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Paprikash ('Paprykarz szczeciński'): transformation of maritime identities and domestication of ethnic food

Maciej Kowalewski* and Robert Bartłomiejski

Abstract

At the center of our research is the 'Paprykarz' (*Paprikash*—fish and rice sandwich *pate*), local fish food which is an example of the relations and networks in a field of maritime culture. These relations address both the question of the social memory of national fishing industry and a regional identity. Sold originally in a tin, 'Paprykarz' was an export hit in the 1980s. In fact, it was a domesticated version of a Senegalese dish, called *Tiep bou dienn Sénégalais*, *Thieboudienne*. The story of paprikash is an unusually interesting one for those researching ethnic food, due to the complexity of its case. The many intersecting narratives about paprikash include stories from the food and fisheries industries; stories of political transformation, domestication, Soviet colonialism, and Creolisation; stories, too, about creating local identity, about nutritional habits, and the idea of *slow food*.

Keywords: Paprikash, Domestication, Senegal, Poland, Soviet colonialism, Seafood, Maritime sociology

Introduction

The center of our analysis is 'Paprykarz szczeciński,' a fish and rice sandwich *pate* ('paprikash,' Fig. 1). This product is a fish and vegetable paste, made popular since the 1960s by Szczecin's (now defunct) Gryf Far-Sea Fishing and Fishing Services (*Przedsiębiorstwo Połowów Dalekomorskich i Usług Rybackich 'Gryf'*). Sold originally in a tin, it was a popular 'quick bite' for students, workers, and travelers. In fact, paprikash is a domesticated version of a Senegalese dish called *Thieboudienne* (Fig. 2). The story of paprikash is an unusually interesting one for those researching ethnic food, due to the complexity of its case. The many intersecting narratives about paprikash include stories from the food and fisheries industries; stories of political transformation, domestication, Soviet colonialism, and Creolisation; stories, too, about creating local

identity, about nutritional habits, and the idea of *slow food*.

The three theoretical starting points for our research are: the inspiring actor-network theory by Bruno Latour [19, 20], references to a classic work on scallops by Michel Callon [8], and works of food anthropologists that use the Actor-Network Theory perspective [1, 13]. From these perspectives, food serves as a basis for analyzing relations and networks of connections between actors on a plane important for maritime sociology [4]. Taken together, these relations reference both the remembered identity of place history and the ongoing search for a regional, sea-related identity.

The aim of the research is to analyze the social significance of the transformation of ethnic food, from cultural appropriation to transformation into domesticated local, *slow food*. We aim to discuss how a food product concentrates the leading themes of maritime culture, and how paprikash becomes a metonymy for the complexity of meanings associated with the sea.

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Fig. 1 Paprykarz szczeciński, Polish canned fish spread. Source: Wikimedia Commons, author: Kpalion, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=48978164>



Fig. 2 Original Senegalese red Thieboudienne. Source: Wikimedia Commons, author: Dbilakovic, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=35960228>

Our research questions revolve around the changes of meaning in the domestication of paprikash and the role of food in the creation of maritime culture and port city narratives. In relation to the research questions and literature review, we propose a hypothesis: Paprikash has detached itself from its ethnic roots and in the process of domestication has become a food representing the maritime character of the city and the heritage of Polish fisheries.

The content analysis of texts such as advertisements, restaurant offerings/menus and local press were consulted to determine the leading narratives and meaning of paprikash was involved. We also reviewed previous historical research on the origin of examined food. We also refer to a local survey [28], diagnosing the

associations of city residents with the city, (N = 198, non-random, self-selected sample).

We focus on two main aspects of paprikash history: (1) the process of domesticating a product that was appropriated from its ethnic, African roots and turned into a significant local dish—in another place, context, and time (see Fig. 3); and (2), ties of the product with the port city of Szczecin and its maritime identity. (The paprikash described here has the adjective ‘szczeciński,’ from *Szczecin*, in its name.) Our idea is to present how an ethnic dish from western Africa became a crucial element of the foodscape of a port town in northern Poland [22, 24], and more broadly, to contribute to research on the ideas of ethnicity and locality, as these concepts pertain to food.

History of Paprykarz: domestication, Soviet colonialism and manufacturing the exotic

Paprikash was created in the late 1960s by Gryf Far-Sea Fishing and Fishing Services in Szczecin, Poland. This flagship company for regional and national fisheries employed at its peak over five thousand persons, and operated several dozen fish-catching ships and processing vessels. These Polish reefer ships caught fish in West African waters, and the food processing technicians working aboard the ships learnt of a dish sold on the shore that local chefs called *chop-chop* [9, 16]. Research on the origin of paprikash points to its history as a traditional dish from Senegal called *Tiep bou dienn Sénégalais*, *Thieboudienne*, *Tiep*, *thieb*, or *chebu jen* [10]. This ethnic food was a combination of rice, tomatoes, onions, and hot spices.

