

Iwona Kaliszewska

University of Warsaw

## CHEESE BRIBE. VIEWING SOCIAL CHANGES THROUGH FOOD AND MOBILITY IN DAGHESTAN, NORTH CAUCASUS

This paper makes a contribution to food research and studies of mobility through analyzing food exchange in a translocal context. Furthermore, by focusing on Muslim women's practices in the North Caucasus it also contributes to gender studies of post-socialism, which, for the most part, are based on the field material from the non-Muslim part of the Russian population. Anthropologists have viewed social changes through the lens of various food items or consumption patterns. I argue that adding a mobility aspect to the research centered on food can help us discover social changes and practices that may otherwise remain unnoticed. I will show that studying the dynamics of food circulation and human mobility may serve as a good starting point towards the broader study of societies. Thus, by taking people originating from the Shiri village in Daghestan as an example, I look into channels of food sharing to analyze the nature of reproduction of social relations within communities and the cultural entanglements created by the circulation of goods. Furthermore, the analysis of their vernacular practices reveals the existence of informal exchange networks, in particular the ones secured by and for women. Through these networks, food and favors are exchanged, and social bonds and feelings of obligation are created and preserved. Further analysis also reveals social changes connected with mountain abandonment, in particular the growing awareness of the weakening of *tukhum* (lineage) and village ties. These dynamics reflect recent changes in the Daghestani society that are connected with increased mobility and the processes of (re)islamization.

**Keywords:** mobility, food exchange, economy of favors, informal economy, corruption, gender, Islam

### Łapówka z sera. Jedzenie i mobilność w Republice Dagestanu, Kaukaz Północny

#### Streszczenie

Jedzenie często służyło antropologom jako punkt wyjścia do analizy procesów społecznych na terenie byłego ZSRR. W tekście tym pokazuję, że jednoczesne badanie cyrkulacji jedzenia i mobilności ludzi może być dobrym punktem wyjścia do badania szerszych zmian społecznych w regionie. Tekst oparty jest na materiale badawczym będącym efektem długotrwałych, etnograficznych badań terenowych prowadzonych w położonej na Kaukazie Północnym Republice Dagestanu w latach 2004–2016, a w szczególności w latach 2012–2016.

Prowadząc badania wśród wychodźców z górskiego aułu Sziri przemieszczających się między rodzinną wsią i położonymi na równinie miejscowościami Družba i Czinar, przyglądam się procesom przekazywania jedzenia oraz towarzyszącym im relacjom społecznym. Pokazuję, że o ile analiza praktyk jedzeniowych związanych z konkretnymi potrawami jest ciekawym punktem wyjścia, o tyle dodatkowe prześledzenie mobilności danej grupy może pozwolić nam na zaobserwowanie szerszych zmian społecznych. Przykładowo, analiza lokalnych praktyk cyrkulacji jedzenia między Sziri i równiną ujawnia istnienie nieformalnych sieci wymiany, w szczególności sieci tworzonych przez kobiety i dla kobiet. Analiza materiału badawczego pokazuje, jak współcześnie, na muzułmańskim południu Rosji zmienił się charakter tych wymian oraz ich aktorzy. Ponadto, przyjrzenie się mobilności ludzi i jedzenia między górskim Sziri a równiną pomaga dostrzec zmiany społeczne wiążące się z opuszczaniem gór, w szczególności osłabianie więzów rodowych oraz próby przeciwdziałania temu procesowi. Powyższe praktyki ukazują charakter zmian społecznych związanych ze zwiększoną mobilnością mieszkańców Kaukazu Północnego oraz (re)islamizacją regionu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** mobilność, wymiana jedzenia, ekonomia przysług, korupcja, gender, islam

## Introduction

Social changes of the 1990s in the former USSR have been broadly viewed by anthropologists through the lens of food (e.g. Humphrey 1995; Patico 2003; Caldwell 2002; Ries 2009). Research on food in Soviet and post-Soviet contexts has been conducted along the lines of food consumption and production (e.g. Dunn 2008; Humphrey 1995), as well as food shortages and subsistence strategies of the 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Ries 2009: 196). More recently, food nostalgia (Boym 2001; Caldwell 2006) and local and national identity aspects of food preparation have been scrutinized by various authors (e.g. Caldwell 2002; Muelfried 2007). However, little attention has been paid to the complex web of entanglements that food circulation creates within groups that actively engage in mobility, or to put it more broadly, to the relation between food circulation and human mobility.

Furthermore, even though the issues of transformation times and the early immersion in capitalist market economy in Russia have both been given a lot of attention, I have not come across any ethnography-based social-science research that would take food and human mobility as a starting point to explore important social changes in contemporary Russia, particularly in North Caucasus. This article aims to fill this gap.

What is more, it makes a contribution to food research and mobility studies through focusing on food exchange in a translocal context, and, by investigating the practices of women in the Southern, Muslim, part of Russia it also contributes to gender analyses of post-socialism, which for the most part are based on the field material from the non-Muslim part of Russian population. I believe that although the transformation processes in North Caucasus in the early 1990s were similar to those all over the Russian Federation, today – over 25 years after the collapse of the USSR – it is important to take into account the varied paths that different post-Soviet republics or even Russian administrative units have taken. It is also crucial to attempt to link food-flows with current political changes (spanning over the last 15 years in a given setting), considering that the early 2000s brought about significant changes in the paths that Daghestan and “Russia”<sup>1</sup> have taken. As a result, the term “post-Soviet” in Daghestan is different from the “post-Soviet” in, for example, Tver or Rostov.

Nowadays, as a part of the Russian Federation contemporary Daghestan certainly undergoes many economic and political changes similar to the rest of the country; however, it is the most islamized republic in Russia and one with the highest rates of migration (Kapustina, Karpov 2011). Nevertheless, an ethnographic insight into its food circulation may serve as an informative example of social change and changing gender roles in Southern Russia in general. It can also reveal societal changes on the micro scale that would go unnoticed if analyzed through a top-down approach (cf. Schatz 2009).

In the paper, I take a closer look at food sharing and food circulation between the communities of Shiri (located in the mountains), Chinar, and Druzhba (located in the lowlands), with a specific focus on their complex web of entanglements which create reciprocal bonds. I also analyze their character as well as the ways in which they are reproduced. The analysis of vernacular practices of these exchanges subsequently enables me to look into informal economic activities, in particular the ones secured by and for women.

Furthermore, by encompassing in-depth ethnographic insights from my fieldwork, I will show that adding a mobility aspect to the food-oriented research of societies enables us to gain additional insights into social changes and practices that could otherwise stay hidden from the eyes of researchers.

In the paper, I firstly provide basic information about Daghestan, my field site, research and methodology. Secondly, I scrutinize two dishes that my interlocutors claimed to be the most important for themselves, the ones through which I initially wanted to look at the Daghestani society. Thirdly, I add the mobility

---

<sup>1</sup> Here: the part of the Russian Federation outside the North Caucasus. Although North Caucasus is de jure a part of Russia, the majority of the population uses the word “Russia” to refer to the area outside of North Caucasus (more Kaliszewska, Falkowski 2016).

aspect to my analysis and provide four case studies from my recent fieldwork (2012–2016) as well as other insights from my former research (2004–2012). Finally, I present the results of my analysis, with a particular focus on the social changes made visible through the analysis of food and mobility.

### **A brief insight into everyday life in contemporary Daghestan**

Daghestan is the southernmost republic of the Russian Federation located in the North Caucasus, and the most ethnically diverse republic in Russia. It is populated by around 3 million people from over 30 different ethnolinguistic groups, some as small as the population of a single mountainous village. Daghestan is divided into lowland territory and a mountainous part, the latter consisting of villages scattered on mountain slopes (*auls*) or located in the valleys. The mountainous villages are usually inhabited by a number of *tukhums*, which can be defined as lineages (sometimes also clans) originating from one place.

The Republic of Daghestan is also the most politically unstable region in the Russian Federation that has been undergoing various political and religious changes since the fall of the USSR. It has been burdened with numerous social and political conflicts: high unemployment, clashes between power structures (local police, Federal Security Service, Federal army) and Islamic militants, corruption.

