

In Search of a Lost Taste: La Cuisine Pied Noir

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ABSTRACT: 1962 marked the end of the colonial occupation of Algeria by France after more than 130 years. After a bloody war of independence, nearly 700,000 former European settlers left their old homeland in dramatic circumstances in the summer of this year. Most of them landed in the port of Marseille to find a new livelihood in the motherland of France. After their exodus from the lost French Algeria, the Pieds-noirs developed a multifaceted culture of remembrance. Their specific culinary culture, La Cuisine Pied Noir, is an essential part of this memory work. The description of this cuisine provides a deeper understanding of culinary cultural transfer in the context of colonialism and decolonization. The Cuisine Pied Noir can be used to reflect the importance of food as a cultural companion and as a preserver of social identity. The drama of Algerian-French history is currently being discussed intensively in the French public. The archives are finally to be opened in both countries. A particular concern of this paper is to understand the topic “Food and Movement” from the perspective of Life Review and Biographical Work.

I still remember the inspiring moments of my *tchatche*¹ with Marie-Pierre. We met in March 2019 in the small library of the *maison des rapatriés* in Nice. The large conference table was lined with bookshelves, the walls were emblazoned with colourful coats of arms of towns that have ceased to exist long time ago: Bône, Philippeville, Mouzaiaville, Sidi Ferruch ... each name representing a little Atlantis of a vanished world. Marie-Pierre is president of an association of Pieds-noirs and Harkis² involved in recalling memories of their common country of birth. Marie-Pierre was born in Algiers, in the mid-19th century her ancestors from Malta had settled in the still young French colony as nameless and destitute *petits blancs*. In the course of the dramatic history of French Algeria, a specific Mediterranean food culture developed on the territory of the middle of the three Maghreb states, mixing European and “oriental” food traditions to a veritable eclectic cuisine. “For us, this way of cooking and eating is our bridge to the lost homeland” - Marie-Pierre recalls the happy and simple life, *la convivialité* of people, who felt animated and blessed with being born as children of the sea and the sun, allowed to feed on the rich treasures of the Mediterranean garden. (Ehrohl 2012)

Now something strange was going to happen. I asked Marie-Pierre about a particular dish that spontaneously comes to mind when she thinks of the cuisine of *la bas*. “Couscous, couscous au petit lait. Very important is the big

glass of buttermilk with which the couscous is soaked,” she answered without hesitating. At the same time, I saw tears in Marie-Pierre’s eyes, for a moment she seemed deeply touched and hardly managed to continue talking about her mothers’ and grandmothers’ cooking. Had I just witnessed the famous “Proustian effect”, when the simple idea of a sweet delicacy can involuntarily trigger a cascade of memories? For Marie-Pierre, there is no question, that a dish of steamed semolina, butter, sultanas and the indispensable *petit lait*, prepared in just a few minutes, can tell of great world history! *La Cuisine Pied Noir*, however, also gives an impressive testimony to the personal life stories of people in the shadow of “great history”, who still regard themselves as *les oubliés* (the forgotten) of the Grande Nation’s colonial past.

My contribution on *La Cuisine Pied Noir* is an attempt to reflect on the topic of migration cuisine from the perspective of “life review, reminiscence and biographical work.” First, a very abbreviated overview explains the historical context of French Algeria and I will outline the community of the Pieds-noirs. In an introductory theoretical part, I will present the idea of connecting food culture and “life review”. Using the popular portmanteau word *La Nostalgie*, I want to show how *La Cuisine Pied Noir* is anchored in a multi-layered culture of remembrance. *À table, mes amis!*

Traces of a War of Memories

In 1830, a French expeditionary force of 45,000 landed on the Sidi Ferruch peninsula near Algiers and began the military conquest of Algeria, which had been under Ottoman rule at this period. The act of war marked the beginning of the second French colonial empire, when France occupied the Maghreb and large parts of West and Central Africa. As for Algeria, the French failed in finally pacifying the vast country throughout the entire period of its colonization. The submission of Algeria sparked numerous uprisings of the tribes which were contemptuously referred to as *indigènes* by the colonists. The resistance under the leadership of legendary Abd el-Kader (he united the Berber tribes in western Algeria, defeated in 1847), the Mokrani revolt (1871/72) of Muslim Kabyles and Arabs, or the Setif Massacre of May 8, 1945 are only a few examples of revolts that were bloodily suppressed by the French expeditionary armies and European settler militias.

