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# THE *BUREK* AS A MEAL AND METAPHOR: FOOD, MIGRATION AND IDENTITY BETWEEN “ORIENT” AND “OCCIDENT”

Markéta Slavková

„Sve su pite pitice, samo je burek pitac“ (“All pies are feminine, only the burek is a man” – an aphorism in BiH, also used by writer Momo Kapor/ translation M.S.)

The seductive smell of burek and other kinds of pita lingered over plentiful *buregdžinica* (*burek* eateries) in Bašaršija. The pies sizzled under the *sač* (a heavy metal lid) as they were being baked the “traditional” way on hot coals, maintaining the stock on the counter ever fresh. I headed straight to my favourite eatery (called simply *Sač*) and a veiled woman took my order. I asked for a combination of *zeljanica* (a pie with chard and cheese) and *krompiruša* (potato pie) accompanied with a glass of “drinking” yoghurt. As I took my first bite of that crunchy pastry baked in a charcoal fired oven, my body responded with a sensation of familiarity and satisfaction. This was a taste of my second Bosnian home.

## Introduction: *Burek* or *pita*? The Bosnian perspective

Unlike in other parts of the Balkans, where the dish in question is called *burek*, in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), this dish is referred to as *pita*: in the Bosnian context the expression *burek* is used exclusively for a pie with meat (also e.g. Mlekuž 2017). This distinction serves on everyday level interactions as a powerful identity marker between inhabitants of BiH and the rest of the populations in the Balkans (and their trans-local communities abroad). The name *pita* in the Balkan context is not to be confused with the *Arabic pita* (leavened flat round bread prepared namely in the Middle East). In BiH, *pita* is a general name for the so called “Bosnian pie” and it is also considered to be one of the “national” dishes. Many varieties

exist, differing in the culinary technique used and the filling of the pie. In this article I head on a journey between “Orient” and “Occident” to ask what makes a *pita* a *pita* or a *burek* a *burek* and how its form changed through centuries.

I am interested both in variations of the material form of the *pita* and also in the shifts in meaning that the dish is assigned both inside and outside the “imaginary” Balkans<sup>1</sup>. However, my interest also covers the geographical context of these variations and shifts and the „migration journeys“ that the *pita* has undergone over the centuries. I use the *longue durée* approach to explain the complex historical development

<sup>1</sup> I use the expression “imaginary” Balkans with reference to Maria Todorova’s work (2009, 2018) in order to emphasise the historical, geographic and political development of the region.

of this pastry in order to highlight the processes of migration and cultural exchange that shaped its contemporary form. The *burek's* long journey across history has brought it into 21st century Central Europe, where it has become a commonly available fast-food, particularly in German speaking countries, where numerous trans-local communities from the Balkans and Turkey reside. The *burek* has also made its way in recent years to the markets of the Central European post-socialist countries such as the Czech Republic and Slovakia. To my surprise, I recently spotted a variant of the *pita*, *zeljanica*, in the pastry section of Albert supermarket in the centre of Prague.

The majority of the findings and claims presented in this article are based on my long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Bosnia and Herzegovina between 2013 and 2019. Moreover, I conducted a total of six months of ethnographic fieldwork in Vienna between 2015 and 2016 amongst former inhabitants of Srebrenica and other people of Bosnian origin. I also conducted short term research regarding the consumption of the *burek* in Prague, Czech Republic and Bratislava, Slovakia. Additionally, I carried out a document analysis, employing digital ethnography. I approach the discussed topic mainly from the perspective of sociocultural anthropology, namely the subdiscipline of the anthropology of consumption (see e.g. Messer 1984, Mintz and Du Bois 2002). Nevertheless, a comparative historical approach, in which I rely on existing findings and literature, as well as archaeological evidence and iconographic sources, constitutes an important element of my theoretical and methodological frameworks. I pay attention to both the materiality of the actual ingredients, serving dishes and utensils, as well as their social meaning.

### A historical overview: *Börek*, *pita* and strudel in between “Orient” and “Occident”

When it comes to the food history, one must be always careful not to imagine historical continuity where there is none. The history of the *burek* is not well recorded and lies scattered in fragments (see also Lee 2019)<sup>2</sup>. Here, I present the outcomes of my own examinations of the pathways of the pastry referred to as *burek*, which as I suggest

<sup>2</sup> For this reason, I use combination of all available sources both scientific and non-scientific.