The majority of Daghestanis are Sunni Muslims. The anti-religious practices of the Soviet Union successfully eradicated Islam from the public space, and also partially from the private sphere. However, after the fall of the USSR, most Daghestanis have rediscovered Islamic practices. By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the lives of men and women had changed profoundly. Nowadays, men are encouraged by their peers in mosques to piously pray, quit drinking and smoking, and the women are supposed to dress in “an Islamic way”, stay at home and out of professions that involve contact with men. These changes have been accepted by some and rejected by others, nevertheless the new Islamic way of life has become the social practice that the Daghestani women and men have to deal with alongside the unstable political and economic situation (Kaliszewska 2016: 122–128).

There is a great variety of local communities throughout Daghestan. Despite local differences in religious and political life, most Daghestanis live in self-created, insular communities, relying on people they trust. These communities include mainly the people originating from their villages and *tukhums* (lineages), who live both inside and outside of the republic (Kaliszewska 2016: 150–171). The Republic of Daghestan is also a part of Russian Federation; therefore, the local food market bears many similarities to food markets in other locations

throughout the country. However, with a flourishing second economy, it is impossible to provide any “hard data” about the origin or quantity of food that is imported or smuggled.

One of the major industries in Daghestan is agriculture (sheep farming, grain farming, wine-making, dairying); a variety of food is produced and sold locally, some of it is also exported to neighboring republics. Most food products are widely available in Daghestani cities both in grocery stores and at the bazaars. Larger villages usually have one or several small stores which offer a limited variety of products with longer expiration dates (sweets, soft drinks, tea, coffee, cooking oil, sugar, flour, canned food as well as cigarettes and alcohol, unless forbidden by the imam or *jamaat*) and sometimes a limited choice of fruit and vegetables. In bigger settlements, bazaars are held once a week. Various products from different locations are available, spanning from local beef, lamb and Caspian fish (including those illegally poached in the Caspian Sea), with a range spanning from Turkish or Azeri fruit to frozen chickens imported from China.

## Conducting ethnography among the Shiri people in Daghestan

### Methodology

This study is based on ethnographic fieldwork I conducted between 2012 and 2016<sup>2</sup> among the people originating from the Shiri village who speak the Shiri language/dialect. They are officially considered to belong to the Dargi people, the second-biggest ethnic group in the republic (after Avars), with a population of around 510,000.

The majority of the Shiri live in Chinar, Druzhba, and the mountainous village of Shiri. In my research, I focused on these three settlements; however I also followed my interlocutors to the Daghestani capital Makhachkala and other places. In my analysis, I have also used my experience of fieldwork in Daghestan in 2004–2012<sup>3</sup> in Makhachkala, Lak, and Avar regions

My methodology was based on participant and non-participant observation. Over the course of 5 field trips that took place in 3 different seasons of the year, I conducted over 100 interviews (both video- and audio-recorded as well as unrecorded, 18 of which have been used for the purpose of the analysis

---

<sup>2</sup> The research was part of a broader project based at the University of Bamberg entitled: “Documenting Dargi Languages in Daghestan: Shiri and Sanzhi”. It has been financed by the Volkswagen Foundation. This paper is also a result of a research grant number 2015/19/D/HS3/02362 financed by National Science Centre (Narodowe Centrum Nauki).

<sup>3</sup> This period of my research has been financed by: University of Warsaw, National Science Centre (2009–2011), and myself.

in this article). In addition, I took regular field notes (around 150 pages). Participant observation was a particularly important element of my research. The short comments, everyday conversations during field trips, together with shared cooking and eating enabled me to learn about the practices that my interlocutors would not talk eagerly about in front of the camera or the voice recorder. The main language of the research was Russian (*lingua-franca* in Daghestan) and Shiri, depending on the speaker's will and their ability to communicate comprehensibly in Russian.

The majority (around 70%) of my interlocutors were women, who – with a few exceptions – were not officially employed at the time. Most of them however had worked outside of their households at some point of their lives: in *kolkhozes*, lower-rank administration jobs, post offices, schools, kindergartens, libraries or community centers. Men also eagerly shared their knowledge with me, especially at the *godekan* (meeting place) in Shiri, where they would spend a considerable part of the day. In the lowlands however, many of them were absent due to seasonal mobility or professional work. The majority of my male interlocutors worked as construction workers, some were involved in trade. The economic status of the families I lived or talked with in general was relatively similar. It is however important to note that the people originating from Shiri were seen by other Dargi people (for example from Zelibki or Sanzhi) as “rich” and as the ones who have always been involved in trade, even during the times of USSR.

In the villages of Shiri, Chinar, and Druzhba, the Shiri people still live close enough to each other to keep in touch on a daily basis. Therefore, apart from conducting regular interviews and participating in everyday life in the three settlements, I followed my interlocutors in their trips to and from the lowlands, visits to the city of Makhachkala, to the doctors or teachers. In this way, my research, which was initially confined to three villages, eventually expanded into a multi-sided fieldwork<sup>4</sup>.

### The site

Shiri is a settlement in the Dakhadaevsky District. There are 6 households and around a dozen of inhabitants, but some live in Shiri only during the summer. There is a small school in Shiri (with 3 students, and around twice as many registered) and a closed, though officially operating, *dom kultury* (house of culture), a Soviet-invented community center established in most settlements to promote state-defined folklore and culture. The nearest shop and polyclinic are in Kubachi, a city-like settlement renowned for handcrafted silver jewelry and daggers. It is located within a 40-minute drive on a dirt road that is accessible only by a four-wheel drive.

<sup>4</sup> For more on multi-sided fieldwork, see Marcus 1995.

The inhabitants of Shiri rely partly on self-subsistence. Not all families keep livestock, however the dairy, meat, and honey are shared, exchanged, or traded (in case of bigger quantities), and it is not approved to buy products that are available in Shiri at the bazaar in Kubachi. Other products, such as bags of wheat flour, onions, sunflower oil, sugar, and salt are bought at the bazaar in large quantities and usually brought by relatives who own a car.

The lowland settlements where the Shiri people have moved are located along the stripe of plains close to the coast of the Caspian Sea. The two of them are Chinar and Druzhba.

Chinar (Russian-Turkic: plane-tree, sycamore) is a rural locality in the Derbentsky District and this is where most Shiri people moved to from their mountainous village. It is mostly inhabited by the Dargi people, Tabasarans, and Azeris. Another village, Druzhba (Russian: friendship) is located about 20 km away from Chinar and belongs to the Kayakentsky District. It is inhabited by many different ethnic groups, mostly by the Dargi and the Tabasaran. Both settlements were established in the 1950s as *kolkhozes* (collective farms) that provided grapes for the alcohol (wine and brandy) industry in Derbent, namely the Derbent Brandy Factory (*Derbentskiy Koniachniy Kombinat*). In the 1990s, the *kolkhozes* were privatized and still provide workplaces for the locals today.

Both in Chinar and Druzhba, people cultivate vegetable gardens and a number of them still keep livestock, the latter is however in decline. Other products (if they are not obtained from relatives or neighbors) are bought at the bazaar. Small stores in both settlements serve as places where “last minute” shopping can be done and where under-the-counter alcohol and cigarettes can be purchased.

There is a constant flow of people and ideas between Druzhba, Chinar, and Shiri, as well as the Daghestani capital Makhachkala and other settlements inhabited by the Shiri people, including Izberbash, Daghesanskiye Ogni, and Derbent. Although I have visited all these places, I will limit my analysis to the three settlements and Makhachkala, which was an important point of reference for all my interlocutors.

### **Viewing social changes through the lens of food**

Various food items have been used as lenses to view societal transformations, changes in social relations, patterns of sociability both for post-Soviet countries and elsewhere in the world. I had a similar aim for Daghestan and the social changes that the republic is undergoing.

Everyday life and social changes in the former USSR, especially changes that took place in the 1990s, have been broadly viewed by anthropologists through



the lens of food. Melissa Caldwell (2009: 3) in the introduction of her edited volume “Food and Everyday Life in the Post-Socialist World” writes:

Food is a particularly conducive channel for enacting and understanding social change, both because its materiality makes it a concrete marker of transformation and because the sensual qualities of food evoke visceral responses that transform external anonymous social processes into intimate, immediate, and personal experiences. Not only does food make the political personal, but it also makes the world accessible to ordinary people in ways that other things do not.

