

# THE FOOD PLACE OF MEETING AND DIALOGUE BETWEEN CULTURES. THE EXAMPLE OF A TRAINING PROJECT CARRIED OUT BY “ST. BENEDICT” LYCEUM OF CONVERSANO (BARI – ITALY)

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**Abstract:** *This paper aims at underlining the role of food in intercultural dialogue. Focusing on the lack of anthropological reflections in the Italian educational system, we intended to value the possibilities of school-based curriculum regarding the ways of mediating intercultural dialogue through food. The project WELCOME of "St. Benedict" Lyceum of Conversano (Bari) could be an example of good practice regarding our topic.*

**Keywords:** *food, anthropology, dialogue between cultures, interculturalism.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It may seem paradoxical, but mainly in schools where there is a continuous stream of extra-curricular and/or para-curricular initiatives addressed to intercultural education, there are often concrete acts of intolerance towards ethnic diversity understanding, yet silent, latent, which, in the name of universal rights (where universal corresponds to our conception of the world), do not admit any chance of listening, neither reply, for actions, attitudes, and beliefs of others that are judged harmful to these universal rights.

Getting through my baccalaurean dissertation in cultural anthropology, I “devoured” Clifford Geertz’s innovative book: "The Interpretation of Cultures" (1987). As time flows, I was convinced that, up to nowadays American anthropologist’s thesis had been so acquired that that they have to be considered even obsolete. Instead, approaching the school, I often changed my mind and had to make sure that, if there are often reservations for multiculturalism, interculturalism is now only a fervent desire. I believe that a possible interpretation to this phenomenon is to be charged to the lack of anthropological reflections in study curricula of our educational system, especially in those of the secondary

school level. Let you think that the latter has introduced the (historical) anthropological perspective as epistemological axes of a curriculum of study (that of the Social Sciences) since 1999 only.

The lack of knowledge of anthropology in the Italian school is often overwhelming and prompts us to think seriously how there is still a lack of training in interpreting the basic multi-cultural processes in place, as it is away from starting real intercultural processes and how far education (and pedagogy, as its epistemological reference) has yet to go on this path. It is necessary to educate ourselves to observation, listening to others, suspending initial automatic judgments that disrupt in our minds the extraordinary opportunity offered by stages of thought that logically should precede them. And, as we have to start from simple routine features, in this context, I see the special collaboration of cultural anthropology (especially through the "materialist" by M. Harris, 1988; 1990 and the phenomenological one by C. Geertz, 1987) with intercultural pedagogy.

An example would be deepening everyday multicultural processes through food. In fact, with the comparison through food you can:

- Study what others (ethnically different from us) eat,

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- Understand the meaning they and we provide for the use/lack of certain foods,
- Know the value of certain dietary-energy food, dishes, mutually unknown;
- Discuss about their styles and food traditions;
- Carry out an effective training process where cultures meet and interact with each other interpretative (ethical and emic) perspectives.

## **2. THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL MEANING OF FOOD**

According to many anthropologists, through food, cooking is a way to relate different levels of analysis, from the ecological to the technical, from the social to the symbolic. The food tastes are thus an effect of the socio-cultural environment, so taste and disgust do not depend on the nature but are often determined by the culture and then by customs. As argued Fischler (1992),

The variability of human food choices may proceed largely on the variability of cultural systems: if we do not eat everything that is edible biologically, it is because not everything that can be biologically eat is culturally edible.

As noted by Mary Douglas (2003), the food as well as being an element of body livelihood, is also an important medium, as it represents an instrument of communication, through which the individual expresses himself and at the same time differs from the "other" or from those who do not have the same eating habits. Food can be a "*symbolic cultural frontier*", as can be seen with food taboos. Yet, at the same time, food marks precise boundaries even within the same company. Emphasizes the differences between groups, social strata and serves to reinforce group identity, to separate and distinguish "us" from the other, as shown by Bourdieu (1983) when he described the food systems of the popular classes and the bourgeoisie.

Food is often used as a metaphor for what is good and what is bad. At the end of what are

bad lies, of course, cannibalism: it is the practice of those who use the human body as food. That the actual reality of cannibalism is to be demonstrated, however, and that requires a deep discussion does not detract from the ability of this practice to signify evil. In this way, eating certain foods, those "right" instead of others, is the boundary that distinguishes "us" from "others." Perhaps, therefore, one of future scenarios for anthropology (and not only), as the disappearance of the so-called primitive civilizations, and the erosion of differences under the pressure of globalization go on, will be third millennium alimentation.

Food has been recently approached in TV broadcasts (there is, in addition to thousands of directories on good food, even a satellite channel Gambero Rosso, entirely devoted to it), in newspapers and magazines, on the Internet...

## **3. FOOD AND INTERCULTURALISM**

'Interculturality' is:

understood as a dialogue between cultures and connection (overcoming obstacles and avoiding the ethnocentric approach, valuing communication peer) acquires its true dimension when they failed to qualify not just as an opening more or less controlled towards foreigners and generous acceptance of difference, but as stated intent to build a new and more humane common reality. (cfr. Santelli Beccegato, 2003)

The realization of such a path is difficult and can only pass through

intercultural education able to emphasize the need to arrive at a clear understanding and a clear responsibility of the fundamental principles of community life and not just a series of information surface. (Santelli Beccegato, 2003)

Often news, suitably packaged to feed a certain image of alien "extra-Community", tend to confirm those who argue the impossibility of reaching a multicultural

society. Cultural contacts will not ever turn into relationships culturally integrated, from this perspective, because no culture is willing to give up their references and replace them with others from the outside. Yet situations of cultural integration can be registered in many areas, and one of these is alimentation itself.