(using the inspiration from Friedrich Kunz 2011) belongs to recipes of the “strudel family”, which can be traced back to the oriental dessert baklava. Here, I refer to this group of recipes in a broader sense as the “*pita* family”. Similarly, classical scholar, Svetlana Slapšak (2014: 153), argues that baklava and strudel are related and “*divide/connect Balkans and non-Balkans*”. The historical link between the *burek* and baklava was also documented by historian, Alexander Lee (2019). This group of inter-related recipes originated in the Middle East and Central Asia from where it spread to Europe.

Kunz (2011) suggests that this happened mainly from two directions: from the Southeast via the Ottoman Empire and from the Southwest via North Africa. Also significant seemed to be also the migration of people of Jewish origin fleeing the Ottoman Empire due to growing anti-Semitism in the 18th and 19th centuries (Lee 2019). These processes resulted in the spread of *burek*-like recipes, namely in Italy (Ibid.). Apart from this, the *burek* was introduced on a small scale as well by merchants and other individuals (or small groups) travelling between “East” and “West” (Ibid.) In a broader sense the European variations of the *pita* and the *burek* (whether the fast-food *burek* or strudel) are a result a fascinating cultural exchange between what was known as “Orient” and “Occident” lasting hundreds of years. This is not a linear process, instead the paths wind back and forth.

So what makes a *burek* a *burek*? How do we define the “*pita* family”? These are the questions that need to be answered before we look at the actual historical and geographical pathways of the dish. Certain continuity is apparent in the etymological origin of the denominations of the dish in Turkey and the Balkans. The word “*burek*” stems from the Turkish term *börek* (see also Kunz 2011, Mlekuž 2017). Similarly to other parts of Balkans, with the exception of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in Turkey *börek* signifies a pie with various savoury fillings, not necessarily containing meat. In addition to

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that, the preparation techniques as well as the material form of the dish also follow certain internal “logic” as I suggest in this article. Thus, the dish is defined by certain continuity of similarities in both ideological (immaterial) and material aspects. In the several following paragraphs, I will attempt to show how these aspects interact and also how the meaning of the dish shifts. My argumentation follows a poststructuralist logic whereby I highlight the different preparation techniques (namely layering and rolling up), which copy the spread of the dish across centuries in space and time.

The recipes from the “*pita* family” share the characteristic of a very thin pastry which is spread with a filling, often rolled up, similarly to strudel. Some pies are then twisted into a spiral shape. Others are rectangular or square. In other variations, the *pita* does not have to be rolled, instead thin sheets of *yufka* (from Turkish word *yufka*) are layered in a baking dish with the filling in between the sheets. In Greece, this type of dough is referred to as *phyllo*. Strudel is another distant relative of the “*pita* family” (Kunz 2011, Slavková 2014). As I suggest, in my article “From Istanbul to Prague Paths of Strudel Wound” (Slavková 2014), puff pastry can be interpreted as a specific Occidental adaptation of the thin layered dough of “Oriental” origin with Turkic roots. The material form of the *burek* or, in a broader sense, the *pita*, is defined not only by the specific dough used, composed of thin layers, but also by its variations that mostly employ the culinary technique of “rolling”. Nevertheless, two basic approaches to the final execution of the *pita* exist: 1) with sheets layered on the top of each other alternately with a filling 2) layers created by rolling a filling into a single sheet of dough (similarly to strudel). Pastries made using the second technique are usually then twisted into a spiral shape.

Some authors connect the *burek* with *placenta* – an ancient Roman dish from layered thin pastry alternately filled with cheese and honey as described by Cato (see Kremezi 2013: 238). The relationship between the alleged ancient Roman origin and clearly Turkic etymological origin remains unexplained. Others argue that the oldest known predecessor not only of the strudel (and related dishes) is baklava (Slapšák 2014, Kunz 2011), which is a theory that I also support. Baklava was already known in the Assyrian empire in the 8th century BC (Slapšák 2014: 153, Kunz 2011). Simi-

lar to *placenta*, baklava is also sweet and consists of thin dough but is filled primarily with nuts and sweetened with sugar syrup *agda*. It may be also sweetened with honey (see Slapšák 2014). I would suggest that the history of the dishes in the “*pita* family” goes back many centuries BC and its origin lies somewhere in the so-called Fertile Crescent, in particular the Assyrian Empire, and most likely also other areas of the Levant, where baklava emerged. *Yufka* dough uses the same ingredients as the non-leavened ancient flatbread, which was produced in the area for thousands of years. This would also explain the overlapping of the expressions *arabic pita* and *pita* in a sense of the *burek*.