Jennifer Patino (2002), for example, looked at chocolate and cognac to examine the influence of marketization on the culture of gift-giving and social networking in urban Russia in the late 1990s. Elizabeth Dunn (2008), on the other hand, scrutinized the food canned at home after state-owned factories have been shut and Soviet-established standards for food canning were no longer present. Through the food canned at home and the risks it brought to people’s health, Dunn viewed the post-Soviet Georgian state, or rather its absence in people’s lives after the fall of the USSR, as well as the gradual state disintegration in the Shevardnadze era.

Whereas using food metaphors to describe and analyze social changes makes them comprehensible to the reader unfamiliar with the setting, there is also a risk of hasty generalizations concomitant with it, especially if the metaphors are used to explain the processes in such a large country as Russia. Nancy Ries (2009), for example, uses a potato metaphor to view uncertainties of market reforms and methods of adapting to them in Russian society. She claims that growing potatoes, apart from producing an indispensable food item in domestic economy in Russia, also “constitutes a ritualized mode of activity, exchange, and negotiation within families, networks and communities, and across larger polities. It facilitates engagement with, detachment from, or protection against markets and politics” (Ries 2009: 183). She also adds that “where the state withdrew, potato grew” (ibid.: 196). Although neither Ries’s nor other ethnographies claim to represent the entire Russian experience, they are written in a way that may implicitly suggest so. Inhabitants of the North Caucasus have certainly shared many experiences with people from “Russia” during the *perestroika* times and afterwards, however it would be impossible to view societal changes in the North Caucasus through the “potato lens”, simply because this vegetable does not constitute an important element of the local cuisine. This is but one example of the food metaphor that holds true for most of Russia, but excludes the North Caucasian experiences. We can argue along similar lines about Melissa Caldwell’s (2010) account of cultivating vegetables at the dachas in Russia. Whereas the life at the dachas may be a key to understand “the Russian way of life”, neither the Russian experiences of nature and “natural” food, nor the “dacha



metaphor” is valid for the Daghestanis because cultivating vegetables or spending free time in dachas is quite rare in the republic. We should therefore be careful with using unifying statements about Russian-wide food practices or foodways and take a closer look at the food practices in Russia’s Muslim South.

As the potato would certainly not make a good metaphor, I tried to look at the social changes in Daghestan through local dishes that were listed by my interlocutors as important and indispensable elements of the Daghestani cuisine. Below, I take a closer look at *khinkal* and *chudu* – the two dishes that were mentioned most often during my research between 2012 and 2016.

*Khinkal* are homemade (wheat or corn) noodles boiled in a broth made out of dried or fresh meat, served with cooked meat and garlic, and sometimes also with walnut or tomato topping. In different regions of Daghestan, there is a variety of types of *khinkal* – from small (around 1 cm in diameter) noodles, through bigger (3 cm) stripes of dough, to “rolls” made of longer pieces of dough. There are also *khinkals* made of corn flour (usually 4–5 cm long cones joined together) called *Avar khinkal*, formerly prepared for men who were setting out on longer journeys. “The best *khinkal* is the herdsman’s *khinkal*!” – said my host in Druzhba (man, 52). I have heard many similar comments made by men when *khinkal* was mentioned. Herdsman *khinkal* is one of the few dishes traditionally prepared by men (the more frequent ones are *shashlyks* made during outdoor picnics), when they are away herding. Big noodles (as opposed to smaller ones made by women at home) are boiled in broth and consumed with garlic topping (for similar practices in the Caucasus see Chatwin, Suleimanov 2006: 109).

Interestingly, although *khinkal* was always mentioned, it was not frequently consumed in the lowlands, and sometimes it was prepared just for me, so that I could taste “traditional Daghestani cuisine” as a visitor to Daghestan. Looking back, since 2004 I have observed a gradual decline in *khinkal* consumption. This observation was confirmed by my interlocutors in Druzhba, Chinar, Shiri, and Makhachkala during my fieldwork between 2012 and 2016. They listed various reasons. Six of my interlocutors considered *khinkal* “too heavy” or “hard to digest”. The smell factor was also mentioned. “In the villages where they keep stock, it is appropriate food, if you do hard work” said Mariat from Druzhba (woman, 50). “I like it, but it is too heavy and I have liver problems afterwards” – commented her sister Sapiyat (aged 38). On another occasion, another woman Zeynab (aged 65) from Shiri said to me after I had *khinkal* at her neighbor’s place: “You smell of garlic. You had *khinkal*, right? I do not eat it anymore, because it [the smell] is not nice”. Later in the conversation, she remarked: “in the villages, people eat *khinkal* a lot, we do not”. Zeynab was about to move to the lowlands. Her husband worked at the local school, and she saw her family as more educated and modern (*kulturnaya semya*) than a “typical village family”. People from Zelibki (village near Shiri) were mentioned as the ones who eat

more *khinkal* than the inhabitants of Shiri. Thus in their case, this practice fitted into a general “backwardness narrative” strongly present among the Shiri people who spoke about Zelibkans as “dirty” and “uneducated”.

Although most of my interlocutors liked this dish, not eating *khinkal* (or saying so) was gradually becoming a sign of progressiveness, or being “closer to the city”. *Khinkal* consumption and narratives about this dish shows the change in the lifestyles of Daghestanis, both in the mountains and in the lowlands. Although *khinkal* was still claimed traditional and important, its excessive consumption was seen as backward and unhealthy. It started to signify a village way of life – at times remembered with nostalgia, and on other occasions mocked and marked as primitive.

*Chudu* was usually listed right after or just before *khinkal* when I asked my interlocutors what is the most popular food in Daghestan. *Chudu* is a round pie with a filling made of cheese, meat, pumpkin, or greens, including either wild leafy vegetables/greens (for example ramsons) or domesticated ones (for example chard or lettuce). When my Daghestani interlocutors wanted to explain to me what *chudu* is, the first comparison was “it is a Daghestani pizza, but better”. *Chudu* can be in fact made thick or thin, and the latter version is most popular with cheese; it is traditionally made in large quantities, covered with a butter or sour-cream spread and stacked, so that the first *chudushki* (diminutive of *chudu*) absorb the heat from the ones above them. *Chudu* is commonly prepared as a quick dish served when guests arrive unexpectedly; it is also the most popular dish made at home for dinner and served at weddings. The fact that *chudu* can be re-heated was listed among one of its most important attributes.

In Makhachkala, *chudu* is one of the most popular takeaways. In February 2016, we visited Indira (aged 25), our interlocutor from Druzhba who worked in a *chudushnaya* (a small cafe where *chudu* is baked on the spot) owned by her aunt. Until 5 pm, there had been only occasional customers who visited to eat a piece of *chudu* on the spot and buy some for later; however, around 5-6 pm, when we were about to leave, the number of clients increased. Indira said that most of the clients in the cafe were women, rather than single men who were unwilling to cook on their own, as I had previously expected. My other interlocutors in Makhachkala ordered (or bought at *chudushnye*) *chudu* far more often than pizza. “It’s healthier and tastes better” – said another of my female interlocutors, Zarina (aged 39), claiming that pizza is a Western invention and “you never know what they put in the pizza dough”. When I asked if she knew what they put in *chudu*, she claimed that “yes, it is made traditionally” (which made me realize that tradition stood in this case for “health” and “naturalness”). *Chudu*, especially the thick kind, was also one of the most popular dishes brought on longer journey by bus or train. It was usually cut into 6 slices and shared with co-passengers.

While *khinkal* may serve as a lens to view changing lifestyles, through the lens of *chudu* we can see how traditional food can be incorporated in what is viewed as the “modern city life”, where professionally-engaged women can still provide “good” and “traditional” food for their families by ordering it instead of making it on their own. It can be thus seen as a way towards emancipation from everyday women’s chores. “So I’m supposed to work, bring money and still cook traditional dishes? I’m not a robot. And you can buy home-made *chudu*, so what is the difference?”, commented a woman aged 54. Another woman, in her fifties, too, said that with the takeaway *chudu* (*chudu na zakaz*) she can have a “nutritious, traditional and tasty dinner without the excessive work in the kitchen”. Thus, looking at the Daghestani society through the lens of *chudu* allows us to observe how women creatively negotiate their “traditional roles”, and how they deal with men and the requirements of their families.

