TRADITIONAL VS MODERN FOOD IN THE OJIBWA NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURE AS PRESENTED IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S *THE ANTELOPE WIFE*

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Abstract: The present paper focuses on the dichotomy between traditional vs modern food as treated in the novel entitled "The Antelope Wife" by Louise Erdrich. It deals with the connection between food and culture, the Ojibwa Native American culture. The cultural aspect is one of the most important issues in a country and food stands for one of the most relevant cultural aspects. This study highlights the various types of food presented in the novel as well as the role each of them plays in the Ojibwa culture. The spiritual food and the food of the dead are two very important types of food well represented in the novel. The examples extracted from the novel are given in order to provide a better understanding of the function food has in performing the Ojibwa rituals. The conclusion drawn from this analysis is that food plays a very important part in the novel as it widens the readers' perspective on the Ojibwa Native American culture.

Key words: food, culture, traditional, modern, Ojibwa, Native American, spiritual.

1. INTRODUCTION

The novel entitled *The Antelope Wife* by Louise Erdrich invites the readers into the mystical world of the Ojibwa Native American culture. The story, which unfolds throughout the four parts of the book, is very complex. It has an intricate pattern being both modern and traditional since there are involved many generations of the Ojibwa families. "It is almost impossible to make a clear-cut distinction between myth and truth in this story. Centuries of myth are layered on generation upon generation of family tales that cycle and circle like a tribal dance" (Pirnuta & Badulescu, 2011:26).

As Lester Standiford considers, "in any culture, myth, legend, and folklore serve to explain the unexplainable, to promote cultural continuity and survival, and also to entertain" (Baker, 1982: 168).

Erdrich draws our attention on the life and traditions of the Ojibwas either by inserting us into narrative fragments belonging to their beliefs and customs or by describing the way in which they do certain things. There are many cultural references in the novel, but the present study focuses on one element that might have the most profound connection with the Ojibwa culture and that aspect is food. Modern Native American cuisine is varied. The indigenous food ingredients, plants and herbs represent the Native American food and cuisine.

The spiritual or sacred food, which has unique powers, is given by gods. The food of the dead is specific to the Ojibwas who believe that the dead members of the family visit after death those still living. Offering food is one means of showing respect to them as well as a means of communication with the spiritual world. Almost every page of the novel mentions food or makes use of food imagery. If food is not directly described, then people or objects are presented by using images of food.

2. TRADITIONAL FOOD

Food has always been of primary importance in the lives of the human beings because our existence depends mostly on it. The Native Americans had to provide food for themselves since they lived in wilderness. Thus, each Native American cultural group adapted its diet to the area where they used to live.

The novel offers readers valuable information about the traditional Ojibwan food. In the first part of the novel, which focuses on events taking place in the remote past, nature is presented as the only provider for ingredients used for preparing food. For instance, even Roy who is not an authentic indigenous man, but who lives as one, makes his own food in the Ojibwa style: "In lard, from a neighbor's pig, Scranton Roy fried strips of late squash, dried sand-dune morels, inky caps, field and oyster mushrooms, crushed acorns, the guinea eggs. He baked sweet bannock, dribbled on it wild aster honey aged in the bole of an oak, dark and pungent as mead" (Erdrich, 1998:9).

Thus, by traditional food we understand the ingredients used, the cooking preparation ritual as well as the cooking process. In Louise Erdrich's novel, most quotes referring to traditional food are found in the first two parts, but the most significant ones are part of the first.

The part, in which Blue Prairie Woman and Matilde's journey is described, offers a disgusting image for the modern reader, but this was the lifestyle of the tribal people: "Blue Prairie Woman then stretches the dog out, skins and guts her, cuts off her head, and lowers the chopped carcass into a deep birch-bark container. Suspended over flames, just right, she knows how to heat water the old way in that makuk. Tending the fire carefully, weakening, she boils the dog. When it is done, the meat softened, shredding off the bones, she tips the gray meat, brown meat, onto a birch tray. Steam rises, the fragrance of the meat is faintly sweet. Quietly, she gestures to her daughter. Prods the cracked oval pads off the cooked paws. Offers them to her" (Erdrich, 1998:19).

