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From nutrients to foods: The alimentary imaginary of the Mediterranean diet

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Abstract: Together with clothing, urban artefacts and other aspects of daily life, nutrition is not only one of the basic human needs, but also a system of communication (Barthes, 1961) and expression of sociocultural identity (Levi-Strauss, 1965; Montanari, 2006; Stano, 2015). Undoubtedly food habits, preferences and taboos are partially regulated by ecological and material factors (Harris, 1975). By contrast, all food systems are structured and given particular functioning mechanisms by specific societies—or, better, cultures (Volli, 2015). Although several scholars have remarked this fact, most present-day texts, discourses, and practices concerning food seem to particularly stress a sort of supposed "naturalness" inherent to food systems. Such "naturalness" is generally conceived as both the praise of everything that opposes artificiality (Marrone, 2011) and a return to an original and idyllic past, namely a "tradition" crystallised in "authentic" recipes, "typical" restaurants, etc. Responding to the urgency of enhancing the academic debate on these issues, this paper analyses a specific case study that, albeit being particularly significant, has not been sufficiently investigated yet: the so-called "Mediterranean diet". The idea of such a diet originated from the scientific field, in the wake of medical research (Keys & Keys, 1975; Keys, 1980) correlating the low incidence of cardiovascular diseases among the inhabitants of specific areas (i.e. the Cilento region in Italy) and a particular nutritional regime, mainly defined by the use of certain ingredients and specific techniques of preparation of food. The interest in this topic has then increasingly grown, extending beyond the simple definition of healthy rules regulating nutrition, and embracing the social and cultural implications of the particular "lifestyle" that has come to be identified with the Mediterranean diet. In this sense, the genealogy of the inclusion of such a diet in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity—with the initial rejection in 2007, the approval in 2010 in relation to Italy, Greece, Spain and Morocco, and the extension to Portugal, Croatia and Cyprus in 2013—is emblematic. Moreover, it is essential to point out the important role played by sociocultural elements in the definition of the Mediterranean diet provided by the United Nations: "[it] involves a set of skills, knowledge, rituals, symbols and traditions concerning crops, harvesting, fishing, animal husbandry, conservation, processing, cooking, and particularly the sharing

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and consumption of food" (UNESCO, 2013). These observations open the way to interesting questions concerning both the processes of meaning making and the definition of food systems. We should notice, first of all, the transition from a purely material conception of the Mediterranean diet, stressing its effects on the human body, to a primarily cultural vision, which rather conceives nutrition as a "form of life" (Fontanille, 1993)—that is, a set of rituals, symbolic operations, and practices of expression of "taste" (i.e. a term significantly referring both to "the sense by which [we distinguish] the qualities and flavour of a substance" (Collins, 2014) and to our "preference or liking for something" (*Ibid.*)). Furthermore, the active and transformative—and therefore conscious—nature of such operations emerges, suggesting a process of "invention of [the] tradition" (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983) of the Mediterranean diet, whose imaginary is characterised by a series of remarkable inconsistencies. Although the lifestyle described by the United Nations and the features remarked by many scholars (see Moro, 2014) have been historically shared by several peoples leaving in the Mediterranean area, it is not possible to deny the significant differences among the numerous Mediterranean diets, which are in fact very varied, and not easy to define nor to classify. We should consider, moreover, the processes of globalisation and hybridisation that have affected food in the last decades, with important implications on the grammars, syntaxes, and pragmatics of systems that, instead, tend to be subjected to a process of "crystallisation" denying such dynamism. This paper addresses these crucial issues, making particular reference to relevant texts and discourses that have marked the genesis and development of the so-called Mediterranean diet and of the collective imaginary concerning it.

Keywords: Imaginary, Mediterranean Diet, Naturalness, Tradition, Form of Life

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Des nutriments aux aliments : l'imaginaire alimentaire du régime méditerranéen

