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The world of kebab Arabs and gastronomy in Warsaw

This essay is a result of fieldwork carried out by me between April and August 2011 in various restaurants serving Arabic food in Warsaw. It is based on 30 in-depth interviews not only with the owners of venues, but also their employees, and in some cases their families.¹ According to M. Jackson, “storytelling mediates our relation with worlds that extend beyond us” (2002: 23), therefore I decided to let my interviewees concentrate on the issues that seemed most important to them. I represent these relations via quotations or description of their statements. My aim is to avoid showing Arabic owners and employees of kebab bars and restaurants in Warsaw as an “impersonal mass” (Malkki 1996: 378). I am aware of limits imposed by the intellectual traditions on Western social scientists who describe other cultures. On one hand, they claim to respect and represent the point of view of “Other” (Herzfeld 2001). Still, on the other hand, they are not able to succeed, because they will always remain external observers, outsiders (Geertz 1988). That is why I stressed the same points that were highlighted by my interlocutors. Due to that fact, many different areas of interest are included in this essay (such as problems faced by Arabic immigrants, education, lives, stereotypes, etc.), the order and links between subjects mentioned by my interlocutors reflects the same sequence chosen by my interviewees. Being aware of the shortcomings of this methodology, I decided to additionally apply participant observation and desk research as an additional approach.

Since 1970s a sudden increase of Arab nationals² has been noticed in Poland. The first group of migrants consisted of students who received scholarships in various Polish cities. These young males, mostly undergraduates of technical departments or medicine, decided to stay in Poland and continue their careers here. Since that moment the number of Arabic migrants steadily increased, however the character of the migration changed. There are still many students who receive grants to Poland,

¹ Interviews were carried on in Polish, as none of my interlocutors had problems with expressing themselves (nevertheless sometimes the added Arabic words or English, especially in the context of really detailed description).

² I am aware that use of categories such as Arabs, Muslims countries, Arabic societies are simplifications, nevertheless they are necessary to describe some phenomena. In this essay by “Arab Nationals” I understand both: people who consider themselves Arabs and those who are members of Arab League.

although a new phenomenon, namely “work migration”, appeared.³ It is worth mentioning here that there is also a new group of immigrants – refugees from Arabic countries. As the community of Arab nationals is diversified, I decided to focus on one group – the gastronomy sector. Therefore in this article by “Arabic immigrants” or “Arabs” I understand those working in or in other way related to this particular business activity in Warsaw.

I focused on narratives of Arabs from gastronomy sector, choosing it from wider Arab diaspora in Poland. Since they have constant contact with different social classes, their observations provide interesting insights into Polish reality, seen from external perspective. In their narratives I selected several topics (their daily problems, their vision of Poles and the role of kebab bars and Arabic restaurants), divided into two main parts: “world of kebabs” and “recreations”. In the first part I described issues related to functioning of such places and also matters related to everyday life of their owners and employees. Second one is based on perception of Arabic worlds by Poles and of Poland by Arabs.

The world of kebabs

Contemporary urban landscapes are full of restaurants, fast foods and bars offering at least one “foreign” specialty in their menus. Dishes such as kebab, *falafel* or *shawarma* became popular almost all over the world. Writing about the contemporary is strongly linked to globalization, a process partially identified with technological advance and growth of mobility. Particularly, the latter phenomenon seems to have an important impact on forming Hannerz’s *transnational connections* (1996). These nexuses in the context of intercontinental migrations are related to constant reinterpretation of values and habits of new place of living and the old home place. The main point is that on the one side, mobility helps in applying a completely new set of experiences to the country of origin, and the recipient country as well. As Tim Edensor states, “Home-making includes the domestication of things and experiences from the external world, and of otherness” (2002: 58), therefore immigrant community must implement new behaviors and practices in new society and *vice versa*, recipient society also ought to carry out some changes influencing foreign groups. On the other hand, culture may transfer without personal contact, as it happens through mass media, causing the same effects as population mobility. According to Appadurai, this double influence of certain concepts enables people to create images about the reality; images which become the motive for action. “Deterritorialization creates new markets for film companies, impresarios, and travel agencies, which thrive on the need of the relocated population for contact with its homeland” (1996: 191). I would also add to this ethnic restaurants as the form that strengthens links between people.

³ It is a problematic issue to find out how many Arabic representatives are currently living in Poland. The most current files are those prepared by GUS (Central Statistical Office) and based on the National Public Survey carried out in 2002. According to this source, in 2002 there were 459 Arabs in Poland. More in Kubicki (2006).

Divisions

In Warsaw there are hundreds of places offering Arabic food⁴ and the most popular one are commonly known as “kebab bars”. Moreover, there are many non-Arabic places that include Arabic meals in their offer. Ten years ago hamburgers and hot-dogs were the most popular types of fast food meals among Polish people. Companies such as McDonald’s, Burger King or KFC captured the leader position on the market. At this moment, several immigrants from different Arabic countries decided to open venues where their local food could be sold.