It does not really seem to matter whether the variation of a particular pastry from the “*pita* family” is sweet or salty: all of these dishes are made using the specific cooking technique of producing a thin dough from flour, water and a pinch of salt coated with oil (or other fat), which is then alternately layered with filling. It was most likely in Topkapı Palace in Istanbul during the Ottoman Empire that the dough was mastered into a crunchy sheet thin as a paper (see Kremezi 2013: 238). The ancient varieties – baklava and *placenta*, are layered not rolled. Now, the question arises: where did the *burek* get its “twist” and why is it important? The twist technique is of older Turkic origin. The occurrence of rolled pastries can be traced to Turkic groups and later they spread also amongst the Mongols (the pastry was a popular combat ration during military campaigns and overall it was an ideal food for lifestyle on the move) (see Lee 2019). It was only later that the *burek* and baklava became an epitome of Ottoman culinary culture via which it also spread to Europe. Etymologically, the Ottoman Turkish word *börek* comes from the Persian ‘*bûrak*’ (any dish made with *yufka*), which probably came from the Turkic root, bur-, meaning ‘to twist’ (see Lee 2019). Also, the contemporary distribution of the *burek* and other recipes in the “*pita* family” in the Balkans is a good lead to understanding the history of the dish. Based on my field observations, I suggest that the *burek* rolling technique is widespread namely in the areas which were formerly under the Ottoman culinary regime.

I use the idea of “culinary regimes” to concretise broader structural forces, which Mintz (1995) describes as “outside meaning” or “structural power”

and Feldman (2011) labels in the context of migration as “apparatuses” (also Slavková 2017: 67). By culinary regimes, I mean in particular systems of culinary preferences including distinct culinary techniques and methods of food production that historically developed in relation to specific cosmologies/ideologies and in the context of the options presented by the locality in which they developed (Slavková 2017: 67). These culinary regimes are primarily outside influences which need to be internalised and appropriated by social actors (Ibid.). The ideological sources of culinary regimes vary, but historically they often stem from religious beliefs, however nowadays they are also very actively shaped by various discourses such as ideologies of the nation-state or transnational organisations and businesses (Ibid.). Within the historical context of the emergence of “East” and “West”, in a broader sense I simply distinguish between the “Eastern” and “Western” culinary regimes, characterised by distinctive techniques of food preparation, serving and consumption and also the differences are apparent in the material aspects of cookware and tableware. These two different regimes were also influenced by different religious traditions: Islamic and Judaeo-Christian.

The Ottoman culinary regime is a specific adaptation stemming from the “Eastern” culinary regime, which was mastered and inspired by Sultans’ cooks during the prosperous times of the Ottoman Empire. We place two characteristic and unique techniques of food preparation within the Ottoman culinary regime: 1) stuffing/filling – *dolma* and rolling – *sarma* (Slavková 2017: 87). Based on my comparative analyses of food history and the occurrence and (re)distribution of recipes between Central Europe and the Mediterranean and the Levant, I suggest that the idea of creating alternating layers of pastry with filling in Europe was most likely adopted from the Ottoman culinary regime (for more information see the Chapter by Gabriela Fatková in this book). As I also mention above, the idea of rolling is pre-Ottoman and is linked with Turkic populations in the pre-modern era. This argument is further supported by medieval food history in Western and Central Europe: historical evidence does not point to the existence of filled and rolled pastries in these areas (see e.g. Beranová 2005, Holub 2011). Nevertheless, these culinary techniques became integral to the Ottoman culinary regime which, in addition to rolled

pastries, also includes the idea of rolling up fillings into various types of leaves – *sarma*. The spread of these techniques further to Europe, as I will demonstrate below, is closely linked to the expansion of the Ottoman Empire into Europe and the cultural exchange that took place alongside the military campaigns.

Strudel, which I suggest is a Central and Western European adaptation of the *pita* and the *burek*, was introduced in the Early Modern Period. The oldest known manuscript containing a recipe for strudel dates back to 1696 and is known as *Koch Puech* (*Wiener Stadtbibliothe/Wienbibliothek*). In particular, it was a *Millirahmstrudel* aka *Milchrahmstrudel* (a “cream strudel”), which is related to a *Topfenstrudel* and *Quarkstrudel* in German speaking countries, *tvarohový štrúdl* in the Czech republic, *tvarohová štrúdlľa* in Slovakia or *túrós rétes* in Hungary. The ancestor of these sweet pies (made with topfen/quark/tvaroh – a type of fresh curd cheese) is the salty cheese *burek*, or *sirnica*, as the pie is called in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In early modern Central Europe this type of pie was a culinary novelty; not only the thin layered dough but also importantly the technique of rolling the dough, which is reflected in the etymological origin of the word strudel. The expression “strudel” stems from Old High German word *sredan* – a “whirlpool” (Online Etymology Dictionary)<sup>3</sup>, and, thus, clearly refers to the idea of rolling/twisting.

