *placinda* is easily guessed (Dănilă, 2017).

To prepare the dough, they sift the flour into a large cup, make a funnel-shaped hole in it, into which a warm mixture of water, salt and vegetable oil is slowly poured. Then they knead tough elastic dough like homemade noodles, but without eggs. For the filling, the squash should be peeled, grated and placed in a bowl with holes to drain excess liquid. The dough is divided into several parts and rolled out in very thin crumpets which are greased with vegetable oil, sprinkled with grated squash with sugar and rolled up. They put the rolls in a frying pan drizzled with vegetable oil, and then season the whole cake with sour cream on top. *Plyaschinda* is baked in a Russian oven (T. T. Elisyutikova, recorded by T. Yu. Vlaskina in 2010,



village Novokumskoe). Such a dish is typical for the Old Believers of Dobrudja, where, in addition to squash, cheese and fruit are used as a filling. This dish, without a doubt, is a Danube trace in the culinary history of the Nekrasov Cossacks (Zudin & Vlaskina, 2016, p. 16).

Squash, or rather squash seeds are used to prepare the so-called *tabula* noodles. A special sauce is made from fried and carefully crushed seeds, into which the noodles are then thrown, brought to a boil and removed from the fire (A. V. Mironova, recorded by T. Yu. Vlaskina in 2013, in the village of Novokumskoe). Such noodles are also called *halva* noodles, probably because squash seed *halva* is popular in Turkey.

No less significant is the *pyaz* – a salad of beans with onions, garlic, black pepper and dill with a spicy dressing of vinegar and olive oil. In this cold appetizer, Turkish *piyaz* is easily guessed (Bayindir & Bayindir, 2019).

The conservatism of the Nekrasov Cossacks traditions aimed at consciously preserving the culture and language of the ancestors according to Ignat's behests did not contradict the perception of foreign culinary customs in everyday life, since ritual food was carefully protected from foreign influences. It had to remain without distortion, as an element of the axiological core of culture, along with language, faith and Cossack law. In many ways, this task was solved: a complex of ritual dishes was formed, which are still being prepared for the patronal feast.

Their recipes are kept to the smallest detail and it is in the ritual menu that the Old Russian spirit is most noticeable, as well as certain overlaps with the cuisine of the Don Cossacks of the early period. This group, of course, includes *pies with porridge* – large flat pies made of lean dough with rice and raisins, which are baked on the hearth of a Russian oven. The hours-long process of baking *pies with porridge* is quite laborious; they are not prepared for ordinary feasts, only for the patronal feast and for the commemoration. This old pastry has also gone from the wedding menu, according to which pies were served with porridge on the second day of the celebration. However, to this day they remain something of a symbol of an unbroken connection with the heritage of ancestors, which lasts for the third century. The eldest daughter of V. P. Sanichev who brought the Nekrasovites from Turkey in 1962, Maria Vasilyevna once said that her father used a lot of energy in his time to convince the older Cossacks of the need to carefully preserve their traditions. Even if we are talking about difficulties in preparing pies, “they will not exist and we will not exist”, he said (M. V. Beresteneva, recorded by T. Yu. Vlaskina in 2013, Novokumskoe village). This thought is echoed by other informants: “The pies with porridge did not begin together with us, and they will not end together with us” (Zudin & Vlaskina, 2016, p. 119).

At the same time, in the ritual sphere, one can find a foreign cultural influence. In particular, the sweet dish under the slightly strange name of the *skulakapyshechki* (can be translated as small crumpets from the fist), which was included in the register of obligatory treats for the patronal feast and for the memo-

rial dinner, is very reminiscent of the Turkish desserts *lokma* and *tulumba*, which are also called “Sultan’s delicacies”. These are sweet balls of dough, in the first case, fried in oil and poured with sugar or honey syrup, and in the second, boiled in thick syrup with the addition of nuts or peanuts (Kraig & Sen, 2013). The origin of Nekrasovite’s traditional low-alcohol drink *buza* which is prepared for the women’s meal on the Midwife Day, may be linked both to Old Russian and Turkish culinary traditions. *Buza* has been known in Russia since the 12th century. *Buza* or *half-beer* was the name of the mash made from boiled and fermented millet with honey (Lipinskaya, 2005, p. 356). However, in Turkish cuisine there is a similar drink with a similar name *boza*, which is the result of fermentation of crushed cereals or flour with yeast and sugar (Bayat & Yıldız, 2019). Their origin is possibly interconnected historically, but the Turkish recipe for *buza* is closer to a Nekrasovian one, since, like the local Turks, they ferment the drink with corn flour with yeast (Object of Intangible Heritage. Nekrasov Cossacks’ Cuisine). Such penetrations are associated with complex processes of discrete inculturation. It is obvious that with multiple migrations, it becomes more and more difficult for migrants to differentiate “their own” and “foreign” in such minute details as tradition requires, since in addition to the main cultural and genetic metropolis, a certain set of places of origin is formed in their minds.

Conclusion

Thus, we can conclude that the significance of the traditional cuisine of the Nekrasov Cossacks lies not only in the opportunity to join the archaic strata of Russian culture, but also in its marking properties. In the sphere of culinary traditions, numerous evidences of the historical path of this unique ethnosocial group have been accumulated, which deserve a deep cross-cultural study.

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