I remember this moment very well. It was seven years ago. I decided to open a restaurant. I had a similar idea for several years. I even tried to open one local bar earlier but I did it with my colleague, not alone. It was a huge mistake. You know what I mean? He wasn’t honest with me. So I left the place to him and waited. Finally in 2004 I found a proper location. In this zone there was only one more similar thing. There was no competition. Almost no one was selling Arabic food.⁵

In his property you may buy kebab, *falafel*, *hummus*, *tabbouleh*⁶ and several Arabic sweets (the most popular one is *baklava*). He also serves Arabic mint tea with rose water and coffee with cardamom.

My interviewers (including this one) distinguish between different types of places where Arabic food can be bought. The division differs from the Polish perspective which includes: kebab bars (cheap and fast) and *shisha* clubs (stylish and trendy). One of owners explains:

You see, my place is a restaurant. I do not have a fast food. It’s a place where you may try the best of our culinary traditions. The division, here in Warsaw is simple,

⁴ Use of the adjective “Arabic” requires further explanation. Meals such as kebab, *falafel* or *shawarma* are well known in all Middle Eastern and North African countries, and even beyond, therefore it’s hard to identify its origins (more on this subject in Heine 2004). As per Barthes, food may be the symbol of the national identity. Many citizens from various countries adopt foreign dishes and treat them as a part of their culinary heritage. The consequence of such “nationalization” is the difficulty in identifying the roots of many dishes. Probably that is why in Polish language “Turkish coffee” means “Arabic coffee” and “kebab” for the Polish citizen does not mean the same what for an Arabic one. Interesting example of “nationalization” is the case related to the *falafel* in Israel, which adopted this meal from Palestinians. The final stage of this naturalization was adding a national symbol, such as flag of Israel to the dish as a decoration. Such photo of *falafel* with Israeli flag is common on postcards or tourist publications (Raviv 2003). To avoid misunderstandings with the use of “Arabic”, I apply this adjective in relation to all dishes that were described by my interlocutors as Arabic, even if its origins were different.

⁵ All quotations are statements of my interlocutors. The translation to English was done by me. I do not provide too many details about their age and often I changed their nationality due to the fact that they asked me to remain anonymous. All the information provided in this essay, unless stated otherwise in a footnote, is a result of fieldwork.

⁶ Levantine salad made of tomato, cucumber, parsley, onion, bulgur, olive and lemon juice.

we, people from Syria, Palestine and Lebanon own restaurants. The rest have kebab bars.

Similar distinction is also done by a different interlocutor. He highlighted that only several people may afford owning restaurants. The reason of this are mainly costs:

You find a small place, you don't have to pay a lot for it, and you do a job that doesn't require any special abilities. You earn a lot of money really quickly. I chose the simplest dishes, I decided against serving all this complicated stuff like wine leaf filled with stuffing. I cook it only at home. For my wife and daughters (he is laughing). Here, it is kebab and *falafel*. If you want more, go to an Arabic restaurant.

That kind of distinction might be the consequence of well known among my interlocutors culinary traditions of Syria, Palestine and Lebanon. As Waines states, with the growth of the empire of 'Umayyad and Abbasid, a new phenomenon appeared: food for pleasure. Damascus, Cordoba, Baghdad, Kufa became centers related to the cuisine (Waines 2003: 573). It is interesting that my interlocutors did not include in this group Iraq, which is famous for its treatises on the art of cooking since 10th century.⁷ It is possible that due to the unstable political situation Iraq is ultimately not perceived through its cultural heritage.

The menu of kebab bars usually consists of Kebab, Kebab XXL, Kebab dish (drink included), Falafel. With each meal set you may buy Coca Cola or Pepsi. Such a combination of Arabic meals with Coca-Cola is a great example of what Mathews calls *cultural supermarket* (2002). This is a combination of different culinary elements (kebab from the Middle East and Coca-Cola from United States) bought and consumed at the same time in the new context (in Poland). In this context, kebab bars and Arabic restaurants might be described as the places of *transnational connections*. Nowadays, when the identity is dispersed, global becomes local and local becomes global. This cultural exchange influences increase of sales in whole gastronomical sector. Many Polish companies added to their offer products related to kebab business. It's possible to buy all the ingredients needed to prepare kebab at home. Even "kebab flavor" pizzas are available. What is interesting, names of such goods frequently contain cultural references to different areas, as it happens with "kebab-gyros" spices. Kebab may be related to MENA countries, while gyros is a part of Greek cuisine.