To sum up, viewing changes Daghestani society through the lens of *khinkal* and *chudu* points to (respectively): (1) gradual changes to the lifestyles of Daghestani people from villages and city-like settlements and the growing awareness of “healthy” food practices as shaped through the discourses of health and modernity, as well as (2) changing attitudes towards food preparation at home and towards women’s obligations to provide traditional food for their families.

### **Viewing social changes through the lens of food and mobility**

Accepting that the scrutiny of food practices may inform us about social changes in a given society, I claim that in today’s mobile world, adding the mobility aspect to the analysis can help us see social practices and social change that may otherwise go unnoticed.

My claim is based on the observation that food is not only consumed and shared, but very often it is circulated. It travels with people, and significant effort is put into its transportation. Therefore, omitting the mobility aspect would mean removing an important part of social life from the scope of the analysis. To support my point, in the paragraphs below I first look briefly at the mobility of my Daghestani interlocutors and at the category of mobility itself. Then, I provide four examples from my research in which food and human mobility can serve as a lens through which social changes can be observed.

#### **Mobility of the Shiri people in Daghestan**

Mobility is a category used to describe both internal and international mobile subjects (Glick Schiller, Salazar 2013); nevertheless, we need to be careful here not to fall into methodological nationalism (Wimmer, Glick Schiller 2002). While division between “internal” and “international” may be useful in some

research contexts, we need to bear in mind that this distinction normalizes the existing political order. In that frame, since Daghestan is *de jure* part of Russia, mobility within the republic and between Daghestan and the rest of the country would both fall into the category of internal mobility. However, mobility within the republic is in many aspects different from the mobility between Daghestan and “Russia” (Karpov, Kapustina 2011), therefore, in my paper by “internal mobility” I will refer to mobility within Daghestan.

The internal mobility in the republic is very intense. During my research, I was surprised to meet the same adults and children from Shiri in Druzhba and Chinar, and then in Makhachkala within relatively short periods of time. The mobility of my interlocutors and the ease, with which they visited each other and stayed at each other’s places for shorter and longer periods of time, encouraged me to follow them in their trips and visits to different settlements, even if it meant relocating on a daily basis. Eventually, I started travelling with my interlocutors between Shiri, Druzhba, Chinar and Makhachkala, and observing what they took with them, what they received from their relatives or co-villagers from the mountains, who was providing for whom, and most of all, how they spoke about these mobility practices.

The family members from Shiri, Chinar, and Druzhba visited each other frequently; sometimes stayed at their relatives for weeks, and on other occasions only briefly. The elderly people from Shiri usually spent winters in the lowlands and summers in the mountains. At other times, the parents from the village sent their children to the lowlands to attend schools or universities. The boys that lived with their relatives were encouraged to take up some work (for example help in family businesses), and the girls usually took care of younger children in the families or helped with household chores. The lowland-dwellers, on the other hand, sent their children to Shiri in the summer for various reasons: to get some fresh air, eat local food, or to practice the Shiri language.

The mobility outside of the republic is usually seasonal. The season, however, often lasts as long as 9 or 10 months. Young and adult men usually take up seasonal work in “Russia” either to earn money needed to marry or to provide for their families. They usually choose destinations such as Moscow or other large Russian cities to work at construction sites or in the oil industry in the North (my interlocutors had families in Syktyvkar and Norilsk). It is also not unlikely for whole families to move for a few years to Rostov or Astrakhan regions, where they rent plots of land to cultivate vegetables.

The mobility of the Daghestani people has a long history. Before the Soviet times, men used to set off on trade journeys. The ancestors of my Shiri interlocutors traded silver jewelry from Kubachi and blades from Amuzgi with the Georgians. In 1944, the Shiri inhabitants were forcibly resettled to Chechnya, and came back only in 1956, when the Chechens were allowed to return from

the exile in Central Asia. Upon seeing their village destroyed, many of the Shiri decided – encouraged by the Soviet authorities – to move the lowlands. During the USSR rule, involvement in trade was forbidden or limited, but the Daghestani men would still engage in *shabashka* (semi-legal work) on construction sites outside the republic or become involved in illegal trade activities. My interlocutors admit to trading illicit fur, silver, and gold between Central Asia and Siberia.

After the fall of the USSR, it was the women who outperformed men in petty trade in Russia (cf. Farideh 2002, for Azerbaijan). They took to bazaars and made attempts to sustain their families in all possible ways. In Daghestan, women sold vegetables from their gardens and became involved in petty smuggling to and from Azerbaijan (women rarely underwent detailed border controls because most border officers were male and did not feel comfortable with checking women). Around one-third of my female interlocutors from the lowlands had been involved in petty trade in the 1990s. They experienced these times as “tough and criminal”, but at the same time there was also a hint of nostalgia in their recollections. From the early 2000s on, together with the rapid economic growth in the Russian Federation resulting from significant rises in oil prices, the men have started to find employment in various areas of the economy, and have become the main breadwinners for the Daghestani families. The financial influence of women, on the other hand, has diminished in many households. They were encouraged by their husbands or other relatives to drop their small-income jobs in trade or the public sector, and instead take care of their children at home. Some did, while others decided to remain employed, even if their income was insignificant.

Below I present four case studies from my research, which I use as a basis for my analysis of the food and the mobility of the Shiri people, and show how this type of analysis can shed light on the intricate recent changes in the Daghestani society in particular, and thus help to better explain the changes that occur in societies in general.

### **Food circulation between Shiri and the lowlands**

#### ***Food parcels from the mountains and a cheese bribe***

“When we leave the mountains, who will supply them with food?” – wondered Patimat, an elderly inhabitant of the Shiri village in Daghestan, referring to her relatives in the lowlands. Late in the evening, she was busy packing a big file of *s:is:upi* (*Allium victorialis*)<sup>5</sup> and dried beef to be transported to the lowlands on

---

<sup>5</sup> Local Shiri names were transcribed according to the standard transcription for Caucasian languages. Latin names were provided by Iwa Kołodziejska and her colleagues from the Warsaw Botanic Garden.

the next day. She was carefully choosing who to send the parcel to, considering the place her neighbor was going to and how much she could burden him with the distribution of the parcels in the lowlands. Eventually, she chose to send the whole parcel to her daughter in Druzhba. When I asked why she wanted to give them such a large amount, she said: “It’s good to give a lot. They can give it to their neighbors, they also share with them. *S:is:upi* is tasty. People like the *s:is:upi* from the mountains. It won’t go to waste.”

On another occasion, I asked her why she sends the parcels to the lowlands. She was surprised by my question. “What do you mean, why? I do not understand”. After a while she said: “Well, I can help, I have nothing to do here so I can go to the fields [...] they [wild leafy greens] do not grow anywhere else, and they are the best”. She referred to two species locally called *ʔaʔBʔamura* (*Cerastium davuricum*) and *gurʒinak:ʔi* (*Oberna multifida*) that are indeed very rare (Kaliszewska, Kołodziejaska-Degórska 2015). “And Malaykat [her daughter, aged 42] keeps cows, so we can send them good food. They have nothing there.” – Patimat added.

I helped in the preparations but did not follow this parcel to Druzhba. Later in 2014, I went to Druzhba and asked Mariat (aged 50) and her sister-in-law Aisha (aged 54) about the food parcels from Shiri. I entered Aisha’s backyard and saw her busy cleaning tomatoes and putting them in big jars. There were around 50-60 jars waiting to be filled. Most of the year she was living alone, her husband was coming back only for the winter, while her grown-up sons visited only occasionally. “By the next season everything will be gone!” said Aisha seeing my surprise. I helped Aisha fill the jars and used the opportunity to ask her about the food parcels from Shiri. “Before, I did not appreciate it [food from Shiri]” – said Aisha when we took a break to have some tea with quince jam. “Now I really miss it. These leafy greens do not grow here, only some of them do. I go to the forest here and collect *mec* (*Urtica urens* and *U. dioica*) and some other greens but it is not the same, and many greens do not grow here [...]. Meat also does not dry well here, the climate is bad [...]. It’s good that we still have relatives who send it to us, but it’s probably not long before they are gone.”