Blue Prairie Woman kills and cooks the dog from a maternal instinct since she wants to feed her baby. Even if this act can be perceived as being brutal, she adapts to the situation. Louise Erdrich does not change any information regarding the diet of the Native Americans as she is willing to describe their lifestyle as accurate as possible, laying emphasis upon authenticity.

The Ojibwa people had a practical way of thinking and dogs represented for them both great companions and a valuable source of food. The author presents in her novel the habit of haunting and gathering practiced by the Ojibwa people: "Eats bird's eggs. A snared habit. Roots. She remembers fire and cooks a handful of grouse chicks. The herd flows in steps and spurting gallops deeper into the west. When they walk, she walks, following, dried berries in a sack made of her dress. When they run, she runs with them. Naked, graceful, the blue beads around her neck" (Erdrich, 1998:20).

In the second part of the book, we do not have so many references to traditional food, but they still exist. For instance, another reference to traditional food is again a puppy: "I hear these words – Get under the house, Melvin, fetch that white puppy now. Bam! (…) He drags me out and gives me to a grandma, who stuffs me in a gunnysack and

slings me down beside the fire (…) Sharpen up the knife. Grandma's voice. That's a nice fat white puppy. Someone else. He'll make a good soup, but do you think enough to go around? Should we kill another one? Then, right above me, they start arguing about whether or not I'll feed twenty. Me, just a little chunk of a guy, owah! No! I bark. No! No! I'm not enough for even five of your big strong warrior sons. Not me. What am I saying? I'm not enough for any of you! Anybody! No! I'm sour meat. I don't want to be eaten!" (Erdrich, 1998:76-77).

Again, we have in front of our eyes a brutal scene, the way in which an animal is sacrificed. But beyond the dog's tragedy, there is a funny side. Cooking a dog is for survival. Fortunately, in this part the puppy is saved by an innocent girl, by Cally, the two of them having a special connection.

The importance of food for the Ojibwa culture is not only suggested in the text, but it is also directly expressed. Frank states: "We are people of simple food straight from the earthen earth and from the lakes and from the woods. Manomim. Weyass. Baloney. A little maple sugar now and then" (Erdrich, 1998:138-139). What they eat makes them stand apart from the other Native American cultural groups; thus, food defines them.

However, at celebrations like the wedding of Rozin and Frank, the old customs come back alive and Ojibwan food surpasses any other modern recipe: "The meats of the day were all game acquired by the brothers and uncles and prepared according to their own special methods. The moose was unearthed from a cooking pit in the backyard. Fish, dunked in fluffy beer batter, fried, dripped a delicate grease in a bedding of paper towels. Deer sausages sizzled in light gold fat. (…) Ambrosia appeared. Wild rice and onion. More wild rice with shredded ham" (Erdrich, 1998:170).

Thus, the novel entitled *The Antelope Wife* gives an accurate account of the Ojibwan traditional food which functions as a distinctive cultural feature of the society.

3. MODERN FOOD

Modern food is related to modernity, to the days in which we live. Modernization brings with it a transformation, which includes a cultural aspect. Over time people have evolved, they have changed their thinking and values altering the way they eat. Modernity goes hand in hand with civilization and it stands for a break with tradition.

In the first part, although we have many references to traditional food, we find some elements related to modern times. Starting with the chapter entitled *Klaus Shawano* (Erdrich, 1998:21), the action does not take place anymore in the forest, but in a modern place, a civilized one, definitely in a city. The first element of civilization that appears in the first section about food is Frank's bakery. This is the moment when Rozin falls in love with Frank: "I was married to Richard Whiteheart Beads. Our twins were five years old. From that old-time connection, I had always known the Shawanos as a good family, big and numerous with relations all over the place, in every walk of life, but I didn't know a single one individually until I bought a loaf of bread from Frank. That was shortly after we came here to the city. He ran his own storefront bakery. It was his

calling" (Erdrich, 1998:36). In this quote we see the moment when the two fall in love and the element that seems to link the two is that piece of bread.