Kebab bars are also objects of differentiations: Arabic kebab bars with owners from Arabic countries and others held by Turkish nationals. As I stated before, these kinds of divisions are not noticeable between Poles, who often identify Turkish

⁷ Old Arabic culinary treatises are not just cookbooks. Recipes are only a small part of the manuscripts. Different chapters contain information not only about meals, but also about properties of ingredients, fragments of poems, anecdotes about famous individuals of the epoch or tips on how to properly behave at the table (Ibn Sayyar al-Warraq 2007).

nationals as Arabs. My interlocutors also distinguished between Arabic and Polish kebab bars (where owners are Polish citizens) and explained that other places offer Arabic food, as nowadays kebab became a real “Polish traditional dish”. Differences between Arabs and Poles in division of these places might be the consequence of applying distinct criteria. For my interlocutors the most important factors of the division are time needed to prepare and consume the food and the nationality of the owners. For Polish citizens actual trends and economical constituent are important.

Preparation of food requires patience and time, two factors that are disappearing in the era of globalization. Perception of time changed. As Eriksen emphasis, we live in the era of tyranny of the moment when 30 seconds seems to be too much (2001: 88). Different concept of time is reflected in the menus of Arabic restaurants and kebab bars.

I do not have Arabic tea and Arabic coffee with spices in my offer, because drinking it requires time. And if you buy *falafel* and continue on your way home or wherever, you don't have the time. So you take Coca-Cola or a small bottle of juice. Arabic restaurants offer our traditional tea. But not all of them.

As my interlocutors said, drinking Arabic tea and coffee is more than just a simple part of the meal. It is a ritual that should not be a part of a commercialized world.⁸ This stays in accordance with what Hjalager writes about body food and soul food:

Body food comes from fast food restaurants, which fulfill the need to feed the stomach rapidly in standardized environments that do not challenge the intellectual capacities in any way. Soul food has another appeal. The food is prepared more slowly, possibly accordingly to special wishes, sometimes exotic and different – at the very least with some distinct qualities. The pleasures of the environment and the company of other people is an essential part of the eating experience. (2002: 31)

What's interesting, Arabic immigrants engaged in culinary business do not consider tea or coffee drunk by Polish people as a liquid that may have any social function. That is why it is included in their menus, even in kebab bars, with a possibility to take it away.

Crisis

A few years ago, before the outbreak of the global financial crisis, newly established kebab bars reached the top of their popularity. According to my interlocutors,

⁸ It is worth mentioning here that in one of Arabic TV advertisements images of traditional teapots filled in with instant tea were used. The same commercialized use might be found in tourist places. Trips organized to “real” Bedouin's camps, where tea and coffee are served are a part of ritual representations for tourists.

the best time was between 2006 and 2010. That was the time when the revenues of such establishments were impressive. Restaurants were open from 9:00 a.m. till late hours of the night and filled with clientele all the time. At that moment many owners decided to open new spots, creating a net of the most famous kebab bars. Polish press was constantly informing about the growing popularity of these venues.⁹ The Internet bustled with multiple rankings, comparing restaurants with Arabic food on offer. Why did it draw such a huge interest? “Our food is cheap and tasty”, “you can eat a lot and not pay a lot”, “it’s healthier than a hamburger”, “the box of hot wings in KFC costs almost 50 PLN [11 EUR] and it’s full of artificial ingredients and our *falafel*, it’s 8 PLN [2 EUR] and you may be sure that it’s fresh”, “we are open almost 24 hours and we are everywhere”. There is also one more reason: it was trendy to eat ethnic food. Not only Arabic dishes became popular. Also other local cuisines were noticeable in the Warsaw’s landscape. Kebab prosperity came to a halt in 2010. As one owner says:

Since the middle of 2010 our situation started to deteriorate. I had to dismiss a couple of employees. Our restaurant is opened from 10:00 to 20:00, sometimes to 21:00, but only on a really good day. In 2009 I had a few tables outside the restaurant. This year I had to remove them. Do you know that for the last two years I haven’t changed the prices? In 2009 there was a kind of marketing; all Arabic bars offered their dishes cheaper than non-Arabic places. Running such a business requires flexibility. So the prices remained the same. In 2010 something changed. The crisis started. I didn’t earn anything this year. And my suppliers raised their fees twice. First, I thought that maybe a new bar was opened somewhere here, but I checked it and nothing new appeared in the neighborhood. I talked to owners of other bars. They have the same problem. It’s easy to understand what’s going on, people have less money, so they don’t eat in restaurants. They prefer to stay at home.