If we also think of eating habits and social life of an average Italian man, we will find that he has been practicing food interculturalism for years: once a week he goes to the Chinese restaurant, a "classic" of conviviality so far, sometimes attending the various ethnic restaurants offering Indian, Pakistani, African, Mexican, etc. In each market there is a "ethnic" store where you buy the soy sauce and tofu, edible seaweed from Japanese tortillas. There are also a number of shops where imported products very welcome by Italians usually come: Chinese exotic fruits, fresh datteri from North Africa, North African spices and so on.

Western cuisine has been intercultural for centuries. For centuries, mix ingredients sourced from many different parts of the world, has being creating new amazing recipes are paired disparate foods. The combination of pasta and tomato gave rise to pizza, one of Italian most famous product in the world; some plants have produced social changes, for instance the introduction of coffee has given rise to the ritual of early morning cup of coffee and post-prandial one, so typical of Italian culture. Food is intercultural, and often, the best and most creative dishes derive their elements from a mix of different origin. The "gastroan-tropology" teaches that diversity is an asset, because they allow you to mix, inventing, creating, and producing new things and new flavors, giving shape to new ideas.

#### **4. AN EXAMPLE OF INTERVENTION TRAINING**

During school year 2011/2012 in "St. Benedict" Lyceum of Conversano (Bari) we carried out the project: WELCOME, financed by a special fund for the construction of ministerial projects related to areas of high immigration process. In particular, the "Welcome" project was open to all students

who attended the Institute and students interested in Italian in order to:

- encourage pupils' motivation,
- protect susceptible individuals,
- combine, in teaching methods, the values of solidarity, culture and democracy,
- value diversity in relation to parties and social contexts of belonging.

Several actions have been undertaken and in particular has been realized a laboratory for cultural exchanges with specific reference to gastronomic traditions of the cultures of foreign students. 26 students participated in the activities of Italian and 10 foreign students of different Origin: Russian, Romanian, Albanian Bulgarian. The path is divided into 30 hours divided in 10 meetings held during the second semester of the school year.

The purpose of each meeting was to learn through direct testimonies, photos, documents, videos, images / texts cultural riches, human geography, but especially culinary traditions of the countries represented by each foreign student (some of the foods presented were also made taste in the school). The meetings have attracted particular interest in the participants. In the satisfaction questionnaire administered during the last meeting the consent for the project was unanimous. This is a very interesting accomplishment, since many students have argued that those few hours together have made it possible to "clean" false ideas and beliefs, especially on the Albanian and Romanian culture and gastronomy.

In the same way, unanimous has been the request to play more and more in-depth meetings on knowledge/sharing of cultures other than their own, in next school year.

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

Currently alimentation is one of the displays more 'important for defining ideological barriers, ethnic, political, social, or otherwise one means more' used to know the "other" cultures, to mix civilizations, groped the way of interculturalism. (Scholliers, 2001). Today anthropology supply is vibrant and growing; having then occupied in recent decades - a vocation - even cross-cultural issues, multicultural and sense of identity, and

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gender issues found itself at the center of the complexities of the global network, and having been able to grasp some fundamental "nodes", has been transformed from discipline "device" in the "central", arousing the interest of many young social scientists towards it. This is because the exchange between different cultures is expressed primarily as exchange of food culture (products, recipes, attitudes, social gatherings, etc.).

Behind the tastes, smells, hiding many meanings; behind the taste of sitting at the table, but also to stand behind the stove, there is a thick texture of symbols and languages that make up the diverse landscape of culinary science. Our body, our psychology, education, culture, environment, history, are fundamental to understand and retrace the route of pleasure, since they affect not only the preparation and presentation of the food, but also the visual perception, olfactory and the choice of some flavors at the other place. There are also elements often overlooked but no less important such as the desire, creativity, desire, imagination that transforms the foods and their preparation in a real language. Who loves to cook generally discover, research, studies, experiences, acts according to his knowledge, his legacy and look, thanks to the imagination, to create to accommodate the need to communicate moods and passions. We should not be shocked, therefore, to school in supporting interventions persistent and effective in raising awareness and train the younger generation (together with the same teaching staff, management and non-teaching) interculturalism through educational interventions supplementary extra-educational school based nutrition "different".

Eating together (typical character, if not exclusive, of the human species) is a way to turn the gesture nutritional supply in an eminently cultural. What you do with the other, in fact, thereby subject himself to a social meaning, a value of communication, which, in the case of food, appears to be particularly strong and complex, given the essential nature of the object relative to the survival of the individual and of the species.

The mode of appointment of the meal may, in itself, be significant: the festive banquet (baptisms, weddings, funerals) is not a "working lunch", not only from the technical point of view but also on a symbolic level. All of these situations express different contents, perfectly understandable because communicated with a coded language within each society. And indeed it is a language, intercultural means not only willingness to exchange between different cultures (such as, for example, is taking place in European countries due to heavy immigration from Islamic countries), but also, knowledge of other languages, as it is evident that each element can assume, in different contexts, different meaning. Equally evident is that the central theme of intercultural not consist in proposing a remix and an approval to the lowest common denominator of structurally different behaviors, but also, and above all, open to the understanding of and respect for diversity in the knowledge that the same identity are not given once and for all, but you change, you adjust, remodel over time.

The feeding behavior in this sense becomes an important "detector" that

man is what he eats, of course, but it is also true that what you eat is food that is completely filled with the culture. (Montanari & Flandrin, 1997).

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