What Frank gives Rozin to eat seems to be something sweet. This is definitely a very beautiful gesture: "The first time Frank and I took a walk together, he fed me bits of cinnamon roll from his bare fingers and then bent over and tied my shoe. (…) Frank unrolled the soft crush of bread in his fingers, shared. Toward the middle the taste intensifies. Delicious spice. Talking of something else he fed the syrupy, fresh central bud to me from his fingers" (Erdrich, 1998:37). Here we find a similarity to what happens today when lovers walk for the first time together and the boy offers something sweet to the girl.

In the second part of the book, we have no reference to modern food, just to the traditional one. In the third and fourth parts of the novel, there is a more modern perspective concerning the Ojibwa people's food preferences. The Ojibwas eat typical American products as the following scenes suggest: from the first part, "A box of Cheez-It crackers floats on the counter before me, perfect little squares. I open the box and begin to eat, holding the crackers between my teeth, mashing them into a salty paste, licking them until they disintegrate" (Erdrich, 1998:40) or from the third part "End of August. It is night, the cheese curd stands frying curdled milk, the Australian batter-fried potatoes, the chili con carne bars at war, the dip cones, and the beer gardens. Eating something long, snakey, and blue, we watch the show horses practice outside the arena in a sawdust ring" (Erdrich, 1998:144).

The third part of the book is very rich in relevant scenes related to modern food. Here all the characters live a normal life and references to traditional food are almost nonexistent. In this part, Cally is sent by her mother to work at Frank's bakery which turns into a central element.

For the first time, we can see in the following quote, the rules of hygiene that are respected when Cally works with food: "I start right in and learn the cash register, the prices, how to handle the pastries with a plastic glove or wax-paper tissue. The first morning, I'm already selling doughnuts. Also maple long johns, hot pies, raised braids, and crullers. Things go fine except that I get vibed from the wife of Klaus" (Erdrich, 1998:104). Further on, we can see that Frank's bakery sells pastries; normal things we find in any city, almost on every street: doughnuts, hot pies, crullers. Nowadays, these products can be found anywhere; these sweets are made to stop your hunger for a moment. This is the role of the bakery.

The most representative element for modern food in this part is for sure the blitzkuchen: "Blitzkuchen! All of a sudden, he gets talkative. He's trying to reconstruct the recipe. Trying to win the state fair's highest honor. The cake is a fabulous thing, he says. The cake is holy. Extraordinary with immense powers of what sort nobody knows. He calls it the cake of peace. The cake of loving sincerity. For years, he tells me, he has searched and tested for the exact recipe. In fact, the hunt for this recipe could be called his life quest. Always, between other concoctions, even inventions like his popular rhubarb sludge bars, when he has a little moment to himself, Frank Shawano makes a

trial cake. Attempts a variation on the length of time he beats the batter. Amount of ground hazelnuts. Types of sugars and butters" (Erdrich, 1998:114).

In this part, we can easily see Frank's obsession. Although he spends a lot of time in the kitchen cooking different recipes, he still seems to be unable to find this one. For days he tries to cook the recipe and many hours he searches for the perfect ingredient to give the cake the perfect taste.

Grandma Zosie recognizes that the crucial ingredient it needs is fear, but she doesn't tell anyone. Once the characters realize the perfection of the blitzkuchen with the inclusion of fear, the almost mystical quest for that perfect flavor ends. The book also mentions chocolate raspberry sugar cake whose ingredients are not specific to the Americans; otherwise, the blitzkuchen is not specific to Americans. However, we can speak about a cultural mix of ingredients and recipes.

This part also refers to the characters' lifestyle. For instance, Cecille has a healthy life: "But even after lunch, which was simple – health food for Cecille, nuts and carrots and a swipe of peanut butter – she sits back and tells me stories of her students" (Erdrich, 1998:111). We have another reference to what she eats: "As a martial arts enthusiast Cecille eats and drinks nothing that is not healthy. Except for an occasional root beer" (Erdrich, 1998:115). We can see that Cecille cares for her health, she only eats raw fruits and vegetables. "Cecille pursues her physical and spiritual discipline at all times. She has a deep belief we are what we eat and she is trying to change her brother's serious demeanor" (Erdrich, 1998:115). Of course, this is a mental thing about how we perceive food, in other words, everything we eat influences our mood.