The Gryf technicians perfected the recipe, and began producing and selling paprikash. Its creation is attributed to Wojciech Jakacki [16], but also to Bogusław Borysowicz [15]. The entire dish (in its original, classic version) also included rice, tomato pulp imported from Bulgaria and Hungary, *pima* hot paprika, vegetables, and seasoning [29]. The first tins were sold in 1963. The basis for the Polonised version were fish offcuts (e.g., *Pagrus* and *Coryphaenoides rupestris*), made while cutting frozen blocks of fish meat into rectangular shapes. Interviews given by the Gryf employees after 1989 point to issues of rationalizing the production and making it cheaper: offcuts gathered while freezing rectangular blocks of fish meat were used to produce this tin product [16].

None of those ingredients (apart from onion and rice) were a frequent feature of everyday Polish menu in the post-war reality. Paprikash was exotic because its ingredients were imported from other countries and because of the story of its origin—it was a fish-based dish that could not be found in the domestic and regional Polish cuisine. As Jolanta Tambor points out, before the tins of ‘Paprykarz szczeciński’ appeared, paprikash itself



was similar to a Hungarian dish called *paprikáskrumpli*, made with diced sausages, paprika, onions and potatoes. For this reason, the original name *paprykarz* denoted a dish that was similar within Polish and Hungarian cooking cultures [25].

'Paprykarz' quickly became Poland's export product, sold to over 30 countries, including the USSR, USA, Japan, Liberia, Hungary, Côte d'Ivoire, and Togo, according to Adam Zadworny [29]. In the late 1970s, Gryf produced 20 thousand tonnes of seafood every year, and for many years paprikash constituted about half of this weight.

In the late 1970s, the significant share of Polish fisheries in Senegal were noted, with peak of around 400.000 t year in 1978 [5]. This catch ended in the 1980s due to Poland's failure to comply with its contractual obligations

and the revocation of Poland's license to fish in the area [21].

As the prosperity of Polish far sea fishing ceased and fish were no longer caught in Western Africa, Paprykarz tins started to include Atlantic fish, with a bigger rice-to-fish ratio and without the *pima* seasoning. In the 1980s, less nutritious parts of fish—bones and scales—appeared more and more often [29, 30].

From our interpretive lens, this appropriation of the Senegal *Tiep bou dienn* or *Thieboudienne* recipe was a historical element of Soviet colonialism [2, 26]. The colonialist perspective treated the resources of developing countries that fell within its influence as inexhaustible sources, not only in terms of raw materials, but also in cultural and culinary matters. Russian imperialism, which Poland was forced to endure after 1945, freely used

any technologies, project solutions, and human resources of subordinate countries. The history of paprikash is, in a way, similar to that of British curry: here, a dish was also transferred into a different context, initially associated with the exotic, but (in contrast to curry) domesticated over time, made into a national and local product, with its exotic origin erased.

Despite this international history and ingredients, and despite the food’s presence on international markets, paprikash was still viewed as a domestic product – not an exotic and ‘foreign’ one. It was a novelty on the food market, but its African roots remained hidden. Instead, marketers emphasized the uniqueness of the recipe and highlighted its ties to national technological innovation. Paprikash’s Szczecin locality was accentuated, and its ‘exotic’ dimension was not used as a marketing headline. The product was one-of-a-kind, but available for daily consumption. Moreover, despite the global sales and popularity of the paprikash in Poland, it did not become something to be prepared at home: it remained solely a ready-made snack, to be purchased.