It is probable that the economic crisis could have changed peoples’ habits and many of them eat at home instead of restaurants. But can all the changes be explained by the crisis factor? The above opinion was stated by a co-owner of an Arabic restaurant located in one of most prestigious and wealthy districts of Warsaw. It seems almost impossible that the impact of crisis caused sudden loss of interest in eating out in that area. It would mean that if the richest people could not afford eating in restaurants, the representatives of middle class would neither. It is worth mentioning here that kebab bars and Arabic restaurants with their *shishas* are still popular among

⁹ Kebab to nasza potrawa narodowa. *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 11.08.2010, http://kielce.gazeta.pl/kielce/1,35255,8241547,Kebab_to_nasza_potrawa_narodowa_.html; Kebab. Polskie Danie Narodowe. *Gazeta Prawna*, 19.08.2010, http://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/artykuly/443985,kebab_polskie_danie_narodowe.html; Czy Kebab się oplaca? *Gazeta Prawna*, 23.08.2008, http://biznes.gazetaprawna.pl/artykuly/102013,czy_kebab_sie_oplaca.html; Kebab to polskie danie narodowe. *Dziennik. Polska, Europa, Świat*, 23.12.2008, <http://wiadomosci.dziennik.pl/wydarzenia/artykuly/299232,kebab-to-polskie-danie-narodowe.html>; Kebab za 2,5 miliarda. *Wprost*, 36(1439), <http://www.wprost.pl/ar/207298/Kebaby-za-25-miliarda/>.

students in Poland. Could the loss of clientele be influenced by a change of actual trends? Is eating in ethnic bars not stylish anymore?

According to Augé (1995) one of the signs of modernity is excess. The abundance of goods was also mentioned by my interlocutors, who do not believe in crisis as factor of deterioration of situation in this part of gastronomical business.

I don't believe it's because of the crisis. People in Poland know what real crisis is. I think that Polish people have money. Look in the shopping malls, it's the best example. They are full of people each weekend. We are losing our clients because there are more and more new kebab bars and restaurants. Now, in Warsaw there are a few thousand of such places. So clients could eat every day in a different one. We earn less and taxes are higher each year. That's why the prosperity period ended for us.

One of ways of fighting the loss of clients was implementation of new solutions. As an example, some places added delivery services to their offer. Observing the popularity of such offers in pizzerias, Chinese and Vietnamese restaurants (which are also popular among Polish consumers), owners of some kebab bars and Arabic restaurants decided to follow the suit. There are also other ideas, such as selling not only hot meals and drinks, but also some additional ingredients of Arabic cuisine. Some of kebab bars offers also *pita* bread, *ful*¹⁰, spices needed to prepare Arabic dishes, rose water, etc. Additionally, there are also „kebab chips” or even „kebab instant soups”.

Clients, owners and employees

Clients of Arabic restaurants and kebab bars are mainly Polish representatives of all age groups (although some interlocutors highlighted here that usually “young people are the clients”), male and female, from different social classes. Depending on the location of the bar, different types of clients visit the place. These situated near university campuses, schools, hospitals, business parks are frequently visited by regular customers. Nevertheless such advantage of regular clients may also become a disadvantage:

80% of our clients are the same people. We know them. They know us. On one hand it's really good because I'm pretty sure that they recommend our kebab as good place. But on the other side, we may count on them only during the week, because on weekends or during holiday season less people visit us. And calculation is easy. Less people mean less money. And all fees are the same.

Other places situated in the city center or popular streets do not have a lot of regular clients during the week, but usually earn more on weekends. Therefore, these

¹⁰ Dish made of cooked beans, onion, tomato, olive oil, parsley.

kebab bars and Arabic restaurants have different opening hours and the work requires the employees to stay there all the night.

It is worth mentioning here that staff members of such places are usually male foreigners from Muslim countries (mostly Arabs and Turkish). What may be observed here is a phenomenon of *masculinization of migration*. Gender perspective in analyzing migrations shows that in the context of labor migration from Arabic countries to different European countries men are the dominant sex. Young men from Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, Syria, Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon come to Poland looking for jobs. As they do not have all the permissions to stay, they usually leave their families and get married in Poland with Polish women. This is one of the ways to legalize their residence. Not all of my interlocutors plan to stay in Poland. Poland is just the first step on their journey to Europe.

I've been here since 2005. Before I came here I had no idea where Poland was. There was a scholarship in Warsaw. I thought that this way I would come to Europe, but first they had to tell me that Poland is in Europe [he is laughing]. I graduated in Computer Science in Warsaw. I don't want to spend all my life here.

As my interlocutors stated, salaries of foreign employees¹¹ are usually low and do not depend on their education. Work contracts are predominantly short-term, without any additional benefits such as social security. They work about 10 hours a day, 7 days a week. Owners of Arabic restaurants and kebab bars hire foreigners due to two reasons: first, they speak their language (and most of them speak English as well), therefore they might be sure that everything is understood properly. Second reason is related to the fact that in a new place foreigners usually do not know how much they may earn. Young men leaving their countries feel obliged to succeed abroad. If they find employment and can send back even a small amount of money to their families, the prestige of their relatives increases.

If I hire an Egyptian I will be able to explain the rules to him. That is the most important. And of course he has no idea how much he should earn, because he has no idea about Poland. So even if I offer him a salary that wouldn't be accepted by Polish people, he will take it, because it is more than in Egypt. So I'm happy and he is happy. He is even happier than me, because he still has money to send to Egypt.