At the end of the third part, when Frank and Rozin's wedding is organized, all their dishes are presented: "Macaroni. Cecille's self-advertised carved watermelon boat filled with exotic fruits strewn with plump grapes and toasted coconut. Six types of potato salad. Fry bread in a cardboard box. Still to come, pies of winter saved and fresh picked fruits. Marshmallow Krispy Bars, studded with colored chocolate bits. Fudge. Of course, Frank's cake. Towering. Glistening. The Blitzkuchen. Curls of white chocolate. Raspberries. Stiffly whipped cream" (Erdrich, 1998:170-171). In this section we find their food and we can see that they have both simple and more complicated dishes. In this part, there is a lot of modern food, but there are also a few references to traditional food when referring to the preparation of meat. On the other hand, we have many sophisticated recipes.

4. SPIRITUAL FOOD AND FOOD OF THE DEAD

Louise Erdrich's novel entitled *The Antelope Wife* is "a tale of love, betrayal and revenge being both shaped and shadowed by the mythic Native American spirits" (Pirnuta & Badulescu, 2011:26.

Each Native American cultural group can be defined through a Native American language, an inherited place and a set of traditions – folklore, ceremonies, rituals, religion or even food. The heritage is "passed from generation to generation in songs, legends (…) healing rituals, spiritual rites of passage, and vision journies to the sacred world" (Baker, 1982:80).

Apart from the ordinary food, the novel suggests us another type of food: the spiritual or sacred food. This kind of food is given by gods and has unique powers. It goes right through one's soul granting humans a direct connection with the divine forces. In the novel, the Blitzkuchen represents such a type of spiritual food: "The cake is holy. Extraordinary with immense powers" (Erdrich, 1998:114). It contains "the very secret of life" (Erdrich, 1998:135). The preparation of the cake is described as a ritual. The care with which Klaus handles the ingredients is unusual and it suggests us that his skill at making desserts was a gift given by gods only to a few chosen people. His method of preparing the cake fascinates the Ojibwa elders who sit and wait patiently to see the final result.

The fact that the Blitzkuchen stands for spiritual food becomes obvious in the following scene: "More than delicious, the fragrance that floated. Impossible. Perhaps an Anishinabe vision word comes close and perhaps there is no way to describe the premonition they all experienced then, as he tenderly drew the pan along the rack until it rested secure between his thick, furry, rag-protected paws " (Erdrich, 1998:137).

The smell of the cookies is literally divine. The Blitzkuchen triggers visions of the spiritual world for the Ojibwa men: "Together, they sat, swallowed the last crumbs, pressed up the powdery sweetness with their fingers. When they had licked every grain into themselves, they sat numb with pleasant feelings and then, over the group, there stole a sweet poignance. Some saw in the lowering light the shadows of loved ones who went before us on the road, whose spirits they had fed as well as they could, food of the dead (Erdrich, 1998:139). The connection between men and spirits, which comes immediately after they taste the cookies, is a proof of what the Blitzkuchen is, not just a common dessert, but sacred food.

Amongst all the Ojibwas who have tasted the Blitzkuchen, Frank – who was just a child – is the most touched. He becomes a devoted baker who comes to be recognized according to the desserts he makes: "He came to our house once. We knew it was him because there was sugar on his pants and flour in his hair. There was in his hands a large box and in the box, between layers of wax paper, an assortment of fancy sugar cookies cut into the shapes of carrots, trees, dolphins, stars, moons, dogs, and flowers" (Erdrich, 1998:57). His passion is a way of living, it offers him peace: "Simple things – cake, bread, pie. Also complicated European torten. These are Frank's ways of making sense of the world. When confused and when challenged, he bakes as though the order he imposes on his raw ingredients will straighten out his thoughts" (Erdrich, 1998:115).

Even though many Ojibwa people tasted the Blitzkuchen, he is the only one who tries to replicate the taste and find the original recipe: "The hunt for this recipe could be called his life quest" (Erdrich, 1998:114).