Résumé : Ainsi que les vêtements, les artéfacts urbains et d'autres aspects de la vie quotidienne, la nourriture n'est pas seulement l'un des premiers besoins de l'homme, mais aussi un système de communication (Barthes, 1961) et d'expression de l'identité socioculturelle (Lévi-Strauss, 1965 ; Montanari, 2006 ; Stano, 2015). Sans aucun doute les préférences et les tabous alimentaires sont partiellement réglementés par des facteurs écologiques et matériels (Harris, 1975). Toutefois, tous les systèmes alimentaires sont structurés par des sociétés — ou, mieux, des cultures — spécifiques (Volli, 2015). Bien que plusieurs chercheurs aient remarqué ce fait, la plupart des textes, discours et pratiques concernant l'alimentation semblent mettre l'accent sur une sorte de « naturalité » supposée inhérente aux systèmes alimentaires. Cette « naturalité » est généralement conçue à la fois comme l'éloge de tout ce qui s'oppose à l'artificialité (Marrone, 2011) et comme un retour à un passé original et idyllique, notamment à une « tradition » cristallisée dans des recettes « authentiques », des restaurants « typiques », etc. Pour renforcer le débat académique

sur ces questions, cet article se propose d'analyser une étude de cas spécifique qui, quoique étant particulièrement important, n'a pas été encore suffisamment étudiée : le soi-disant « régime méditerranéen » (ou « diète méditerranéenne »). L'idée d'un tel régime alimentaire provient du domaine scientifique, dans le sillage de certaines recherches médicales (Keys & Keys, 1975 ; Keys, 1980) corrélant la faible incidence des maladies cardiovasculaires chez les habitants de certaines zones géographiques (en particulier la région du Cilento en Italie) à un régime nutritionnel particulier, principalement défini par l'utilisation de certains ingrédients et des techniques spécifiques de préparation des aliments. L'intérêt pour ce sujet a ensuite grandi de plus en plus, en portant au-delà de la simple définition de règles saines régulant la nutrition et en embrassant les implications sociales et culturelles du « style de vie » qui maintenant correspond à la dénomination de « diète méditerranéenne ». En ce sens, la généalogie de l'inclusion d'une telle diète dans la Liste représentative du patrimoine culturel immatériel de l'humanité de l'UNESCO – avec la réinjection initiale en 2007, l'approbation en 2010 par rapport à l'Italie, la Grèce, l'Espagne et le Maroc, et enfin l'extension au Portugal, à la Croatie et à Chypre en 2013 – est emblématique. En outre, il est essentiel de souligner le rôle joué par la dimension socioculturelle dans la définition de la diète méditerranéenne fournie par les Nations Unies : « [elle] est l'ensemble des savoir-faire, connaissances, rituels, symboliques et traditions qui vont du paysage à la table et qui concernent, dans le bassin méditerranéen, les cultures, les récoltes, la cueillette, la pêche, l'élevage, la conservation, la transformation, la cuisson et, tout particulièrement, la façon de partager la table et de consommer les aliments » (UNESCO, 2013). Ces observations ouvrent la voie à des questions intéressantes concernant à la fois les processus de signification et les dynamiques de définition des systèmes alimentaires. Il faut noter, tout d'abord, le passage d'une conception purement matérielle du régime méditerranéen, soulignant ses effets sur le corps humain, à une vision essentiellement culturelle, qui conçoit plutôt l'alimentation comme une « forme de vie » (Fontanille, 1993) – c'est-à-dire comme un ensemble de rituels, opérations symboliques et pratiques d'expression du « goût » (mot qui, de manière significative, fait référence à la fois à l'« un des cinq sens, renseignant sur les saveurs et la composition des aliment » (Larousse, 2015) et à la « capacité à discerner ce qui est beau ou laid selon les critères qui caractérisent un groupe, une époque, en matière esthétique » (*Ibid.*)). De plus, le caractère actif et transformateur – et donc conscient – de telles opérations émerge, ce qui suggère un processus d'« invention de la tradition » (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983) de la diète méditerranéenne, dont l'imaginaire est caractérisé par une série d'incohérences remarquables. Bien que le style de vie décrit par les Nations Unies et les caractéristiques remarquées par de nombreux chercheurs en relation au régime méditerranéen (voir Moro, 2014) aient été historiquement partagés par plusieurs peuples vivant dans le bassin méditerranéen, il est impossible de nier les différences significatives entre les nombreuses diètes méditerranéennes, qui sont en fait très variées et difficiles à définir ou à classer. On devrait envisager, en outre, les processus de globalisation et d'hybridation qui ont affecté la nourriture dans les dernières décennies, avec des conséquences

importantes sur les grammaires, les syntaxes et les pragmatiques de systèmes qui, cependant, ont tendance à être soumis à un processus de « cristallisation » qui semble nier leur dynamisme. Cet article traite de ces questions cruciales, en faisant notamment référence à des textes et des discours pertinents qui ont marqué la genèse et le développement du soi-disant régime méditerranéen et de son imaginaire collectif.