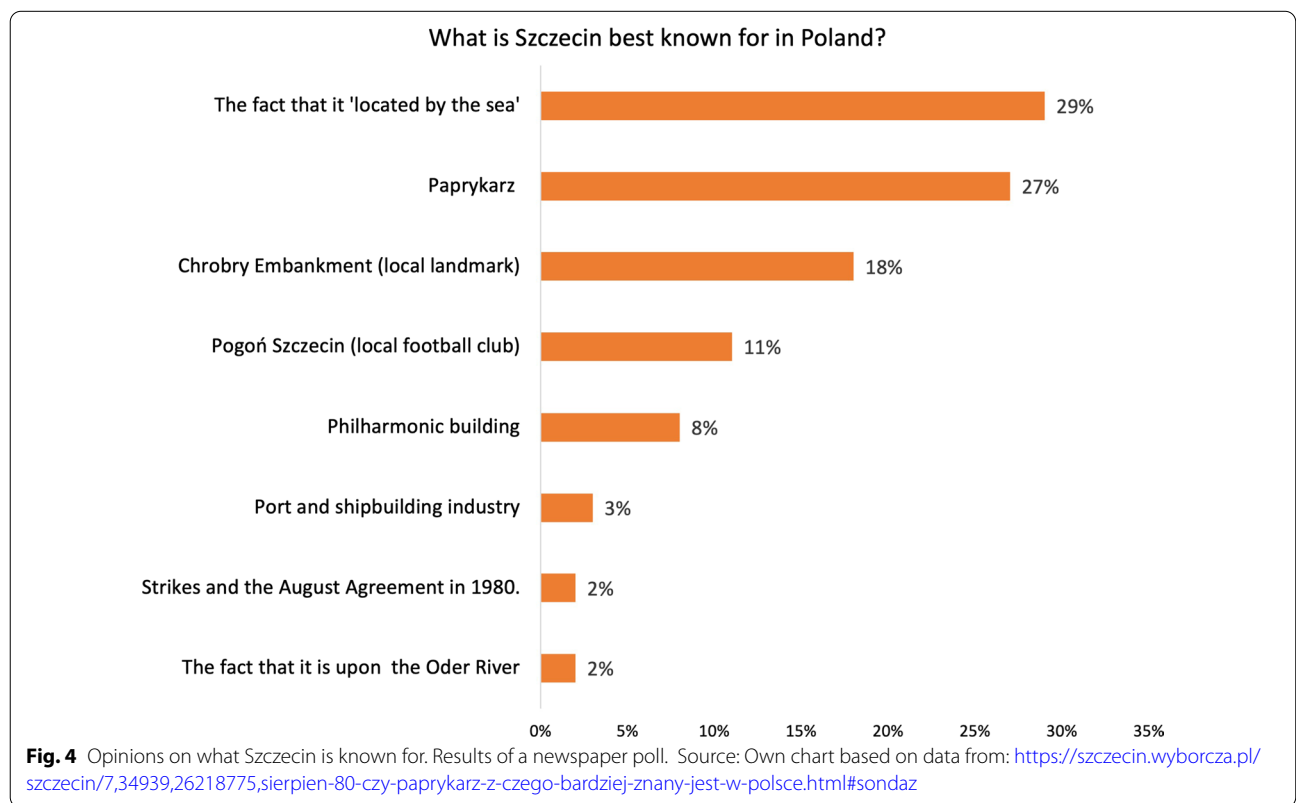
The 1990s brought a flood of exotic food into post-Soviet countries and triggered the association of such meals with prosperity, which led the collapse of domesticated paprikash sales. Its Renaissance would not arrive until the idea of *slow food* gained popularity in

Poland. The Gryf company stopped making Paprykarz szczeciński in the 1990s, but after a short break two new versions—one mass-produced and one craft variety—appeared on the market.

Food and maritime identity

In Poland, paprikash is still currently associated with the city of Szczecin. The dish underwent a metamorphosis from being a mass-produced worker’s food into a hand-crafted product, made of fish caught by local fishers, without preservatives and fillers, and traditionally pasteurized. Since 2010, ‘Paprykarz szczeciński’ is listed as a traditional product in the category ‘Fishery products of the Zachodniopomorskie voivodeship.’

Paprikash is widely recognizable across Poland, and present in its pop culture. A 2020 poll, carried out by local newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza Szczecin*, asked 198 respondents (in a non-randomised, self-selected sample): *What is Szczecin best known for in Poland?* (see Fig. 4). Among a pre-defined set of responses, as many as 29% of pointed to ‘the fact that it [the city] is located by the sea.’ (Even though it is located a few dozen kilometers from the seashore, many citizens believe that Szczecin is a sea-side city.) For 27% of respondents, Szczecin is best known for its paprikash. Less popular responses included references to the local football club (Pogoń Szczecin – 11%)



and the city's iconic architecture (e.g., the philharmonic building – 8%) [28].

Paprikash's significance has crossed the borders of locality, even though the product has 'szczeciński' in its very name. This product, sold all over Poland, carries the image of the town's maritime character and cultural associations with the strength of Polish fishing industry. Port cities have a unique historical character of serving as access points 'to' and 'from' local places. They are urbanized spaces, where land and water meet, and the exchange of goods, persons, services, and capital is possible thanks to the movements of the ships [3, 14]. Paprikash is part of the port city's culture, which may be seen as an outgrowth of the local foodscape. It encompasses physical, sociocultural, economic and, political influences at both the micro- and macroeconomic levels [27]. Paprikash is a good example of success contributed to a complex mix of factors, including: the company-owned sea fleet of catching vessels with a Polish crew; a contemporary market shortage of exotic products in PRL; the location of the fish-processing company in a large port city, with a wide fish-catching and distribution network; and finally, the PRL media and advertising that built a network of positive associations with this brand. Therefore, paprikash is something more than just an object (a dish) or an artifact associated with city of Szczecin. It was the result of a specific way of manufacturing, of consumption patterns, and of a cultural mindset, typical to the social system of PRL.