During the interviews none of the employees complained about their situation. Even if they were aware of their half-legal conditions of work, this was not considered on the same terms. As one of them explained:

I know that my working conditions are rather poor. I would like to change the job and I will do to that. But when I decide to change it, I won't sell kebabs anymore.

¹¹ Occasionally Polish students (more often male, rarely female) are hired.

I earn too little to afford many things, but at least I have a job. I know that young Polish people also have problems with finding employment, so I can't complain.

Many interlocutors highlighted the problem with finding a job that would be related to their education. Moreover, they frequently emphasized that this difficulty is common for all young graduates, both Poles and Arabs. Lack of opportunities for career development was also a problematic issue for the older generation of Arabic immigrants, actual owners of restaurants and kebab bars, who had arrived to Poland during 1970s. Nevertheless, older generation seems to be more optimistic about the possibilities of achieving success:

I've been in Poland for the past 25 years. I came here to study. I graduated from University of Technology and after that I started PhD. I really liked my "scientific career", but I had to interrupt it. The salary was too low, I couldn't maintain my family. I decided to open an Arabic restaurant. [...] You know, in fact I believe that it is possible to find a work related to the studies. It's extremely hard, but it's possible. There is a different problem, also common for all the people: either you do what you want or you earn money.

As I mentioned previously, some of young immigrants decide to leave Poland and start their dream life in other European countries. The main reason is related to the possibilities of self-development. Foreign countries are rather idealized, especially if the interlocutors have never been there. Wives and children are not treated as a sufficient reason to stay in Poland. Many of these young men think about getting married once more, with a woman from their country.

I would like to go to Norway. It's not so easy because I got married here. I have a wife and a daughter. My wife doesn't want to leave Poland. So I will go alone. [Why Norway?] The life is easier there. How do I know that? I'm not sure. My colleague told me. I have never been there, but I know English. I want to continue there with postgraduate Ph.D. studies. Do you know that it's cheaper than in Poland? Studies and the room in student dorm are for free.

I emphasize here that not all the interlocutors showed the will to leave Poland. The older generation, which has been here for many years, is not interested in changing their lives. They see other EU members as attractive countries to visit, but not for living. They seem more conscious about real problems that they would face if they decided to move out of Poland. They established their businesses in Warsaw many years ago, they have friends here, their children are mostly either high school students or studying at universities, therefore they feel strongly linked with Poland. The older generation of Arabs involved in kebab bars or Arabic restaurants businesses also show more flexibility in work style changes. They do not perceive the lack of continuity of their studies as a failure. Possibility of learning new skills is noted more as a chance to develop, a challenge. More often they were able to abandon studies and start working.

I came to Poland in the 1990s. My brother was already here. I wanted to go to Ukraine, but he told me that it would be stupid, because he was in Warsaw at that time and he could help me. He helped me with getting a scholarship. I started the studies, but I quit them shortly. I wanted to work and earn money [...] Hobby and studies are one thing, but work is another. I only completed the Polish language course. I met my wife there. First I worked on the *Stadion*.¹² It was a great job. I had to get up at 4 o'clock, but I had a lot of money. I finished the work at 12:00, 13:00 and the rest of the day was mine. There were not too many Arabs on the *Stadion*. I sold clothes. A couple years ago I changed this job and I opened a kebab bar. Now I'm thinking about completing studies. It's a good time to do that.

The differences between opinions of older generation and the young one might be caused by different expectations of the immigrants. First of all, many Arabs who came to Poland in the early 1990s had more opportunities to set up their own businesses, as it was the period of free market transformation. It seems that they arrived to Poland with a clear vision what they wanted to do and they met a comfortable environment to implement their plans. I would also add one more factor. Mass media at that time were not as developed as nowadays, therefore images of Poland available in their countries of origin were completely different from the current ones. The mass media feed the youth from around the world with a false image of Europe. This breeds excessive expectations based on the false message. Moreover, currently young Arab immigrants cannot succeed so easily as previous generations due to the global economic crisis.

Re-creations

As I mentioned earlier images, concepts and visions about reality become impulses of action. It is especially noticeable in case of Arabic restaurants and kebab bars in Warsaw, which are objects of re-creations of certain images.