Interestingly, the introduction of the *burek* into Central Europe coincides chronologically with the Ottoman–Habsburg wars, namely the Second Siege of Vienna in 1683 (the first strudel recipe was recorded in Vienna a little more than a decade later after this siege). Within the domain of anthropology of food, this is not a surprising finding, since food patterns commonly change and food innovations are adopted in times of war (see Mintz 1995, Messer 1997, Slavková 2017, Slavková 2019). The *pita* and the *burek* were most likely introduced to Europe via cultural exchange with the Ottoman army; the salty pie was an ideal food for military camps and life on the move as the pastry lasts for a long period of time without spoiling and its preparation does not require complicated kitchen equipment. , The *burek* spread into Central

<sup>3</sup> From Old High German *sredan* „to bubble, boil, whirl, eddy”. Etymology online, “Strudel” (<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=strudel>)

Europe, with the soldiers of the Ottoman Empire where it became domesticated as strudel. A couple of centuries later, in the 20th and 21st centuries, the pastry made its second arrival on the Central European food “scene” and became a popular fast-food under its original name *burek*.

### The *burek* and the *pita* inside and outside Bosnia in the 20th and 21st Centuries

Food is literally both the producer and product of the „human form“ and one should not forget that the primary function of consuming food remains the nourishment of the body. It is food that provides nutrition to preserve vital functions of the organism and thus assures survival (see Counihan 1999, Farquhar 2006, Lupton 1996, Slavková 2017). This significance of food in human life is reflected in social reality. As Farquhar notes, food directly produces: „*bodies and lives, kin groups and communities, economic systems and ideologies, while being produced in its turn by these formations*“ (Farquhar 2006: 146). Precisely for this reason, the aphorism „You are what you eat“ continues to be invoked in studies ranging across human sciences (Ibid.). So who are those who eat *burek*?

In the preceding historical section I elaborated on how the *burek* and pastries in the “*pita* family” are a historical product of various populations and centuries old migrations. I suggested that the age-old ordinary food of Turkic herdsman became a popular combat ration of Mongolian and later Ottoman armies as well as featuring on the elite menus of Sultan and viziers in the Empire’s capital city (see Lee 2019). As Slapšak states, during Ottoman rule in Istanbul the poor had a saying that: “*one cannot have a burek and baklava every day*” (Slapšak 2014: 154) (metaphorically expressing that these were delicacies and luxury foods). Now, let us take a look at the meanings that *burek* and *pita* have acquired in contemporary BiH.

I first encountered the *burek* during my fieldwork in BiH, therefore, here I will examine the topic from a particular angle – the “Bosnian” one; thus, I intend to tell the story of the *burek* from the point of view of the *pita*. A popular aphorism in BiH says: „*Sve su pite pitice, samo je burek pitac*“. This is truly difficult to translate and always some aspects seem to be lost in translation. On one hand, the aphorism means: “*All pies are*

*feminine, only the burek is a man*“. On the other hand, this translation does not quite capture the meaning of the word *pitica*, which is a diminutive form of the word *pita* (indicating in Slavic and other languages “smallness”, “endearment”, “intimacy”).

In this case, it is a metaphor for “femininity”, since the grammatical gender of the word *pita* in Slavic languages is feminine. This is further indicated by the use of the word *pitac* – a neologism, which is a masculine variation of the word *pita*. The masculinity here is underpinned in both an ideological and material sense, thus, defined by the meat content. In Bosnia, *burek* unquestionably means only a meat pie, and, thus, the aphorism also refers to a specific national identity – that of Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Pita* is generally translated into English as „Bosnian pie“. Therefore, it is also an important referent for ordinary understanding of the „Bosnian national identity.“

In contemporary BiH many eat *burek* or other types of *pita* on an everyday basis (cf. *banička* in Kouba 2016). Thus, the *burek*, literally and directly produces bodies and sustains lives. It plays an important role in cultural reproduction of various aspects of social life and it is central in the processes of negotiating and establishing relations within families. It is produced at home, although the “traditional” method of production is on the decline amongst the younger generations. Nevertheless, homemade *pita*, particularly one made by a mother, contains extremely important symbolic value in terms of Bosnian sociability and the idea of home. In contemporary Bosnian villages, the ability to make *pita* constitutes an important qualification for getting married (cf. Chapter by Gabriela Fatková in this book). The *pita*, thus, establishes community both on material and social/symbolic levels.