Mots-clés : imaginaire, régime méditerranéen (diète méditerranéenne), naturalité, tradition, forme de vie

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Introduction

Together with clothing, urban artefacts and other aspects of everyday life, nutrition is not only one of the basic human needs, but also a system of communication (Barthes, 1961) and expression of sociocultural identity (Levi-Strauss, 1965; Montanari, 2006; Stano, 2015). Undoubtedly food habits, preferences and taboos are partially regulated by ecological and material factors (Harris, 1975). By contrast, all food systems are structured and given particular functioning mechanisms by specific societies—or, better, cultures (Volli, 2015). Although several scholars have remarked this fact, most present-day texts, discourses and practices concerning food tend to remark a sort of supposed "naturalness" inherent to the food system. Such "naturalness" is generally conceived both as the praise of everything that opposes artificiality (Marrone, 2011) and as a return to an original and idyllic past, namely a "tradition" crystallised in "authentic" recipes, "typical" restaurants, etc.

Responding to the urgency of enhancing the academic debate on these issues, this paper intends to analyse a specific case study that, albeit being particularly significant, has not been sufficiently investigated yet: the so-called "Mediterranean diet".

1. The genesis of the Mediterranean diet

The Mediterranean diet originated from the scientific field, in the wake of medical research on heart and vascular diseases. It was 1958 when, after pilot studies in Italy, Spain, Japan, Finland and Greece, the American physiologist Ancel Keys launched the Seven Countries Study with the aim of investigating the links between cardiovascular diseases and the traditional lifestyles of specific countries. As a result, he discovered that a particular nutritional regime was associated with lower rates of coronary heart disease and mortality. This was the origin of the so-called "Mediterranean diet", namely a dietary pattern defined by a high intake of bread, legumes, vegetables, fruits and fats rich in unsaturated fatty acids (e.g. olive oil), a moderate intake of fish, and a low intake of dairy and meat (Keys, 1980; Nestle, 1995). In *Eat Well and Stay Well* (Keys & Keys, 1959), and *How to Eat Well and Stay Well, the Mediterranean Way* (Keys & Keys, 1975) the American scientist also complemented recommendations on safe ingredients with information on appropri-

ate techniques for cooking them. And almost twenty years later, drawing on Keys' observations, Oldways[1], the Harvard School of Public Health and the World Health Organization developed the so-called "Mediterranean Diet Pyramid", that is, a model illustrating the Mediterranean diet pattern by suggesting the types and frequency of foods that should be eaten every day.

2. The inclusion of the Mediterranean diet in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity

Since Keys' "discovery", interest in the Mediterranean diet has increasingly grown, making it extend beyond the simple definition of healthy rules regulating nutrition and embrace the social and cultural implications of a specific "lifestyle". In this sense, the genealogy of the inclusion of such a diet in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity is emblematic. When the first proposal was submitted to the agency of the United Nations, in 2008, it was rejected. Among the reasons for such a refusal, UNESCO reported that the definition of the Mediterranean diet provided in the request was limited to nutritional criteria and factors, almost disregarding anthropological and cultural aspects. This made it hardly applicable to the extensive and very varied context (i.e. Spain, Italy, Greece and Morocco) to which the application made reference.

Only in 2010, after substantial redefinition, the Mediterranean diet was included in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Furthermore, in 2013, it was extended to Portugal, Croatia and Cyprus. What made its acceptance and extension possible was precisely the inclusion of sociocultural elements in its definition:

> "The Mediterranean diet involves a set of skills, knowledge, rituals, symbols and traditions concerning crops, harvesting, fishing, animal husbandry, conservation, processing, cooking, and particularly the sharing and consumption of food. Eating together is the foundation of the cultural identity and continuity of communities throughout the Mediterranean basin. The Mediterranean diet emphasizes values of hospitality, neighbourliness, intercultural dialogue and creativity and plays a vital role in cultural spaces, festivals and celebrations, bringing together people of all ages, conditions and social classes". (UNESCO, 2013)

Such a definition, which evidently recalls Edward B. Tylor's description of culture—i.e. "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor, 1871, p. 1)—, does not merely refer to the peculiar climate and geographical conformation characterising the Mediterranean area, but encompasses social interactions and cultural values which are inherent to the food system, namely shared practices and knowledge passed down from generation to generation (Moro, 2014, p. 96-98).