Artifacts

According to authors of the publication *Food and Cultural Studies* "restaurants are not there simply to feed people" (Ashley et al. 2004: 143). What is really important is the experience created during the consumption. In context of *transnational connections* and *detrterritorization*, places such as Arabic restaurants or kebab bars should be ideal to offer the client not only a hot dish, but also a special ambience, a substitute of being a part of different culture. Moreover, such places, through the interior decoration, may also become an important sign of identity of the owners, who try to re-cre-

¹² 10th Anniversary Stadium in Warsaw. In the 1950s it was one of largest stadiums in Poland. In 1980s it stopped being a venue for sport events and transformed into the biggest illegal open-air market, where anything could be bought (from clothes to illegal firearms). In 2009 the black market was closed and now it's being redeveloped into the National Stadium.

ate their landscapes in a completely new place. I used the word “may”, because in many cases, this special “Oriental” and “exotic” atmosphere is just a marketing trick based on the stereotypical images. The use of stereotypical images is related to Said’s “Orientalism” (1991). Using them in the context of building trends (what happens in case of kebab world) Górak-Sosnowska calls “inventing the Orient” (2011). As she says:

Fascination with the cultures of Islamic peoples has, apart from the religious, also a secular face. Through the general interest in (or rather the fashion for) the Orient, and the particular interest in Islam, the cultures of Islamic people have entered show business. There are Oriental-stylized cafes and bars offering water pipes (*shishas*), clubs playing contemporary Arab pop or Punjabi *bhangra*, belly dancers (the most famous one has even launched her own revue) and henna-tattoo painters. Among some circles of Polish youth it has become trendy to go to such clubs, listen to Tarkan or Amr Diab, smoke *shisha* or even attend belly-dancing workshops.

Analysis of the situation in Arabic restaurants and kebab bars in Warsaw seems to lead to the conclusion that the first category is more prone to such activities. Mosaic tables, Arabic music, *shishas*, brass hanging lamps, colorful pillows and Arabic teapots with sets of glasses – these are the artifacts needed to give the customer a sensation of taking part in something extraordinary. Even if that image is completely stereotypical and does not represent a real Arabic restaurant, it is still considered as a characteristic Arabic place. Kebab bars interior decor follows a contrary philosophy. Apparently there are no things that could be treated as “typical”. Tables and seats are made of plastic, all the dishes are served either to take them away or to eat them on plastic plates with plastic cutlery. So what makes them as “exotic” as restaurants? As owner of the kebab bar states:

Kebabs must be sold by an Arabic or Turkish young man. It’s a part of concept. Kebab sold by a Polish guy does not have the same taste. Clients coming to kebab bar and asking for *falafel* expect being served by Arabic or Turkish immigrant. I’m talking about Turkish, because for most Polish people a Turkish national and an Arabic national means the same. The customer wants not only the food, but the proper seller. Did you know that some Vietnamese bars included Arabic food in their offer, but no one buys it? Personally I think that it’s due to the seller.

Expectations of Polish customers are based on visual criteria. If the sellers do not speak Polish fluently, it is even better, as it makes them more “exotic”. It may be partially related to the significant increase in the number of Polish tourists who have been spending their holidays in Egypt and Tunisia in the last years. During such holidays they maintain contact only with young male employees of hotels (which are designed in accordance with *One Thousand and One Nights* stereotype) and later use the same image, but in different, Polish context. Therefore, Arabic place, according to the customer, is one where all the artifacts related to the common concept of being

Arabic are gathered, or the place where the image of this phenomenon is applicable. Personally, I would define an Arabic restaurant/bar as not only the place with Arabic food, but the one which Arabs choose as their place of meetings.

I would like to highlight that Arabic immigrants treat neither Arabic restaurants nor kebab bars as “their” places. If they decide to eat out, they would rather choose a different ethnic place. Sometimes they do meet each other in Arabic cafeterias, but bigger encounters are organized at home. Nexuses of traditions from their countries origin are re-created mostly at home. When I meet with the spouse of the owner of an Arabic restaurant at their home, the wall of her dining room is adorned with a big picture of the old town of her homeland’s capital city. She has access to Arabic TV and she loves watching Egyptian and Lebanese series. Ramadan will start soon. On the floor there is a hand-made carpet and when she serves me *ful* with rice and onions flavored with many spices and *tabouleh*, I notice the set of small glasses for tea, which have a completely different meaning here than at her restaurant.

Stereotypes

Stereotypes and images of Other are tightly linked to re-creations in two dimensions: they are used to describe reality and they are created by people who give them different meanings, depending on the context. This subject appears at the beginning of almost every interview. Owners of Arabic restaurant told me their story:

A: One day, when I was at my homeland I asked my mother to find me a good wife. I didn’t want to get married in Poland. It’s not because there is something wrong with Polish women, all of you are amazing, but the marriage should have some basic point of reference. And marriage with Polish woman would require a lot of problematic issues to be solved: completely different cultures, different languages, different religions. If we add day to day problems to this, it could fail. My mother talked with her mother.

B: So the next time when he was in the country, we met and talked. And I wanted to become his wife. I didn’t know where Poland was, but I was sure that he would take care of me. I knew that his family respects me. So here we are. I know that for some people it sounds strange. I hate these looks directed at me which seem to check if he beats me or not...