On the other hand, many people nowadays, especially in urban settlements, obtain the majority of their food supplies in shops. The typical establishment for purchasing *pita* in Bosnia and Herzegovina is a *buregdžinica* (a type of an old Ottoman shop and eatery specialising in *pita* production) but they might be found as well in a *pekara* (bakery). *Jufka* is still made from scratch only in fairly isolated cases, generally by elderly women, and in specialised *burek* eateries, but most *jufka* is industrially produced. Supermarkets in Bosnia and Herzegovina sell frozen, ready-to-bake *pita*

dough. *Pita* is often eaten for “breakfast” (this means often around 10 p.m. in BiH, most people just drink coffee in the early morning) but it can be eaten at any other time (*banica/banička* is consumed similarly cf. Kouba 2016). The pie can be consumed simply by itself with a glass of yogurt, or it can constitute a course in a more elaborate feast.

The most common varieties of *pita* are: *burek* (meat), *šareni burek* (meat and potatoes), *sirnica* (cheese), *zeljanica* (usually chard or spinach and cheese), *krompiruša* (potatoes) and *tikvenica* (yellow squash). There is also *pita maslenica* (literally “butter pita”). In fact *maslenica* is often made with cream and a little bit of *kajmak*, fresh cheese or *mileram* (a type of sour cream). However, some people also add butter (also Slavková 2017). Many more variations of the dish exist, both savoury (e.g. filled with cabbage, mushrooms etc.) and sweet (filled with apples, cherries etc.) and plenty of other appellations that one might encounter in the Balkans. In the most recent years, these pastries and their perception were significantly transformed by the transnational food industry and new varieties such as for instance “*čoko burek*” (chocolate *burek*) have been invented and found their place in the globalised market.

So what does this say about the *burek*? And can we consider it a Bosnian national dish? To pose these questions necessarily opens up another question: how does food help to create or is created by economic systems and ideologies? In this following section I will explore briefly the dynamics in between these contexts in relation to the notion of so called „Bosnian national cuisine”, which only emerges as late as in 1992, along with the declaration of BiH as an independent state. In a broader sense this applies to all of the “national cuisines” that have emerged since the creation of the first nation-states following the French Revolution at the end of the 18th century.

Similarly to Appadurai (1988), I see the so called “national cuisines” as intellectual constructs. I am drawing on Anderson’s understanding of nation-states as of „imagined communities” (Anderson 1983). Food functions as a means of internalisation and embodiment and also as a medium for expression of national ideologies, which are generally perceived by the social actors as a “natural” unit of self-identification (also Slavková 2017). As Appadurai (1988) argues, “national cuisines” are represented by a few selected characteristic dishes

and the national category is often used to unify the regionally and ethnically diverse. Thus, in fact, it is national ideologies that “cook” the national identity using a selective range of recipes which are tagged as “national”.

During the existence of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), various dishes were understood both by insiders and outsiders more in terms of the Balkan Peninsula in general since they are generally cooked throughout South-Eastern Europe. Regional differences and food specialities were more prominent in distinguishing foods e.g. Dalmatian or Istrian cuisines. Interestingly, this was also the period when the *burek* migrated to Slovenia and the “West” under the name *burek* or alternately *börek*. The migration of the *burek* to Slovenia, which copies the journeys of migrant workers from the rest of the countries from former Yugoslavia, was mapped in detail by Jernej Mlekuč (2011a, 2011b, 2017). Outside the SFRY and in Slovenia, which associated more with the “West”, consumption of the *burek* was perceived as a marker of difference.

Nevertheless, it was the disintegration of SFRY in the 1990s, along with the bloody armed conflict, that significantly impacted the regional foodscapes and gave emergence to the national cuisines of the Western Balkans as we know them nowadays (Croatian, Bosnia, Serbian, etc.). The notion of the Bosnian national cuisine was supported, shaped by the emergence of few “Bosnian cookbooks” (*Bosanski kuhar*) by Alija Lakišić (1999) and more recently by Lamija Hadžiosmanović (2007). In more recent years, a few other cookbooks tagged as “Bosnian” have appeared on the market, nevertheless the number is very small. Therefore, a more important role in the process of shaping the image of the Bosnian national cuisine seems to be located in cyberspace on various websites, forums and social media. In the following section, I will take a closer look at the shifts in meaning of *burek* in the 21st century in Austria and Slovenia and across cyberspace (that the trans-local communities use to communicate with their places of origin).

### The taste of home or the pie of the “Others”? The shifting meaning of the burek amongst the Bosnian trans-local communities in Austria and Slovenia

During my stay in Vienna in spring 2016, I met with Bastian – a former EUFOR soldier who had served on an observation mission in Bratunac. We were enjoying a *Stiegl* (Austrian beer) on the university campus when he noted: “*Nowadays, Vienna is like the capital of the Balkans*”. I found this metaphor very fitting (also Slavková 2017: 58). Vienna was also likely the place where the burek first entered Central Europe as the strudel and where it later re-emerged with the growing number of Turkish and Balkan origin migrants as the *burek* and became a popular fast food, which is eaten not only by people of Turkish and Balkan origin but also by other inhabitants of the city.