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[1]A non-profit food and nutrition education organisation founded by K. Dun Gifford in1990 (cf. http://oldwayspt.org/about-us).

3. The Mediterranean diet and the collective imaginary

What clearly emerges from the stages described above is a transition from a purely material conception of the Mediterranean diet, stressing its effects on the human body, to a primarily cultural vision, which rather conceives nutrition as a "form of life" (Fontanille, 1993), that is, as a set of rituals, symbolic operations, and practices of expression of "taste"—i.e. a term significantly referring both to "the sense by which [we distinguish] the qualities and flavour of a substance" (Collins, 2014) and to our "preference or liking for something" (*Ibid.*) (see also Landowski & Fiorin, 1998). In Keys' view, the Mediterranean diet was a "natural stroke of luck" (1975), that is, a gift of nature providing the inhabitants of specific regions with healthy food products. Such products are mainly conceived as "nutrients", which means that they are praised for their nutritional capacity, according to what Jean-Marie Floch (1990 [ET2001]) would have described in terms of a *practical* valorisation. By contrast, the definition provided by the United Nations seems to adhere to a *utopian* valorisation, since it stresses identity, traditions and culture. From a different perspective, such an opposition could be described by referring to Guido Ferraro's discursive regimes (Ferraro, 1998): the Seven Countries Study is mainly based on a *causal* regime, since it puts the emphasis on objective facts, recalling a logic according to which "what one does—i.e. eating healthy foods—defines what one is—i.e. healthy people". On the other hand, UNESCO's definition reflects a *positional* regime, according to the logic "what one is—i.e. Mediterranean people—determines what one does—i.e. sharing those skills and traditions allowing a healthy and convivial lifestyle".

But how are such conceptions of the Mediterranean diet reflected in the contemporary collective imaginary[2]? Which values are associated with the Mediterranean diet in the mass and new media discourses? In order to answer these questions, we will examine some relevant case studies[3] through a semiotic approach, making particular reference to the specific background from which Keys' intuition originated: Italy.

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[2] The term *imaginary* is here used to refer to the socially shared depository of images—or, more generally, of figures—, which comprises part of a cultural encyclopaedia (Eco 1975, 1979, 1984) directing and regulating its imaginative paths according to the dual dimension of an "internal imaginary"—intended as a "cultural pattern for the production of images and figures" (Volli, 2011, p. 35 [our translation])—and an "external imaginary"—conceived as a "material system of production and storage of [these] images" (Volli, 2011, p. 35 [our translation]). Several works have investigated this term and its meanings, which are not easy to define; in particular, see Leone, 2011, *passim*.

[3] Several texts and discourses have been produced to promote the Mediterranean diet in Europe and abroad. In order to be able to identify the main isotopies characterisning the collective imaginary concerning it, this paper makes reference to a limited corpus of commercials, websites and events realised in Italy—i.e. one of the leading countries in the promotion and communication of the Mediterranean diet—since its inclusion in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

3.1. *The Italian Ministry of Agricultural, Food and Forestry Policies and the commercial by Nicola Paparusso*

In 2013 the Italian Ministry of Agricultural, Food and Forestry Policies decided to celebrate the confirmation of the inclusion of the Mediterranean diet in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity with a commercial[4] realised by Nicola Paparusso.

Since the first monochrome frames (Fig. 1), the isotopy of rural tradition is evident: the first sequence shows a cart pulled by a horse, which brings a young woman, her husband and their son back home through a sunny street in the countryside. The next sequence introduces a strong opposition by showing a military car (modernity vs. tradition) that crosses the same environment. When meeting the young boy in a field of olive trees, the two American soldiers who are driving the car ask him in a broken Italian where they can eat macaroni and wine ("Hey boy! Come on, come on… we mangiare maccheroni …vino, vino"). The young boy answers with the stereotyped paraverbal sign expressing his inability to understand them, therefore symbolising a substantial incompatibility between the two semiospheres that these characters represent. This is when the animated rhythm of Glenn Miller's *In the Mood*, which opened the commercial, gives the way to Dean Martin's *Mambo Italiano*, whose first verses, song by a choir, recall the acoustics typical of folk songs and explicitly refer to the Italian context through their lyrics ("A boy went back to Napoli because he missed the scenery / The native dances and the charming songs"). In the meanwhile, very short sequences show a young lady dancing with an elder woman, then a plough tilling the soil, and finally the previously introduced young couple joyfully running through a field of spikes. Then the camera moves to some fruits and vegetables on a big table, and finally it is captured by the sensual dance of another young couple, whose harmonious movements reinterpret traditional food rites (such as setting the table or pressing the grapes by feet, as it was usual in Italian rural societies) with a ludic tone. Suddenly, the American soldier reappears on the screen, moving closer to the young lady dancing on the grapes and offering her an apple (a sin fruit?). She winks at him and takes the fruit, but finally pushes him away, just a second before the arrival of another young bare-chested boy—whose outfit reveals his rural identity—, who takes her off the barrel where she was pressing the grapes and continues dancing with her.