Mariat, who works as a kindergarten teacher, lives two blocks away from Aisha. She was not very enthusiastic about her mother’s parcels with the greens. “I am not too much into greens because there is too much hassle with them and I am lazy” – she laughed. Mariat only likes when her mother sends the greens cut and dried. “But it is ok, my neighbors and colleagues like it, I can share with them.”

During my next visit, Mariat was busy preparing *chudu* with cheese from her mother. She was wondering why her mother sometimes does not understand that the times of the crisis have ended and that she can buy things here, so there is no need to send so much. She said however that she really loves dried meat and

fresh cheese. “*Chudu* made with it is so much better and softer! [than when she uses the cheese from the bazaar]. Take more, it’s really delicious!” – she said when I stopped after helping myself to the fifth piece. “Even tomorrow and after tomorrow it will still be good” – she added.

On another occasion, in winter 2016 when we were having dinner, Mariat mentioned that the cheese she made the *chudu* with comes from the mountains. She received it from a woman who wanted to make sure her child becomes accepted in the kindergarten. She did not know exactly where the cheese came from. “Somewhere from the Dargi regions I suppose. She was a Dargi too. This is why she went to me [...]. So it is a cheese bribe” – she laughed. “Are you also sharing the parcels from your mom as gifts?” – I asked a bit later. “Yes, she sends a lot, so we share.” – Mariat said in a general way, but did not point to any specific transaction, and I did not enquire further.

### ***Dry meat and Ali’s car***

In the basement of her house in Chinar, Uma (aged 45) owned two big freezers, each about one meter tall, with an opening at the top. She used them to preserve products from her own garden, from Shiri, and other sources (bazaar, neighbors). In winter 2016, she showed us the frozen leafy greens (clean and cut into small pieces, ready for *chudu*), blackcurrants and meat from the cow that she ordered in the mountains. When her daughter (aged 23) learned from us that Ibragim (her uncle) is moving to Izberbash for good, she was truly sad. “Who will bring us products from Shiri, then?” – she wondered. “There are still other people like Patimat” – I suggested. “I know... but she provides for others...” – she said. Uma and her husband Ali belonged to the same family as Ibragim and they did not have the best relations with Patimat’s family.

We were surprised to meet Patimat’s son-in-law two days later. When I asked him why he visited, he answered that “they are our villagers. You always have to come and visit when you are around.” Later, I learned that he brought them a parcel with dry meat. His wife told him to take it along to the lowlands and give to the relatives. Eventually, it turned out that Patimat’s son-in-law came over to buy a car (*gazel*) from Ali to use it for the transportation of his livestock. He negotiated the price, but eventually did not buy it. I learned later that he hardly ever visited Ali and Uma.

Was the parcel with food thus supposed to be a facilitator of the transaction? A way to negotiate a lower price? “Maybe. You never know”, said Ali when I asked him later on.

People’s mobility patterns are connected with the movements of the things people take with themselves (Basu, Coleman 2008). The things my interlocutors take with them while traveling from Shiri to the lowlands are most often food



items. The relatively long travel time, spanning between 4 and 6 hours between Shiri and the lowlands, usually requires an overnight stay at the destination. However, except for a bag filled with food and a purse/wallet, the Shiri inhabitants have hardly ever taken other personal items. The reverse food circulation – from the lowlands to the mountains – is far less frequent. The relatives from the lowlands occasionally bring products unavailable (or very expensive and usually not fresh) in the mountains, for example: watermelons, melons, cucumbers, tomatoes or pineapples – symbols of luxury that decorate many tables during *Uraza Bayram*, the holiday that marks the end of the fasting period.

The food packages from Shiri to the lowlands usually included homemade cheese, and milk or sour cream available all year to those who kept cattle. In summer, wild leafy vegetables (fresh, or cut and dried) were added, whereas in the winter, dried meat, dried sausages, or jars with marmalade were sent. The packages were usually prepared by women and brought to the lowlands by women and men. Food parcels, as Joanna Mroczkowska notices in this issue (see also Patzer, in this issue), reproduce bonds with people who stayed behind, and become a mobile element of local identity. Mroczkowska (in this issue) also demonstrates that the food sent home supports the family and community ties, but at the same time alienates a mobile subject in a new city setting. My ethnographic data however does not confirm the above argument in the case of Dagestan. In the Republic of Dagestan, one's origins are a cultivated element of pride, and a lack thereof is considered an element of "russification" (Kaliszewska, Falkowski 2016). Food from the mountains (and the access to it) is therefore an element of pride both in the city of Makhachkala and in the lowland settlements.

Economic growth and the gradual abandonment of mountainous villages left many families without constant supplies of sent food. It is important to note that the food from one's own garden in the lowlands may be viewed as healthy and tasty, but in the words of my interlocutors, it is "the food from our mountains" that is "really" cleaner and healthier. One of my Shiri interviewees, Malaykat (aged 42) emphasized that: "Everything is ecological here, our plants, our air. When I go to the lowlands I suffocate and I cannot eat anything because I throw up." "Here, all our food is ecologically clean food" – added her husband. "Ecological" is used here as a substitute for clean, pure, or organic, especially when used in the phrase "*ecologicheskij chistaya eda*" (ecologically clean food). This phrase is popular in the health discourse in Russia – "ecologically clean food" is supposed to be healthy and full of essential minerals and nutrients (Caldwell 2007:53).

Food from Shiri constituted an important element of Uma's, Aisha's, Mariat's, and many other lowlanders' cuisines. Some families from the lowlands, including Aisha's, would not buy the dry meat or wild leafy greens in the lowlands but

instead wait for their relatives to supply them with “real dried meat” or “the good leafy greens”. Only then, certain dishes such as *chudu* with greens or *khinkal* with dried meat were prepared. For my interlocutors, cooking with ingredients from Shiri was of special importance (however, even if the ingredients were bought, cooking at home, for one’s husband, kids or guests was considered highly meaningful, see Mroczkowska 2016: 192). Care and love for the family were expressed through the practice of cooking and feeding (for description of similar practices, see Patzer, in this issue). When men and children were away and women stayed alone, they would engage in preserving food for the winter. This usually included tomato pickles (as in Aisha’s case), eggplant salad (called “baklazzhannaya ikra”), jam, pickled cucumbers, and various kinds of *kompot* (a beverage obtained by cooking fruit and berries with sugar). They would also cook far less frequently. Mariat and my five other interlocutors did not consider cooking for themselves to be worth the trouble, and they emphasized that only cooking for someone is meaningful. Similar observations were made by Joanna Mroczkowska (2016) in her analysis of foodways in Dąbrowa Białostocka in Poland, and by Anne Murcott (2001: 114-115) in South Wales.

Family food practices would change significantly when men returned for the summer or winter. “I am so tired when my husband is back, all that cooking, serving, washing up”, said Beka from Druzhba (aged 38). Her neighbor, a middle-aged woman, remarked: “he [the husband] always wants me to make *khinkal* or *chudu*”. Similar kinds of expectations of “traditional food” that prompt the re-traditionalization of foodways and food-related gender roles were mentioned by Mroczkowska (in this issue) in her analysis of “*Słoiiki*” in Poland, and by Diana Mata-Codesal (2010) in her study of Equadorian migration.

Looking into channels of food mobility between Shiri and the lowlands, between Patimat, Malaykat, Mariat, Aisha and Uma and other Shiri, Druzhba, or Chinar inhabitants, enabled me to obtain an insight into their lives as well as into the broader changes in their society.

Thus, through the lens of food and mobility we can better understand the social and cultural processes connected with the gradual abandonment of the mountains. Having relatives who provide food from the mountains is becoming increasingly more exclusive, and in contrast to the 1990s when it was commonplace, it is nowadays viewed with nostalgia. Having access to food from the mountains or being able to provide relatives with it became an element of pride and identity. Similarly, in the case of the providers of this food, it is a sign of care for the loved ones as well as an expression of the urge to feel needed and appreciated even in times when products are widely available and economically accessible.