People who leave for disparate places to pursue „new“ lives also bring their favourite foods along with them. This was a common phenomenon that I kept noticing during my fieldwork in Vienna. It seemed that whenever someone travelled from BiH to Austria, they always brought various food items with them. This concerned both individual journeys as well as more official visits organised through associations. For example, in spring 2016 the Srebrenica-Wien-Platform association organised a visit by selected inhabitants of Srebrenica to discuss the Bosnian issues with the „diaspora“ in Vienna. Various food items were prepared a few days in advance in Srebrenica and carefully driven over 700 km to be served at the event. One member of the delegation was also the former Srebrenica mayor, Čamil Duraković, who at that point was running an election campaign. The *burek* and other variants of *pita* could not be absent amongst the other dishes from Eastern Bosnia (sweet and savoury) at this symbolically important event.

This was not the case with Bosnians alone, but I observed similar symbolic significance amongst other migrants as well.<sup>4</sup> In Austria in 2016 I ate *börek* that had been prepared the day before by a Kurdish family in Istanbul (Alevi Muslims). Their son – my housemate at that point, who studied

and lived in Vienna – brought it back with him upon his return from Turkey. I wondered how he had managed to bring so much *börek* to Austria by plane. He laughed and told me that he was actually over the weight allowance, but when he explained that his mother stubbornly insisted on taking all this *börek* for him, the airport worker took pity on him and, exceptionally, did not charge him with any additional fee. These two short stories from Vienna underline the symbolic importance of the *burek* and *börek* amongst various groups of people who consume it. Now, it remains to answer the question of how the burek is perceived by those who primarily do not eat it. And to examine in what sense it is used in discussions in cyberspace.

In Vienna, I have encountered the consumption of the *burek* both in homes and in countless *burek* fast-food eateries run usually by people of Balkan and Turkish origin. Unlike in BiH, the *pita* was not generally produced at home in the majority of the Bosnian diaspora households that I visited in Vienna, but brought back from visits to BiH or purchased in fast-food eateries. The pie is not made due to the time consuming preparation involved, which does not suit the work routines in a post-modern urban settlement such as Vienna. A couple of my research participants also mentioned (under the influence of modern nutritional discourse) that they considered the *pita* fatty, therefore unhealthy and tried not to eat it often. Similarly, Mlekuž (2011b, 2017) writes about the perception of the *burek* as an unhealthy and fatty food in Slovenia. This is a huge shift in meaning from the perception in Bosnia, where it is associated with homeliness and a good source of sustenance. Such perception was reflected in unforgettable billboard „DROGA? Ne, hvala, ja ću BUREK!“ (“*Drugs? No, thanks. I would like a BUREK!*”), which was part of the Zenica canton drug prevention campaign for the International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking in 2010 (see e.g. Klix.ba). As the local media sarcastically reported: “with the help of traditional gourmet specialities, the war on drugs progressed” (Ibid.). Nevertheless, the authors of the slogan must have associated *burek* (and *ćevapi*) with something nutritious that helps to sustain human lives.

Such significant shifts in meaning of different dishes during migration are quite common in food history. In Slovenia, we encounter a radical shift of meaning, when *burek* and its consumers take

<sup>4</sup> This claim is supported by years of countless ethnographic observations that I have undertaken throughout my studies and career. I observed similar strategies amongst transnational migrants in the Northern, Central and South-East Europe as well as Asian trans-migrants in Australia.



on pejorative connotations in the eyes of the host population (see Mlekuž 2017). Mlekuž (2011a, 2011b and 2017) describes this asymmetrical relationship arising among migrant workers from elsewhere in the SFRY and the dominant Slovene population ever since the 1960s. In Slovenia, the *burek* is associated particularly with migrants of Muslim origin, namely those from Bosnia and Albania (see Mlekuž 2011a: 318-321). To illustrate these attitudes Mlekuž gives an example from the humour supplement of a political weekly newspaper, showing a picture from a protest (see Mlekuž 2011a: 319). The protesters in the picture are holding a sign saying: “No mosque for us, no burek for you” and next to it is a headline with the inscription: “We’ll trade bureks for a mosque!” (Ibid.)