[4] Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NRI3Q3ESKN8.

Figure 1. *Frames from the commercial by Nicola Paparusso (2013) – Initial part*

The soundtrack then slightly changes to a more recent version of the previous song, *Mambo Italiano* by Flabby Feat. Carla Boni. At the same time, polychromy invades the scene and fading figures referring to different cultural backgrounds (e.g. Asia, France and the United States) appear on the screen (Fig. 2). The final sequence takes place in a restaurant, where the child appearing in the opening of the commercial brings some "maccheroni" to the American soldier, who is now dressing a different outfit. The screen then turns black to host the white message: "DIETA MEDITERRANEA AMBASCIATRICE DELLA SALUTE NEL MONDO" (*THE MEDITERRANEAN DIET: AMBASSADOR OF HEALTH IN THE WORLD* [our translation]). Finally, the emblem of Italy and the name of the Italian Ministry of Agricultural, Food and Forestry Policies appear on the screen, together with the Italian flag, thus legitimising the entire message.

Figure 2. *Frames from the commercial by Nicola Paparusso (2013) – Final part*

"Here" and "there", local and global, past and present, which were at first radically opposed (so as to originate incomprehension and incommunicability), find in the end their point of contact in the Mediterranean diet—which is presented not only as a set of healthy foods, but also and above all as a real "lifestyle". In Flochian terms, the resulting valorisation is a utopian one, which opposes local identity to global otherness. A ludic-aesthetic valorisation is also noticeable, and finds expression in the fusion of food rituals and the passionate dance of the young characters. Health, which is made explicit by the verbal language in the closing of the commercial, is also incarnated by the Italian characters' toned and beautiful bodies (i.e. the men's muscles and the women's sinuous silhouette). Such a "form" (cf. Boutaud 2013), as opposed to the clumsiness characterising the American soldier (who is also muscular, but lacks the other characters' "innate" lightness and easiness of movement), allows the Italian men and ladies to take part in the sensual and harmonious dance that embodies Italian identity. Definitely, health does not merely depend on the nutritional value of food products, but rather on identity, nature, and tradition. In Ferraro's terms, the first part of the commercial is therefore marked by a positional regime, according to which participating in the harmonious dance requires belonging to the represented rural "here", while no access is given to "others" coming from any "there" (e.g. the young lady pushing away the American soldier, or the lack of communication between the soldiers and the child). Yet the end of the commercial somehow celebrates inclusion, partially recalling a multiperspective regime by means of specific figures (i.e. the ideograms, the Eiffel Tower and the Statue of Liberty) and plastic formants (i.e. polychromy).

3.2. *The Mediterranean diet at EXPO 2015*

The Mediterranean diet could not miss EXPO 2015 "Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life", the world's fair dedicated to food, with respect to different aspects (from

sustainability of agricultural practices to *haute cuisine*, from culinary traditions to eating disorders, etc.).

3.2.1. RAI's commercial "The Mediterranean diet" for EXPO 2015

On the occasion of EXPO 2015, Italy's national public broadcasting company RAI released the commercial "The Mediterranean diet"[5], which was strongly criticised by several associations and experts.

Figure 3. *Frames from the commercial "The Mediterranean diet", RAI (2015) – Initial part*

The first scenes of the video (Fig. 3) show a natural environment that is similar to the one characterising the previously analysed example: the image of an insect moving on lettuce follows that of a plough tilling the soil, and finally gives the way to an aged hand cutting a bunch of grapes and another one picking up a tomato. At the same time a voice over says: "Nella Campania povera del dopoguerra, il medico americano Ancel Keys nota un fatto singolare: i contadini che fanno una vita dura e mangiano una grande quantità di frutta e ortaggi, oltre a pane, pasta, pesce e pochissima carne, hanno un cuore più sano dei ricchi borghesi napoletani dalla dieta molto più ricca" (*In poor post-war Campania, the American doctor Ancel Keys noticed a curious fact: the farmers, who made a hard life and ate a lot of fruits and vegetables, as well as bread, pasta, fish and a very low quantity of meat, had a healthier heart than the rich Neapolitan bourgeois, whose diet was much more varied* [our translation]).