He becomes so absorbed in finding out the missing ingredient of the recipe that he believes this is his duty: "That is my calling" (Erdrich, 1998:117). He even identifies himself with the cake, fact which affects his relationship with Rozin who gets fed up about his obsession and says to him: "Not everything reflects on your cake (…) Not everything is about your cake" (Erdrich, 1998:179).

Nevertheless, Frank cannot reproduce the original taste of the Blitzkuchen until his wedding. It is then when he finally reduplicates the taste, discovering the secret: "The final and the missing ingredient – fear" (Erdrich, 1998:179). Once again, the Ojibwa people come into contact with the world of the spirits. Frank accomplished his quest thus becoming the next chosen man to prepare the sacred food.

There is another chapter in the novel suggesting a topic related to another type of food specific to the Ojibwa culture: *Food of the Dead* as the title of chapter 17 suggests. The Ojibwa community believes in the existence of spirits. It is believed that members of their families visit them even after death, so it is vital for them to be respected.

One method of showing respect for the spirits is to offer them food which they liked when they were alive. Shaken up by her ex-husband's death, Rozin decides to prepare food for him and their dead daughter, Deanna. She behaves as they were alive and sets the table for them, too: "On the table, at the western end because that is the death direction, she sets two places carefully. Spirit plates, with tobacco. A paper napkin folded once. Knife, fork, and spoon all on one side. She fills the plates with the wild rice in a heap beside the turkey, the milky, buttery corn, a bit of fruit salad containing strawberries, and beside them, a large bowl of vanilla pudding. Eat it, eat it, all up, now, she thinks, vehemently, heartsick, setting another smaller plate for her daughter at the head of the stairs, then go to sleep" (Erdrich, 1998:188). This fragment draws our attention to some Ojibwan beliefs and practices, the West being the direction of the dead. It also describes the ritual of food offering, which can be practiced every day until the alive feel that the spirits are content. As far as the role of food is concerned, Erdrich suggests that food is a way of showing love to the loved ones which remains the same even after they leave this world.

Moreover, food giving is represented as a means of communication with the spiritual world. For example, Rozin visits Deanna's grave and "Still, she takes food to her grave. A bag of airline peanuts. A bowl of oatmeal. She leaves a pack of playing cards. An apple. What she has in her purse" (Erdrich, 1998:192). The food which she leaves at the grave is an indication of the fact that she has neither forgotten her daughter nor stopped caring for her. This chapter gives readers other pieces of valuable information about the role of food in the Ojibwa culture.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the novel entitled *The Antelope Wife* focuses not only on the lives of several generations of twins, but also on various cultural aspects of the Ojibwa cultural group, among them being their traditional food. By reading the novel, we can find out what the Ojibwa people ate in the past and which were the changes that have occurred in their culture with regard to their diet once they modernized.

The first part of the book offers information about the way in which the Ojibwa got food while the next parts show us that the traditional food is still prepared and enjoyed especially at ceremonies. In addition, the novel has suggestions of other types of food, too: the sacred food and the food of the dead. Basically, food is not meant only for

humans, but also for spirits. The spiritual or sacred food is food for one's soul and has a different role than the common food.

The story even presents the readers a character – Frank – whose evolution revolves around one type of food: the Blitzkuchen. The story of this dessert is the story of discovering a means of communication with the Ojibwa ancestors. Food of the dead represents also a way of keeping in touch with the dead members of the family as well as a form of respect towards them. Thus, food in all its forms plays a vital role in the Ojibwa culture because it feeds more than the body, it feeds the soul and spirit.

The present paper analyzes the clear-cut distinction between traditional and modern food in Louise Erdrich's novel entitled *The Antelope Wife*. Generally, in the book, the preparation of traditional food is described minutely and the images created are cruel and disgusting. The traditional perspective is represented by the Ojibwa Native Americans who were mainly hunters and gatherers. The modern scenes are similar to our reality, to our days.

As Kenneth Lincoln suggests the Native American literature remains "integrated with and inextricable from its embracing culture" (Baker, 1982:81). Thus, literature does not separate from the daily context of the Native Americans' lives. Their myths, legends, spiritual rites and cultural traditions bring the Native Americans together and the traditional Native American writings idealize the balance of spiritual and worldly concerns.

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