Mlekuž (2011a) defines these hostile attitudes towards the migrant of Muslim faith as “Burekalism”, using Said’s idea of Orientalism (1978). In particular, he defines it as “a style of thought based on an ontological and epistemological distinction made between a population and place defined by the burek and a population and place not defined by the burek” – “a style of the non-burekalized population for dominating, reconstructing and having authority over the burekalized population” (Mlekuž, 2011a: 318). Nevertheless, Mlekuž’s attempt to introduce a new concept of “Burekalism”, does not seem sufficiently persuasive, as it reduces the complexity of Said’s (1978) argumentation. Perhaps Todorova’s concept of “Balkanism” (Todorova 2009) would be more useful. On the other hand, I am not trying to say that Bosnian migrants to Slovenia are not subjected to expressions of xenophobia as Mlekuž (2011a, 2017) successfully demonstrates in the example of political anecdotes and in countless internet sources.

I have not encountered particularly negative connotations linked with the *burek* in Vienna. Orientalist attitudes seem to be linked with different cultural markers (such as the custom of wearing *hijab* – a veil worn by Muslim woman). In Vienna, which primarily promotes itself as a liberal, multicultural city with one of the highest living standards in the world, “migrant” food is seen as a “positive” marker of cultural difference, and therefore it is something that the migrants actively use to “promote” their cultural origin. Certainly no special gatherings where national identity was performed and promoted (such as Srebrenica Day in Vienna) would be complete without variations of the *pita*.

Most importantly, in the Bosnian context, the internal distinction between the *pita* and the *burek* has become an important marker of national identity and patriotism). This can be perhaps demonstrated most clearly using the many jokes, statements and images available on internet example.

For instance, the webpage vukajlija.com shared a satirical picture from 2014 of a *burek* cut into two slices like a sandwich with a slice of cheese in the middle. Beneath the picture is the caption: “Konačno da vidim taj burek sa sirom.” (“At last, I’ve seen a burek with cheese.”) Another frequently shared picture showed a „Fatal Error“ window saying: „Nema burek sa sirom” (“There is no burek with cheese”) (see frontslobode.ba). Below the message there is an “OK” button to click. Nationalist sentiment and identification is demonstrated most explicitly in a tweet from December 2015, a user called Buba tweeted: “Ako hoćeš Bosanca za doživotnog neprijatelja, dirni mu u Bosnu ili mu traži burek sa sirom” (“If you want a Bosnian to be your enemy for the rest of the life, touch Bosnia or ask him for a burek with cheese”).

Perhaps, the best example how complex these “language games” are may be seen in the following uses of *burek* in jokes, which are also political parody. On a satirical Croatian news portal newsbar.hr Kristijan Leskovar (2019) writes in the headline: “Bosnia is endangered by constitutional crisis after the discovery of a wooden sign with the inscription ‘burek is sirnica’ at the Bosnian pyramids” (the author clearly makes fun out the differences in pastry terminology, which further have national connotations). Reading between the lines, one sees that the Croatian writer wants to say that both *sirnica* and the Bosnian pyramids are a fantasy (implying that perhaps so is the whole state or simply points out to the absurdity of the entire situation).

Perhaps the most iconic and complex use of a *burek* as a metaphor in relation to Bosnian nationalism as well political parody is the “train case”. A Twitter user, who calls himself “Balanser’o” tweeted on January 14, 2017: “Željeznice Federacije BiH uvode specijalni voz na liniji Sarajevo–Zagreb i novoj liniji Sarajevo–Beograd” (“The Railways of the Federation of BiH introduce a special train on the line Sarajevo–Zagreb and on the new line Sarajevo–Belgrade”). The tweet included a picture of a train with a big red inscription on it: “Burek je sa mesom!” (“A burek is with meat!”). This is a reference to nationalist tensions between BiH,

Croatia and Serbia, political provocation as well as the failure of the states. The joke refers to an incident in January 2017 when a train painted with the Serbian tricolour covered with inscriptions in twenty-one languages reading “Kosovo is Serbia” headed from Belgrade to Kosovska Mitrovica, on which the news portals reported already prior to its departure (see rts.rs).

### **Conclusion: Cooking beyond borders – food is a double-edged sword**

In this study I have elaborated on the countless of journeys of the *burek* and related dishes across the centuries. My approach is based on combining the methods of sociocultural anthropology and history. Nevertheless, when the attention remains focused on the history and social life of a single dish, the findings offer a fascinating and incredibly complex understanding of shifting material forms and meaning of various dishes over time. What the long “journey” of the *burek* through Central Asia, the Near East, the Balkans and Central Europe highlights is the extent to which migrations and cultural exchange have influenced the process of shaping the idea of Europe as we understand it today. At the same time, the findings call for re-thinking the idea of identity, so it is perceived in a more processual and “flexible manner”. As Liisa Malkki fittingly states: “...Identity is always mobile and processual, partly self/construction, partly categorisation by others, partly a condition, a status, a label, a weapon, a shield, a fund of memories, et cetera. It is a creolised aggregate composed through bricolage” (Malkki 1992: 37).