[5] Available at http://www.expo.rai.it/non-sola-salute-vive-dieta-mediterranea-expo/.

Figure 4. *Frames from the commercial "The Mediterranean diet", RAI (2015) – Central part*

At this point an infographic (Fig. 4) is added in order to clarify this concept: while fruits and vegetables correspond to a pulsating heart that gets bigger and bigger, meat and sausages are associated with a broken heart. The voice over continues: "La stessa cosa la osserva nel resto del nostro Sud e in Grecia. Nel 1975, con un libro che diventa subito un best seller, Keys annuncia al mondo le virtù della dieta mediterranea. Nel 2010 viene persino riconosciuta dalle Nazioni Unite come patrimonio immateriale dell'umanità" (*The same fact characterised other southern Italian regions and Greece. In 1975 Keys announced to the world the great virtues of the Mediterranean diet, through a book that immediately became a best seller. In 2010 the Mediterranean diet was even recognised by the United Nations as part of the intangible heritage of humanity* [our translation]). At this point the camera moves from the rural background to a metropolitan reality, showing the United Nations headquarter and finally a restaurant. Accordingly, the relaxed rhythm characterising the presentation of the places and subjects (i.e. old peasants) inhabiting the former suffers a sharp acceleration, leading to the frenetic movements of some waiters, who are in fact barely visible. The voice over then introduces the crucial issue animating the commercial: "La dieta mediterranea, insomma, si è globalizzata, ma la seguono soprattutto quei salutisti che si possono permettere vegetali freschi e pesce, piatti ben cucinati e ore di sport alla settimana" (*The Mediterranean diet, definitely, has been globalised. But it is now mainly followed by health-conscious people who can afford fresh vegetables and fish, well cooked meals, and hours of sport a week* [our translation]).

Figure 5. *Frames from the commercial "The Mediterranean diet", RAI (2015) – final part*

After showing images of the mentioned health-conscious people (Fig. 5), a urgent contemporary concern is introduced, while on the screen the hand of a child quickly "steals" an apple (here used as a symbol of health) from an elder hand (symbolising tradition): "Lì dove è nata, invece, non esiste quasi più" (*By contrast, there where it was born, it has almost disappeared* [our translation]). A new infographic therefore illustrates better this issue, together with the voice over: "I consumi di ortaggi e frutta scendono anno dopo anno, e aumentano quelli dei cibi spazzatura. Oggi, proprio in Campania, quasi una persona su due è sovrappeso, e una su dieci è obesa" (*The consumption of vegetables and fruits decreases year after year, while that of junk foods is increasing. Today, precisely in Campania, almost half of the population is overweight, and one person in ten is obese* [our translation]). The rhetorical figure of irony is used to reinforce such an idea: a fat man in a pink tutu struggles to keep standing while trying to dance (a reference to the harmonious dance analysed in the previous example?). The voice over finally informs that the problem is not limited to Campania, but concerns a wider reality: "E il resto del Sud, come la Grecia, non sta molto meglio" (*And the other southern regions, as well as Greece, are not better* [our translation]). Hence the commercial ends with a provocative question: "La dieta mediterranea tornerà mai a casa?" (*Will the Mediterranean diet ever come back home?* [our translation]).

Interestingly, in this case the emphasis is put primarily on the beneficial effects of the Mediterranean diet, which can rely on natural food products and traditional practices, or rather on physical activity, depending on the case. In rural past societies health was a characteristic natural to all people, therefore finding expression in the quiet smiling figures of elderly men and women. By contrast, in globalised present societies it necessarily involves playing sports and physical activity, whose lack leads to "deformation" (cf. Boutaud, 2013). This change reveals a practical valorisation of the Mediterranean diet, which is here associated with a causal regime: the "Mediterranean way"—with all the benefits deriving from it—is no longer enabled by geographical or cultural belonging (i.e. a "being" that is natural to human be-

ings), but rather by people's will and actions (i.e. a "doing" characterising only a few individuals—the health-conscious ones—who play sports and do not succumb to junk foods). This situation is presented as a direct consequence of "globalisation", therefore emphasising a third essential dimension connected to the Mediterranean diet: socioeconomic and political processes.