Cruelty of Arabic husbands and Muslims pictured as terrorists are the two most common stereotypes highlighted by the interlocutors as the most harmful in Polish society. Interestingly, no one blames the people, because “they don’t understand the Arabic culture and Islam”. All the fault is attributed to mass media, which were described as “completely unprofessional”, “biased”, “lousy”.

In Polish TV you won’t find programs about us, about our life. You may find programs about Islamic extremists, terrorism, regimes, poverty, violations, manifestations.

Things are getting worse. Especially after September 11. Creation of an Arab-Terrorist image is useful.

Analyzing newspapers and media transmissions¹³ it is hard not to notice that Arab countries are mentioned in the contexts of violations of human rights, military conflicts, poverty and terrorism. Islam is treated as the only factor that explains everything. Arabs are represented as a homogeneous mass, zealous in its religious rituals. And if other religious minorities appear in the context of Arabic countries, they are usually represented as the victims of “Islamic despotism”. Such representations must influence perceptions of Arab minority, although some of interlocutors believe that “a lot of Poles know that media are manipulating the information”.

Are the opinions of Arabic immigrants in Warsaw about Polish people less stereotypical? Many times their answers contained elements met in the stereotypical image of Poles (intoxication, thefts). Nevertheless, there is a big difference in their judgment compared to opinions of Polish citizens. It is based on the personal experience and not on the media image. According to my interlocutors the most appreciated characteristic of Poles is being sociable and friendly:

What I like mostly in Poland is sociability and kindness. People here are really helpful and direct. My neighbors are my best friends. I can always count on them. They never showed me any kind of suspicion or rudeness. They were more curious, they really wanted to know us, understand our culture. You guys here in Poland are really interested in other people. [...] What is really funny is that due to lack of knowledge of each other, misunderstandings appear. Once, I went to one of my neighbors to ask him if he could give me some grape leaves. I was preparing a special meal for my wife. He stared at me for some moment. And finally told: ok, do you need it for some animal?

Hospitality. That's the best word to describe all of you. I have never met here anyone who would be unwelcoming towards the guests. And I always enjoy Polish parties. You have so many ideas how to spend free time. It's amazing!

Girls! Polish girls are great! So beautiful! [he is laughing; And girls in your country are not beautiful?, I asked him] Yes, they are the most beautiful, but you can't see them as they are hidden all the time [he is laughing].

I also asked about things that are annoying in Poland. Employees of kebabs and Arabic restaurants are in constant contact with the Polish people. Owners of such places have been in Warsaw for so long that they experienced a lot of different behaviors.

You drink a lot of alcohol. Young people, old people, everyone. I know that it's not my business but I hate when you oblige other people to drink. I remember

¹³ To find more on this subject, especially about images of Arabic women in Polish press, please refer to: Nalborczyk (2008), or Marek (2004).

a wedding party and this annoying question: what? You won't drink with me? If you want to drink, do it, but leave me alone. And don't feel insulted when I say "no".

I really hate the way you treat old people. Sometimes I can't believe it. It's a complete lack of respect. You leave them alone, without any help. In my country old people are happy. Poor, but happy. In Warsaw you barely notice old people on the street. And it's not because there are no elderly men or women in Poland. It's because they are excluded from the society. I really hate it.

According to the survey carried out in 2010 by *Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights* about racism in Poland, Arabs are one of the least liked nations among Polish people (this group of unpopular nations also include: Romanians, Turkish citizens and Romani People; Mikulska 2010). It should be mentioned that none of my interlocutors agreed with the statement that Poles are racists. This opinion seems rather interesting due to the fact that a couple of stories mentioned by them could be treated as a racist behavior, at least from the European perspective.

Poland is not yet a rich country, so there are no racists. You know, my sister lives in Sweden and says that she has a lot of problems due to her nationality. People exclude immigrants from society. In Poland the situation is completely different [...] Once I was attacked on the street. They beat me badly. I went to the hospital. I lost my job due to this, because my recuperation was long, so my boss fired me from his design office. These guys who assaulted me were just criminals. I don't blame all the Polish people for this.

I remember when I was wearing a *hijab* a lot of people were staring at me! I left it at home under the pressure of the looks and now I'm not wearing it anymore. But it was really strange, I covered my hair and I felt as if I were completely nude! [...] But you don't forbid wearing scarves formally, like they do in France.

In Germany or in France, yes, I heard about it. In Poland people are rather open to other cultures. Media are racist. They maintain negative stereotypes like this one that Arabs beat their wives [...]. At my first work it happened sometimes that people called me 'czarnuch'.¹⁴ But it was on Stadion. And this was peculiar place. [...] It's really funny when people in buses think that I'm a thief. They always touching their pockets and grab their bags nervously, because I'm dark. Maybe they thought that I was Romanian.