In the historical overview, I attempt to pinpoint the changes in meaning and use that the group of recipes that I refer to here as the “*pita* family” undergone in a *longue durée* perspective: from the sweet ancient Assyrian baklava, to the salty pie of the Turkic nomadic herdsmen, the field rations of Turkic, Mongol and Ottoman armies, a delicacy of Sultans and viziers until the recipe was partly domesticated in Central Europe in the context of the Second Siege of Vienna. In the second section I attempt to localize the *burek* and the *pita* in 20th and 21st-century Bosnia and Herzegovina and re-examine the dish in relation to the nation-building process after the disintegration of socialist Yugoslavia. I mainly focused on examples of how the idea of nation-states penetrates the do-

main of food and leads to (and also relies on) the emergence of national cookbooks. Since in the case of Bosnian cuisine only very few cookbooks presenting the “national cuisine” exist, internet discussions and recipe resources play an important role in the process of defining what is and is not “Bosnian”. The last section explores in particular public discussions and representations of the *burek* at various events or in cyberspace within the context of the transnational social field of the “Balkan” trans-local communities. In 21st century Vienna and Slovenia, *burek* is a popular fast-food and the food of working class migrants from the South-East. Nevertheless, it continues to be made in the Bosnian households where it is linked with sociability and sense of belonging.

As Jen Webb (2010: 2) fittingly summarised: “Food is not neutral, not ordinary, not obvious. It is — or, it can be — a site for struggle, a site for the working out of relations of power. It tells us who we are, it divides us.” Thus, food or other objects or customs that mark a difference between “us” and “the Others” may result either in social inclusion or, alternatively, exclusion. The migratory journeys of the *burek* and its consumers clearly illustrate these processes. Firstly, a practical, simple meal of Turkic herdsmen and soldiers over the centuries became a delicacy in the Ottoman Empire. Nevertheless, its more simple varieties continued and continue to be eaten amongst both the rich and poor. Secondly, in a different context a dish that marks familiarity and home amongst specific groups may be seen as a dividing marker of the “Others” as in the case of gastarbeiters in Slovenia.

Similarly, a British archaeologist Andrew Sherratt has shown that food and drinks were already intentionally used in Antiquity to distinguish religious-cultural groups. As he further argues, food and drink choices are cultural processes and food is not only a „system of alimentation“ but also a „system of non-verbal communication“ (Sherratt 1995: 11). Exclusion or inclusion of certain foods, their specific preparation and consumption thus also defines membership of larger groups in society (Sherratt 1995: 12). Also, in this sense, food and drink might become a “competitive arena of social display in which alliances, boundaries and relative standings are negotiated” (Ibid.). Food as an identity marker is indeed a “double-edged sword”; it can connect us or divide us, depending on how we use it.

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## SUMMARY & KEYWORDS

### The Burek as a Meal and Metaphor: Food, Migration and Identity Between "Orient" and "Occident"

This research paper discusses the burek, a pastry that is a popular everyday staple in the Balkans and nowadays also widely available fast-food in Central Europe. I approach this topic from the perspective of anthropology of food with a focus on the „social life of things“ and „migration journeys“ of various food items across time and space. I pay special attention to the historical changes of social meaning of various edibles with a focus on the burek and other variants of the pita. The burek is central not only to everyday diet, but it is an inseparable component of festivities and rites in the Balkans and beyond. At the same time, the burek often comes up in everyday conversations, is an important topic in public political discourses and integral to aphorisms, metaphors and jokes.

► Burek, Pita, Anthropology of Food, Food History, Migration, Identity



*Pita* made in Srebrenica, BiH, using the rolling technique (Photo: M. Slavková, 2013).



The preparation of potato pie (*krompiruša*), showing a specific technique of cutting potatoes with a knife.



Baklava (an oriental sweet) made by a technique of layering. An almost identical technique is also used to make a savoury pita pie (Photo: M. Slavková, 2013).



Homemade pita with cheese (*sirnica*) made by my research participant from Srebrenica (Photo: M. Slavková, 2013)



*Balkanhouse* is a busy fast-food restaurant in Prater, Vienna, that serves amongst other things, the *burek* (Photo: M. Slavková, 2015).



An old photograph of *pita* making used as a decoration in a house in Srebrenica (Photo: M. Slavková, 2013).