Taking a closer look at the circulation of food and people thus enabled me to see how the seasonal mobility to “Russia” affects people’s lifestyles and changes

the foodways of families. I understood that on the one hand, it prompts the re-traditionalization of foodways, and on the other hand, the women have more time for themselves when they stay alone. The question remains, however, how they make use of their free time, and whether it prompts them to become involved in activities that generate income.

In the case studies presented above, the exchange aspect of food circulation was only briefly mentioned. When I asked directly about exchange networks, my interlocutors pointed back to the Soviet Union or to the 1990s. In everyday conversations, it was the giving and the caring that were emphasized by the givers. The receivers, on the other hand, expressed gratitude, appreciation, and pride about having access to “natural” food (even if they felt a bit overwhelmed by the gifts in the way that Mariat was). It was those feelings that prompted people to put a lot of effort to either collect, prepare, or raise food; however, it was only later that I understood what was asked in return, and how the way in which food items were passed-on pointed to an existence of informal exchange networks. I became aware of this aspect of food circulation only after some time.

### **Economy of favor through food and mobility**

The American anthropologist Carole Counihan (1999: 6) sees food as “a product and mirror of the organization of society on both the broadest and most intimate levels”. Warren Belasco (2008: 1), similarly, viewed it as “the core of our most intimate social relationships”. Looking at food and people’s mobility gave me access to women’s and more broadly *tukhum* and village spaces that would otherwise be difficult to access or notice. Below I present two case studies and their analysis.

### ***Shiri women’s annual well-being check-up visit***

In mid-July 2014, an energetic woman in her thirties, who worked as a nurse in the Kubachi polyclinic, came over in a minibus to take the Shiri women for an annual medical screening. The nurse urged women to go, telling them that it was free of charge and that it was important for them to go to the doctor “before it is too late”. She called the screening *techosmotr* (technical inspection, an expression used for cars or machines). The women were reluctant to go, claiming to be busy, but since it was the middle of the day, the nurse promised that they would return before it was the time to milk the cows, and also claimed that “men can survive without food or can handle it themselves”. Eventually most women agreed to go, and a full minibus went down a sloppy mountainous road to the polyclinic in Kubachi. They were meant to have a full-body exam and a gynecological inspection performed. A number of the women took just money, while some grabbed what they had ready: homemade cheese or sour cream. The woman who kept bees took honey. Dried meat from last year was mostly gone

and the new one was not ready yet. The nurse told the Shiri women that nobody will ask any money from them, but being used to paying for medical help, they understood it their own way. One of the women also took a large amount of *chudu* she was preparing for dinner, so that the women could have something to eat before finishing their visits at the doctor and shopping.

All the “food gifts” were given, although those who did not take anything were positively surprised that the doctors indeed did not ask for money. The Shiri women did not know whether “food gifts” for the doctors would help them in the future, yet it seems that for some of them it was important to establish at least some kind of relationship or express appreciation; as they claimed, the gifts were meant “just to thank them” (cf. Patico 2002).

In the bus on the way back, there was a discussion in Shiri language from which I could understand some Russian phrases: “I have the first group”, “my mom has the second group”, “I have to do the first group”. I asked my host about the conversation and it turned out that the majority of women have already arranged disability pensions (through purchasing a disability certificate) for at least some of their daughters or themselves, or were in the process of doing so. But since the situation in Russia was unstable, it was always good to be well connected, one of them explained. In their opinion, the pension for the so-called first group of disability (severe disability) provides a relatively secure income in Daghestan. The income from the second group of disability (partial disability) is smaller and more insecure, because it involves yearly “check-ups”, thus each time the doctors change, there is a risk that they will require money to prolong the pension. Therefore, those who have the second group strived to arrange the first disability group for themselves or their daughters.

After some time spent in the mountains, I was no longer wondering why Daghestan is wittingly spoken about as a republic of “wrestlers and cripples”. Wrestling is popular and apparently, so is the purchase of disability certificates.

### ***Sheikh Hasan holiday***

Every year in June, pilgrims from all over Russia and Daghestan come over to the village to venerate the Shrine of Sheikh Hasan. They participate in *mavlids*, the recitations of specially written poems to commemorate the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday (in Daghestan, *mavlids* are also practiced on special occasions such as births, weddings, or funerals).

It is the holiday that all the Shiri inhabitants start preparing for long in advance. Cows and sheep are slaughtered to prepare *shashlyks* for the occasion and eat them by the river. All guests are invited to dine and sleep in local homes. During the day, the *mavlids* are performed. They are led by men, but men and women actively participate in them together, in separate sections of the mosque. At the end of the *mavlid*, money and sweets given by the person or family who

ordered the *mavlid* are distributed among the participants. Part of the money given out during the holiday will serve the needs of the community. During the holiday, many of the women prepare large amounts of food for the visitors. As my Shiri host said, visitors usually expect “traditional food [...] we make fresh *chudu*, *khinkal*, and sometimes egg *kurze* (dumplings)”. It is during the time of preparation and consumption of food for the Sheik Hasan Holiday that contacts and advices are shared between men and women; it is also an important occasion to discuss family issues: where to send the village children to continue their education in the lowlands, and whom to marry the sons or daughters to. Over food, the economic issues are also discussed, and connections to “influential persons” are established. Typically, men want their relatives from “Russia” to help them in obtaining jobs outside the republic; women most often ask for help with medical care, in case it is unavailable or of insufficient quality in Daghestan. Travels to Moscow for fertility treatments, female-specific diseases, or children’s illnesses were among the most commonly mentioned. These kinds of arrangements were considered “female business”, and very often they involved only women. Meals during the Sheik Hasan Holiday are an occasion to discuss match-making issues, dowries, or weddings. In pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet times, most marriages are arranged within *tukhums*; first cousins are considered best matches and are sometimes matched at birth or in their early childhood (the so-called cradle-match-making). Nowadays more flexibility is allowed, however the older generation still opts to marry their offspring to “our people”. Disability pensions, higher education diplomas, or job promises are important elements that complement the matrimonial discussions. An elderly inhabitant of Shiri joked that “the girl won’t be taken if she is not disabled (meaning: if she does not have a disability pension)”. The Sheik Hasan Holiday is an important event for the whole community – although it is essentially a religious event, the majority of people I talked to saw it as an occasion that brings their people together (“Otherwise we would come together just for funerals”, one of my interlocutors remarked) and helps their children meet people from their village and generally remember their home village. It also connects the village to the broader world, mostly through the community and *tuhkum* ties. The practice of eating together, or commensality, when social bonds are being created and new obligations emerge, is especially important in case of Shiri visitors from “Russia”.

As it can be seen from the above case studies, looking at the Daghestani society through the lens of food and mobility points to the following practices and social changes: (1) the existence of informal exchange networks where food and favors circulate, (2) the changes in the lifestyle and position of women in the society undergoing islamization. Let me briefly discuss them below.

### Informal exchange networks

Offering food to both relatives or doctors (or other influential persons) extends the web of entanglements in which the involved actors feel obliged to reciprocate. Food – taken along, sent, or served to guests – may serve as *blat*: the use of personal networks for obtaining goods and services in short supply and for circumventing formal procedures (Ledeneva 2009: 262).

However, as I outline below, definitions of *blat* and other informal exchange practices have been so far based on the field material from “Russia”, so they seem too narrow for to analyze informal economic activities in Daghestan. I claim that in order to understand the specifics of the gendered food and favor exchange in Daghestan, we need to account for the Daghestani *tukhum* divisions, the specifics of gendered food and favor exchange, and other particularities of Daghestan.

Practices of *blat* or involvement in informal exchange networks, second economy, economy of favor, shadow economy in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia have been broadly described and conceptualized by anthropologists (Humphrey 2002, Ledeneva 1998, Ries 2009 or Srubar 1991). Ilija Srubar sees the Soviet society as an “archipelago of networks”, whose members were primarily loyal to their fellow network members and not to outsiders. Since everybody was to some extent dependent on those networks, their success in life was not attributed to the individual but rather considered a result of political privileges or one’s social relations. (Srubar 1991, as quoted in Lonkila 1997). Similar observations are made by Alena Ledeneva (2009), who focuses on *blat* and its changing significance throughout the Soviet and post-Soviet times. Ledeneva remarks that *blat* merged with patterns of sociability to such an extent that people are unable to distinguish between friendship and the use of friendship. The boundaries become particularly blurred as the exchanged favors become of a particular kind, namely, “favors of access”. *Blat* has thus changed with the change of the regimes: in Soviet times the access to goods and services was far more important, whereas nowadays “money became a new shortage”. Thus “access to money, making a living, and getting a well-paid job became the ‘new power’ of personal networks.” (2009: 262).