Figure 6. *La Dieta Meditteranea.EU's response to RAI's commercial (2015)*

Although sharing concerns about the effects of the processes of globalisation of markets and foods, several organisations for the promotion of the Mediterranean diet strongly criticised RAI's commercial as regards to the condemnation of the disappearance of the Mediterranean diet from Southern Italy—and, more generally, the Mediterranean area. The online magazine *La Dieta Meditteranea.EU*[6], for instance, responded to this commercial by digitally modifying its last frame (Fig. 6): the red typed writing "Veramente… non si è mai mossa di casa" (*Actually… it never went away* [our translation]) provocatively responds to the question appearing in handwritten characters in the final scene of the video, therefore re-attesting the positional regime that connects the Mediterranean diet with such traditions and skills that are considered "natural" to the Mediterranean area.

3.2.2. Bio-Med Cluster at EXPO 2015

A specific Bio-Med (*Bio-Mediterraneo – Salute, bellezza e armonia*[7]) Cluster aimed at telling "easily and immediately the spirit of the Mediterranean cuisine" (http://www.expo2015.org/it/esplora/cluster/bio-mediterraneo [our translation]) was established on the occasion of EXPO 2015 (Milan, May-October 2015). In addition to the Italian southern regions, it hosted Albania, Algeria, Egypt, Greece, Lebanon, Malta, Montenegro, San Marino, Serbia, and Tunisia—with evident variations as

[6] http://www.ladietamediterranea.eu.

[7] Bio-Mediterranean – Health, Beauty, and Harmony (our translation).

regards to the list of countries included in the UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Figure 7. *Bio-Med Cluster on EXPO webpage (http://www.expo2015.org/it/esplora/cluster/bio-mediterraneo)*

The *trait d'union* keeping all these countries and contexts together is precisely the "Mediterranean diet". On the official EXPO webpage, the Cluster is introduced through the image of a land planted with olive trees and a small drawing representing some olives and olive leaves (Fig. 7). The verbal text reported under these elements explains their presence: "Predrag Matvejević wrote that the Mediterranean begins and ends where the olive tree grows and bears fruit" (our translation). Again, therefore, the "Mediterranean character" is presented as an innate feature, which makes here reference to natural resources.

Natural resources, in fact, play a crucial role also in the spatial and visual organisation of the cluster: the building, which from the outside resembles a white nest, reveals in its interior a series of colours which reflect the attention devoted to natural elements. The floor, for instance, is made up of different shades of blue recalling all the nuances of the sea, which "skims" the borders of all the pavilions of the countries hosted in the Cluster. In the central part of the building, traditional outdoor kitchens offer visitors a selection of typical Mediterranean products (e.g. olive oil, bread, and wine) and cooking shows. Places, foods and traditional rites are at centre of the exhibition project, which combines images, literary texts, audiovisual materials, and live performances. Twenty-one columns support the ceiling, originating various visiting itineraries and symbolising the Pillars of Hercules, which in classical literature indicate the extreme limit of the known world (corresponding to the Mediterranean area).

Conclusion

In the initial part of this paper we remarked that, from a historic point of view, a transition from a scientific (mainly material) conception of the Mediterranean diet—which tends to be associated with a practical valorisation and a causal regime—to a

primarily cultural vision—generally associated with a utopian valorisation, sometimes mixed with a ludic-aesthetic characterisation, and a positional regime—can be detected. Both these notions are easily perceptible in the above-analysed contemporary collective representations of the Mediterranean diet, and reveal a series of interesting factors.