With the transformations of 1989, socio-political processes have changed the Polish system. The paprikash product and its perception have also changed with the economy. Still, its connotations with the port, the sea, and the city are deeply rooted in the local and national social identity. One of the means of theoretical conceptualization of this phenomenon may lie in the concept of *porosity*, developed by Carola Hein, which debunks the thesis that port cities are merely places of contact, marking the clear border between three elements: water, air, and earth. In truth, those borders are *open* and many of their elements are transferred into the tangible and intangible landscape of the city. The functions of a port city create networks in space, joined by the physical, administrative, financial infrastructure, and through other chains of command [14]. This multifaceted network shows paprikash as an element of the Szczecin foodscape, and may serve as a foundation stone for researching how the city identity translates into certain aspects of the sea, the port, the city, and its surroundings. The idea of translation [20] is particularly important here: the actors operate and create new networks, modifying both their reality and themselves by joining various networks of elements to create hybrid systems (of past and present,

of non-people and people). Paprikash is an example of such a hybrid, merging a nostalgic view of the port city and its seafaring prosperity during the PRL period with the contemporary interest in ecology, regionalism, and the tradition encompassed by *slow food*. According to actor-network theory, investigating translation involves 'following the actor'. In this sense, paprikash may be a good starting point for finding an answer to questions about the role and function of a non-human subject (paprikash) in a network of subjects (paprikash consumers), engaged in the port / city relationship. This question raises further inquiries: how is the relationship between *nature* (the sea), *technology* (e.g., the port city, fish processing company) and *culture* (paprikash as an element of the foodscape) created and maintained in port cities? The question is grounded in the theory of urban assemblage, where the port city is conceptualized as a complex whole that encompasses societies, institutions, objects, technologies, and nature [4]. In light of the concept of a port city assemblage, paprikash should not be viewed as a merely product, but as a multitude of actions and interactions, occurring in the various contexts where paprikash is consumed. The process of conceptualization takes place in the network of activities around paprikash, activities that engage the actors-networks and the product's namesake city ('szczeciński').

Conclusion

The previous research showed that part of the tourist experience is to compare with the cuisine of one's own ethnic group and use the criteria of 'exotic,' 'original,' 'iconic' food [17, 18]. It has also been pointed out that the familiar-foreign opposition is discursive in nature, and both the exotic and the domestic can be transformed [23]. The concepts of acculturation or multiculturalism [7], among others, have been used to study processes of transforming the meanings attributed to food or cuisine.

Product ingredient reformulations (regardless of their cultural and social meanings) are a separate part of the research on this issue. Nowadays, they are gaining new and important importance, in connection with the discovered functions of nutritional components in the prevention of certain diseases and the process of post-pandemic recovery [11]. Among other things, studies highlight the issues of nutritional safety and the need to develop the resilience of the nutrition sector [6]. Emerging new food technologies and agri-food innovations for this purpose [12] may be a parallel or independent process from the process of transforming the cultural meanings given to ethnic foods—this issue requires further research.

Our research supports the hypothesis that the studied dish is currently unrelated to the ethnicity of the original.

'Paprykarz' became slow food and brand associated with Szczecin, recognized nationally and embedded in pop culture, as symbol of maritime culture. This examination of paprikash's African roots should be understood as the return of a discarded narration. The hidden ethnic origin of the snack has been revived in the modern practices of slow food, joining what is regional with wider cultural contexts.

The history of paprikash is, in a way, representative of systemic changes in Poland after 1989. 'Paprykarz szczeciński' became a symbol of the Szczecin inhabitants' ingenuity, as they were inspired by the African experiences of the local fishers and had limited resources themselves, coupled with a considerable desire to experience exotic flavors. The food-related culture and its ties with the port city of origin is an interesting example of the translation process occurring between the social actors and the sea. In other words, the snack illustrates the ties between the landscape of flavors in the port city of Szczecin and the paprikash. Eating it allows us to enter, for a moment, the world of our imagination: e.g., the port in Szczecin, which no longer exists.

The example of paprikash shows the circulation of eating and nutritional practices, and can be viewed as a valuable source of information on changes in economic systems and social practices. We hope to demonstrate the symbolic meaning of paprikash, which serves as a representation of ingenuity, of the historical fishing industry, and of the product's cultural ties with the local.

Another transformation of paprikash is now taking place, as the dish evolves from a cheap and common snack to a slow food fixture on the fish menu at restaurants. In a complex history, found in a tin, we may observe the translations occurring between actors; the story shows how *paprikash* triggers a nostalgic idea of a prosperous port city and its far-sea fishery. It is proof of the fact that popular foods bring attention to the leading themes of maritime sociology, and the mixed paste becomes a metonymy of complex meanings related to the sea.

Abbreviation

PR: Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa (Polish People's Republic).

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