Practices my Daghestani interlocutors became involved in, for example gaining access to jobs or pensions, can be described as *blat*, or more broadly as economy of favor, with the particular emphasis on the favors of access (Ledeneva 2009: 262) to the goods in short supply. Money – be it disability pensions or state paid jobs – certainly have become “a new shortage” in Daghestan. Thus, in the center of most of the small-talk at the table were the discussions around obtaining jobs, disability pensions, or other state benefits highly valued by both older and younger generations. The contacts in the public institutions (primarily in the health service) were regarded as the most valuable ones.

The contacts in the health service enabled women to arrange disability pensions for their (predominantly healthy) daughters and themselves. This subsequently helped the women to find a better match for them and have a say in the match-making processes (traditionally, it is the father who agrees or disagrees with the future match for his son or daughter, but practically it is very often up to the women to make an actual match). Contacts in kindergartens were also valuable for securing placements for their children (or grandchildren) “for free” or for an amount smaller than a regular bribe required from the *nie svoi* (not ours). The “for-free scenario” thus usually involved a considerable package of “food from the mountains” or sweets. The *tukhum* members that were better connected in the above institutions enjoyed high respect within the lineage and were particularly pleased with food and drinks during Sheikh Hasan Holiday.

The *blat* practices as described by Ledeneva with examples from “Russia” bear many similarities to those in Daghestan, but it would be a mistake not to take into account the *tukhum* divisions, characteristic for the Daghestani society but absent in the areas with the majority of the “ethnic Russian” population. The *tukhum* ties are highly valued by many Daghestanis and therefore the investments in the exchanges within one’s *tukhum*, or employing people from one’s *tukhum*, are very often viewed as obligations, while economically they are not always profitable.

What was also important in the *blat* practices I observed in Daghestan was the “spirit of sociability” that makes the circulating food “better and healthier”. Melissa Caldwell (2007) demonstrates that the food obtained through informal exchange networks is considered healthier, more reliable, and trustworthy than commercial foods. Caldwell’s interlocutors from Tver pointed to the “inherent sociality of natural foods”. She argues that “the most desirable natural foods are those that are gathered and processed in the course of normal socializing with relatives, friends, and neighbors, and then circulated within social networks” (Caldwell 2007: 59). Similar observations are made by Cinthia Gabriel (2005: 204): “The deep mistrust of merchants and fears about food quality that are starting to be documented offer new ways to make sense of enduring informal exchange”. Thus, poverty can hardly be an explanation of this phenomenon (food obtained via networks is not necessarily cheaper – very often the opposite is true). She also observes that the food obtained through exchange networks is superior because it has not been produced by a for-profit entity, but on one’s own plots of land; therefore it is assumed that people who offer it were more interested in health than money. “The personalized nature of these foods makes them more trustworthy, tasty and clean – the qualities foods produced by anonymous, impersonal capitalist means are lacking” (Caldwell 2007: 54). Her research also reveals food exchange facilitates establishment and reproduction of personal relationships. Similar conclusions can be drawn from the dynamics of food



circulation in Shiri. Money was either absent from the exchange, or considered unimportant, whereas the community-building aspect, especially in regard to one's own *tukhum*, was emphasized by my interlocutors on various occasions. The aspect of kinship has been particularly important in regard to close relatives (that includes kin as far as third cousins) and other *tukhum* members, where food has been distributed as a "gift". When distributed among closer relatives, no payment is ever accepted for such food supplies as cheese, milk, sour cream, wild leafy greens, wild fruits, or even meat and dried meat. The same cannot be however said about favors. It was mainly relatives that provide their *tukhum* members with contacts to doctors or officials who may help in securing or "purchasing" a job. If neighbors/friends of the relatives wanted a bigger amount of meat or asked to slaughter a cow or a sheep for a special occasion, then the monetary payment was taken, even though the meat from Shiri was usually more expensive than the one on the market. I have never heard complains about the price, since the origin of the food and its status as "an ecologically clean product" was viewed as more important (cf. Caldwell 2007: 57).

To sum up, I argue that looking simultaneously at food and mobility enabled me to recognize the elusive existence of local exchange networks and kinship and lineage rules that affect social ties. As a consequence, it helped me to complement the constantly changing nature of *blat* in Russia and more broadly, the general research on informal exchange networks.

### **Changing lifestyle and position of women in the society undergoing islamization**

Looking at the Daghestani society through the lens of food and mobility also enabled me to realize that the investment in social networking through food sharing strengthens women's positions in the households and in the community.

The early 2000s brought about a rapid, bottom-up (re)islamization of the society (Kaliszewska 2016: 86–94). Lifestyles of a large part of the society have changed: the use and sale of alcohol dropped, young people, especially men started to socialize in mosques, Islamic values and laws have started to be emphasized and treated as more important than the state law.

Women's lifestyles underwent significant changes: some tried to live as close to "the real Islamic way of life" (as defined in Islamic sermons from DVDs and TV) as they could, many accepted their roles as wives and mothers while their husbands became main breadwinners. Although the exact numbers are not available, during my research (2004–2016) I could observe increasingly more young women becoming confined to the private sphere and living the lives significantly different from the lives of their mothers or even grandmothers during the Soviet times. The previous two generations of women very often worked outside of households and did not wear veils or scarfs when they were young.

A significant element of the bottom-up (re)islamization processes was the reconstruction of traditional gender relations, which according both to the reformists and the so-called “traditionalists”, could be found in the Quran. In fact, local imams or other men claiming to know Islam obtained most of their knowledge from the internet, DVDs, and booklets brought from Saudi Arabia and translated into Russian (cf. Bielenin-Lenczowska 2018).

It is also important to note that the experiences of everyday life in Soviet times – when emancipation and employment of women from ethnic minorities were promoted (Bridger 1987) – have left the now middle-aged or elderly Daghestani women with skills (such as working outside of household, managing the shortages in supplies, etc.) that have never been a part of experience of women in the Middle East. Many Daghestani women accepted their “new women roles” (that they had learnt about from sermons or from relatives who immersed themselves in the new wave of islamization<sup>6</sup>) only superficially and – following the path of their mothers and grandmothers from the Soviet times – they actively became involved in the local exchange networks. These networks usually started among close relatives but quickly extended beyond one’s *tukhum* or village. Since significant numbers of men spent most of the day at work or were gone most of the year, women occupied the niche of the exchange networks and, in particular, the local economy of favors. The practices they were involved in included: “arranging” (in Russian: *organizovat*) disability certificates, securing jobs in non-existing schools (usually schools in small villages where children are officially registered but not present, so “on paper” they operate and employ teachers but in reality they do not exist) or public sector institutions (such as the no-longer-operating community center in Shiri). These efforts secured them and their daughters (and sometimes also sons) some extra income. Yet, in order to be able to “arrange” extra money, the Daghestani women needed to sustain or even create exchange networks that usually started along the kinship lines and subsequently extended to include different important others. Even if it was their husband’s job that brought most of the income, the women claimed that they felt more secure with additional income on the side and that they want the same for their daughters. A middle-aged woman from Druzhba argued: “you never know these days. What if her husband dies or takes a second wife? [...] She does not have any profession, what will she do?” In the unstable political and economic situation, every income considered safe (such as state income) was highly valued.

The question that arises here is whether women’s participation in informal practices facilitated through food can be seen as a silent form of resistance against male domination, and even further, as silent resistance against the

<sup>6</sup> See Kaliszewska 2016.

oppressive Russian state (which presence in the North Caucasus has never been fully internalized and accepted) and radical Islamic practices. However, in order to validate or disprove such a hypothesis, more field material and work in the field is required.