Despite the peculiarities of each of the considered texts, the idea of an idyllic rural tradition is generally presented as intrinsic to the Mediterranean diet, which is mainly conceived as a set of skills and practices—i.e. "cultural" elements by definition—that, nonetheless, are represented as "natural" to the inhabitants of the Mediterranean area. This corroborates Ilaria Ventura Bordenca's analysis, according to which the Mediterranean diet can be defined as the "non-diet" *par excellence*: while common diets rely on regulating systems requiring the subject to strictly follow a number of peremptory prescriptions and procedures, which are dictated by an external authoritative entity, the Mediterranean diet is a safe nutritional model *by definition*, and therefore does not require to follow any particular rule to be healthy and beautiful (Ventura Bordenca, 2015, p. 202-204). In other words, while being on a diet generally implies acting as an *engineer*, that is, following a system of strict regulations and prohibitions, the Mediterranean diet allows acting as a *bricoleur* (Lévi-Strauss, 1962; Floch, 1990), inventing new contingent solutions by reusing and readjusting the various tools (i.e. food products and practices) at one's disposal. If the former implies programming and predictability, the latter involves adjustments and unpredictability. As Jean-Jacques Boutaud (2013) observed, in fact, common diets can be distinguished into diets relying on the deontic modality of prohibition (*having not to do*) and diets relying on the deontic modality of prescription (*having to do*). As the analysed cases illustrate, in the case of the Mediterranean diet such a "doing" is replaced by a specific "being", which opposes spontaneity and common sense to authoritative prescriptions. This becomes particularly evident in the commercial by Nicola Paparusso (2013): even though the American soldier's muscular body reveals his adherence to a healthy diet and lifestyle, he lacks the "innate" lightness and easiness of movement characterising the other (Italian) characters. While "doing" depends on one's will, definitely, the Mediterranean "being" is presented as an innate characteristic, which cannot be acquired but by "natural inheritance". Openness only concerns "a taste of it" (as in the end of the Italian Ministry of Agricultural, Food and Forestry Policies' video), and can have dangerous consequences (as RAI's commercial warns).

This reveals a series of remarkable inconsistencies characterising the collective imaginary of the Mediterranean diet. The idea of the "Mediterranean" itself, for instance, has been described by several scholars as an "invention", that is to say, as the establishment of a "common ancient background on which, from Goethe onwards, the image of modernity has been created" (Niola, 2014, p. 9 [our translation]). From this point of view, as the anthropologist Marino Niola stated, the Mediterranean diet represents a sort of negotiation between local factual history and a stereotyped idea of the "Mediterranean reality" that, although having been estab-

lished elsewhere, has increasingly influenced the local representations of the "Mediterranean identity".

Furthermore, even though the lifestyle described by the United Nations and the features remarked by many scholars (see Moro, 2014) have been historically shared by several peoples leaving in the Mediterranean area, it is not possible to deny the significant differences among the various Mediterranean diets, which are in fact very diverse, and not easy to define nor to classify. This is reflected by the extreme variability of the geographical contexts to which the different texts make reference: while in a few cases the reference is limited to Southern Italy, in many others it extends to other regions, or even countries (e.g. Greece in RAI's commercial, and even Albania, Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Malta, Montenegro, San Marino, Serbia, and Tunisia in the case of the Bio-Med Cluster), with no shared standards.

Finally, it should be remarked that all the analysed representations rely on an a-historic and archetypal conception of the Mediterranean diet, which, in accordance with the definition provided by the United Nations in 2012, is generally represented as "a nutritional model remained constant over time and space" (UNESCO, 2012). By contrast, as UNESCO amended in 2013, it should be rather conceived as a "heritage *re*-created day after day" (UNESCO, 2013 [our emphasis]). Plastic formants (such as polychromy or the adoption of slow motion) and figurative elements (such as the inclusion of a number of elderly characters and old-style machines) are used in the above-discussed examples to represent a "never-changing tradition", while the evolution of lifestyles is mainly conceived as a threat destabilising such a process of "crystallisation". This becomes particularly evident in the commercial realised by RAI in 2015, which opposes an idyllic past and a natural "Mediterranean way", limited to a well-defined area (corresponding to Southern Italy and Greece), to globalisation, which has caused the disappearance of such a "tradition" from the places where it originated.

Albeit the recent evolution of the concept of the Mediterranean diet has brought relevant changes in its definition, conferring importance on social and cultural factors, definitely, the analysis of the observed case studies show that the collective imaginary is still anchored to a dominant vision unable to recognise and opportunely distinguish these factors, which tend to be reduced to a supposed "naturalness"—which, in fact, is itself a sociocultural construct. If attention has successfully been moved from nutrients to shared skills and knowledge, coming to embrace eating rituals and cooking practices, we still need to reflect on a clear but somehow still neglected fact: the Mediterranean identity (from the point of view of food identities, as well as in relation to identity *tout court*) is primarily the result of history rather than geography (cf. Montanari, 2005). This does not mean refusing the idea of a "traditional" Mediterranean diet, but rather admitting that, as any other tradition, it is *re*-created—and, to some extent even *re*-"invented" (cf. Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983)—day after day.

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