Here the interesting element is not only the concept and understanding of „racism”, but also adopting Polish stereotypes about other nations. A good example is the last sentence of above mentioned opinion: „Maybe they thought that I was Romanian”. Using such comparison suggests that the interlocutor is aware of Polish false image of Romanians as thieves. Also the concept of “West” seems to exclude

¹⁴ Pol. 'nigger'.

Poland from “Europe”. As I mentioned earlier, Poland is just a first step to get to European countries, therefore it is not treated like a European country. Another interesting fact is that Poland does not evoke any negative images, as it happens in case of France or Germany.

Rituals

Re-creations are also related to rituals, as they create the image of certain activities in certain situations. As Edensor states, “the rituals often achieve the illusion of fixity and common purpose” (2002: 101). There is no possibility to add new interpretation or any new element to rituals.

Food¹⁵ and rituals related to food are important among Arabic society, and it seems that they are still valued among Arabic immigrants. Gathering together for eating is the preservation of what Kolmer calls the *ritual of association* (2001: 11). Being in the same place, sharing the food, being engaged in conversation, is the creation of unity, even “if the participants are not necessarily homogeneous but may represent various interest groups” (Edensor 2002: 101). Additionally, in Arabic society the faith (Islam, Christianity and Judaism) requires certain attitude on all stages of cooking: ingredients are as important as the way of preparing them. Eating is also regulated by fasting periods. In this context, the Islamic category of *halal*, things that are permissible, is applied as an opposition to *haram*, things that are forbidden. Arabic and Muslim immigrants living abroad should still implement the rule of eating only permissible food, which for many reasons becomes problematic. All my interlocutors confirmed that their food is *halal*, although no one holds certificate of *halal*, which is used in many non-Muslim countries.

There is no need to have such a certificate. It happened once, maybe twice, that a client asked me about detailed description of the ingredients. Trademark *halal* wouldn't be popular in Poland. There are too few Muslims in Poland. I know that there are some shops offering *halal* food, but it's too expensive and no one buys it.

It wouldn't work. People don't need it. If anyone wants to be sure if the food is *halal*, they are usually tourists. But I remember one Polish guy, who wanted to open a kebab bar. He came to me, asked for recipes and started selling kebab with pork chuck steak [laughing] ...as he said it was a mix of Polish and Arabic traditions.

I don't want to sell alcohol and pork. It's against my beliefs. I know that many customers would drink with a pleasure a cold beer, but by selling alcohol I would support something which is *haram* for me. And as I don't want to touch pork, I don't offer it.

¹⁵ The importance of food is illustrated by the use of *kunyas* (part of Arabic names, usually teknonym) for food. One of meanings for Umm Ali (Mother of Ali) is blancmange; (van Gelder: 2005).

There are three butcheries in Poland with *halal* trademark, but two of them export the meat to Turkey and they don't sell it in Poland. One is in Warsaw, another one near Poznań and the other near Szczecin. They are owned by Arabs and Turks. In Warsaw, there are also two bakeries delivering *pita* bread specially for kebab bars and Arabic restaurants. Certificate of *halal* might be granted by Muslim Religious Union of Poland (Muzułmański Związek Religijny). Fulfilling the *halal* rules is not only related to the food. It is the style of life which makes *halal*.¹⁶ I would also amend *halal* lifestyle by adding "health" element to it. That is why in some kebab bars and Arabic restaurants there is no alcohol available. Additionally, some of interlocutors accented that they promote a healthy way of living, as the food they offer contains a lot of vegetables, and Polish nationals usually do not eat many.

Conclusion

Today the Arabic presence in the streets of Warsaw is not as noticeable as in other European capitals. In the symbolic sphere there are only a few shops with artifacts "typical" for Arabic countries, brochures from tourist offices, Arabic restaurants, kebab bars and a mosque which would be more related to Muslims than only to Arabs. There are also several associations of Arabic immigrants and other organizations interested in this community, but as they are known only to a small, closed group of people, they do not hold any place in popular awareness. Hardly ever it is possible to meet people in their traditional clothes, therefore from all these symbolic representations Arabic restaurants and kebab bars seem to have the biggest and the most obvious impact on introduction of Arabic elements into the urban space. Current EU policies aim to highlight the importance of the integration. As one of my interlocutors confirmed, "Working in Arabic restaurant is not only a great chance to integrate and to get to know other people. It also allows other to get to know you".

Arabic restaurants and kebab bars have an even more important function. As Ulf Hannerz states:

In order to adopt a practice exhibited by someone else, people have to have some idea of how it would fit into their own life; and this may involve analyzing similarities and differences between their respective situations, and similarities and differences between themselves and the other. (Hannerz, 1996: 50).

They are not just an auxiliary integration tool helping Arabs to incorporate in Polish society. They are places which also help Poles to get to know other cultural groups.

¹⁶ Part of being *halal* is being eco-friendly. In Poland this understanding of Islam is not popular among Arabic Muslims related to food business. More about eco-Islam might be found in Górak-Sosnowska (2010).

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