## Conclusions

Social scientists have studied social and economic changes in the post-Soviet Russia through the lens of food. Socio-economic changes in the society, gender roles or even politics have been viewed through the analysis of food practices and foodways. However, Russia's Muslim South has been given little or no attention at all. Through focusing on food practices and mobility of Daghestani people from Shiri, I wanted to reveal the character of changes that the Daghestani society has been undergoing in recent years.

While analyzing social life through the lens of a particular dish or dishes may be informative, I tried to show that looking simultaneously at food and mobility may give us access to more intimate and somehow hidden practices that would not be so apparent otherwise. The insights from these observations can serve as a good starting point towards the broader study of a society. Through following the food exchange, we can reconstruct the web of social entanglements – the web along which people and things move, which designates the world known and familiar, filled with people who either care for each other or need each other to function in a broader world. A closer look at the web can therefore reveal not only the dynamics of a given community that stays in constant contact but also the broader issues that are at play in that society.

Initially, looking at the Daghestani society through the lens of *khinkal* or *chudu* – two dishes that were most often spoken about – helped me to understand the changing foodways, lifestyles and consumption patterns both in the cities, city-like settlements and villages. Moreover, adding the mobility aspect to the analysis of food complemented my analysis and yielded additional insights. Firstly, it revealed the existence of informal exchange networks through which food circulates and is exchanged, in most cases, in a non-monetary way. Secondly, looking simultaneously at food and mobility revealed the changing nature of *blat*, showing that the term that can still be useful to describe informal exchange practices in Daghestan, if *tukhum* peculiarities are taken into account. Finally, looking at the Daghestani society through the lens of food and mobility shows that it is important to be careful about generalizations about the gender roles and foodways in post-Soviet Russia. Omitting the religious aspect in the analysis of Daghestan can be as misleading as blindly applying the findings concerning the gender aspects of food preparation in the Middle East or Turkey to

it. Both approaches, if used, would misrepresent the experiences of the North Caucasian middle-aged women, brought up in Soviet Union, and currently living in the society undergoing rapid re-islamization where they skillfully negotiate their position in their communities and the broader society.

## References

- Basu, Paul and Simon Coleman. 2008. Migrant Worlds, Material Cultures, *Mobilities* 3(3): 313-330.
- Belasco, Warren. 2008. *Food: The Key Concepts*. Oxford and New York: Berg.
- Bielenin-Lenczowska, Karolina. 2018. Spaghetti with Ajvar. Ethnography of Migration, Gender, Learning and Change. In: Diana Mata-Codesal and Maria Abranches (eds) *Food Parcels in International Migration. Intimate Connections*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 117-139.
- Boym, Svetlana. 2001. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bridger, Susan. 1987. *Women in the Soviet Countryside*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Caldwell, Melissa. 2002. The Taste of Nationalism: Food Politics in Postsocialist Moscow, *Ethnos* 67(3): 295-319.
- Caldwell, Melissa. 2006. Tasting the worlds of yesterday and today: culinary tourism and nostalgia foods in post-Soviet Russia. In: R. Will (ed.) *Fast food/slow food: the cultural economy of the global food system*. Lanham: Altimira, pp. 97-112.
- Caldwell, Melissa. 2007. Feeding the Body and Nourishing the Soul, Natural Foods in Postsocialist Russia, *Food, Culture and Society: An International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 10(1): 43-71.
- Caldwell, Melissa. 2009. Introduction: Food and Everyday Life after State Socialism. In: M. Caldwell (ed.) *Food and Everyday Life in the Postsocialist World*. Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, pp. 1-27.
- Caldwell, Melissa. 2010. *Dacha idylls: living organically in Russia's countryside*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Chatwin, Mary and Mamed Suleimanov. 2006. Food preparation. The Caucasus. In: J. Suad (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures: Family, Body, Sexuality And Health*. Volume 3. Leiden: Brill, pp. 108-109.
- Counihan, Carole. 1999. *The Anthropology of Food and Body. Gender, Meaning, and Power*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Dunn, Elizabeth. 2008. Postsocialist Spores: Disease, Bodies and the State in the Republic of Georgia, *American Ethnologist* 35(2): 243-258.
- Gabriel, Cinthia. 2005. Healthy Russian food is Not-for-profit, *Michigan Discussions in Anthropology* 15(1): 183-222. <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/p/pod/dod-idx/healthy-russian-food-is-not-for-profit.pdf?c=mdia;idno=0522508.0015.107>. Access 17.06.2016.
- Farideh, Heyat. 2002. *Azeri Women in Transition: Women in Soviet and Post-Soviet Azerbaijan*. London and New York: Routledge.

- Humphrey, Caroline. 1995. Creating a Culture of Disillusionment: Consumption in Moscow, a chronicle of changing times. In: D. Miller (ed.) *Worlds Apart: Modernity Through the Prism of the Local*. New York: Routledge, pp. 43-68.
- Humphrey, Caroline. 2002. Subsistence farming and the peasantry as an idea in contemporary Russia. In: P. Leonard and D. Kaneff (eds) *Post-socialist peasant? Rural and urban constructions of identity in Eastern Europe, East Asia and the former Soviet Union*. Oxford and London: Palgrave, pp. 136–59.
- Kaliszewska, Iwona and Iwona Kołodziejska-Degórska. 2015. The social context of wild leafy vegetables uses in Shiri, Daghestan, *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine*. <https://ethnobiomed.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13002-015-0047-x>. Access 07.07.2016.
- Kaliszewska, Iwona. 2016. *Za Putina i za szarijat. Dagestańscy muzułmanie o Rosji i państwie islamskim*. Warsaw: Warsaw University Press.
- Kaliszewska, Iwona and Maciej Falkowski. 2016. *Veiled and Unveiled in Chechnya and Daghestan*. London: Hurst Publishers.
- Karpov, Jurij and Jekaterina Kapustina. 2011. *Gorcy posle gor: Migracionnyje protsessi w Dagestanie w XX I w naczale XXI wiekow, ich socialnyje i etnokulturnyje posledstwija i perspektivy*. Sankt Petersburg: Peterburgskoje Wostokowedenie.
- Ledeneva, Alena. 1998. *Russia's Economy of Favours: Blat, Networking and Informal Exchange*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ledeneva, Alena. 2009. From Russia with Blat: Can Informal Networks Help Modernize Russia? *Russia Today* 76(1): 257–288.
- Lonkila, Markku. 1997. "Informal Exchange Relations in Post-Soviet Russia: A Comparative Perspective,," *Sociological Research Online* 2(2). <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/2/2/9.html>. Access 25.05.2016.
- Marcus, George. 1995. thnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24: 95–117.
- Mata-Codesal, Diana. 2010. Eating Abroad, Remembering (at) Home, *Anthropology of Food* 7: 1–12. <http://aof.revues.org/6642>. Access 25.06.2016.
- Mroczkowska, Joanna. 2016. *Polityka smaku. Rola jedzenia w tworzeniu, podtrzymywaniu i negocjowaniu więzi społecznych i rodzinnych w Dąbrowie Białostockiej i okolicach*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. University of Warsaw.
- Murcott, Anne. 2001. "It's a Pleasure to Cook for Him": Food, Mealtimes, and Gender in Some South Wales Households. In: C. Brettell and C. Sargent (eds) *Gender in Cross-Cultural Perspectives*. Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, pp. 110–119.
- Patico, Jennifer. 2003. Consuming west but becoming third world: food imports and the experience of Russianness, *Anthropology East Europe Review* 17(1): 31–6.
- Patico, Jennifer. 2002. Chocolate and Cognac: Gifts and the Recognition of Social Worlds in Post-Soviet Russia, *Ethnos* 67(3): 345–368.
- Glick Schiller, Nina and Noel Salazar. 2013. Regimes of Mobility Across the Globe, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39(2): 183–200.
- Schatz, Edward. 2009. Introduction, In E. Schatz (ed.) *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

- 
- Srubar, Ilja. 1991. War der Reale Sozialismus Modern? *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 43(3): 415–432.
- Yuval-Davis, Nira. 1997. *Gender and Nation*. London: University of East London.
- Wimmer, Andreas and Nina Schiller. 2003. Methodological Nationalism, the Social Sciences, and the Study of Migration: An Essay in Historical Epistemology, *International Migration Review* 37: 576–610.