After a last terrible resumption of mutual violence from 1954 to 1962, the Évian Agreement declared the “Algerian War” over. A momentous passage of the Évian Agreement

between the French state and the representatives of the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) declared a mutual amnesty for all war crimes during these eight bloody years. As for France, the inevitable consequence of this amnesty was a collective national amnesia concerning the entire complex of the Algerian War and colonialism in general. The collective denial of the past gave rise to a persisting loss of historical awareness. (Stora 2021) To this day, there is no official joint entry in Algerian French history books: while Algeria celebrates the heroic “war of liberation” from the yoke of the French, a polyphonic and highly dissonant chorus of historical interpreters speaks out in France, all misinterpreting their private stories and tragedies as “history.” These include members of the armed forces, the conscripts of the Algerian War and their families, Algerian immigrants in France, Harkis, sympathizers of the Algerian Liberation Front FLN, intellectuals, leftists and rightists, to name just a few examples. It is estimated that there are about seven million people living in France today who are in some way burdened with the Franco-Algerian question – a fateful community of combatants and victims of a war of memories. (Stora 2007)

One group emerged amongst the Europeans who had to leave their homeland of French Algeria in 1962 in a mass exodus because they were no longer sure of their lives. These protagonists were without question among the great losers of the Franco-Algerian disaster. They were mostly normal people with moderate incomes, civil servants, merchants, clerks, craftsmen. With only two suitcases in hand,³ they boarded the legendary *paquebots* in the ports of Algiers, Oran or Bône and set off for forced exile in metropolitan France.

Most of them ended up in Marseille, where they were anything but welcome by their compatriots. The words of the mayor of Marseille, Gaston Defferre, became famous: “*Que les pieds noirs aillent se réadapter ailleurs.*” In short: The refugees should better land somewhere else. Many mainland French did not know that the new arrivals were French citizens, nor were most aware of the atrocities that had triggered the mass exodus on the other side of the Mediterranean. Suspicion was even stoked, as France had proclaimed military conscription at the height of the Algerian War: A whole generation of young men had had to defend the alleged privileges of these “pseudo-Frenchmen” in North Africa! Only later were the French displaced from Algeria called *Pieds-noirs* - a term that was initially used pejoratively by the mainland French to stigmatize the unloved new neighbours.⁴ The “Europeans of Algeria” (as they called themselves) defiantly adopted this unflattering collective name to express their community of destiny in France.

The exodus of the Pieds-noirs was the largest refugee movement of Europeans since the expulsion of the Germans from the eastern territories after World War II. We are talking about almost one million uprooted people.

There is another tragedy, that must not be overlooked. The end of French Algeria and the exodus of the European settlers also marked the end of Jewish culture in Algeria, which had existed for thousands of years. In 1870, France granted French citizenship to the Jews of Algeria by law (Decret Cremieux). This destroyed the historically-grown peaceful community of Algeria’s Jews and Arabs. The Jews sought assimilation with the French colonial society, but had bet on the wrong card. (Balouhl 1983). They paid for this with displacement and exile. (Stora 2006) The people of Algeria lost their common cultural treasure of an elaborate food culture of their former Jewish neighbours – persistently denying it until today. (Boumedine 2015. Bouayed 2000)

La Cuisine Pied Noir: A Culinary Self-Disclosure

Historians are sometimes considered to be prophets of the past. They meticulously organize and explain a space in our time horizon that is no longer accessible to us, namely: yesterday. Not only lovers know: “Yesterday is dead and gone/And tomorrow is out of sight” (Kristofferson 1970). In fact, the ephemeral present is confusing, boring or chaotic, and we persistently push the erratic future in front of us, the latter mainly reflected as a projection site for our wishes and fears. So, the past remains the only place where we know our way around. After all, we were there! Reminiscence is, first of all, a normal process in our mental life. To remember means to create order and orientation. The work of Robert Butler (Butler 1963) and Erik and Joan Erikson (Erikson 1959, 1978) established a branch of science that has been developing ever since, well known today as “life review.” In the early days, the focus was primarily on older people, providing them with instructions for an orderly life retrospective, especially in view of approaching death.

Even though life review naturally presupposes what has been experienced, the method is no longer limited to the elderly alone, but includes practically all phases of life. The evidence of a well-organized life review is manifold: it helps against loneliness and depression, alleviates the fear of death, promotes mental health and resilience, strengthens integrity, increases self-esteem and improves the quality of life. (Westerhof 2019, 318)

The life review concept deals with the past, but it is a process that takes place entirely in present and aims to manage future more consciously. There is another essential difference between life review and the work of historians. Life review is related to the individual, or to a community of people united in a similar life story. The call for biographical self-disclosure (Groebner 2021) thus does not reconstruct the assumed historical external world, but is an expression of the current internal world, a subtle message to the world.

In the process of biographical work, therefore, there is no right or wrong - what matters is the analysis of the

subject's personality and his or her psychosocial development potential. For every distorted representation of a social or historical constellation, an explainable motivation is assumed: why does a person tell his life story in exactly this way? Typical idiosyncrasies of biographical narration, such as selection, abbreviation, rearrangement and variable evaluation of memories are consciously integrated into the goal of memory work. Biographical self-disclosure is not a pure cognitive act, it is highly emotional and involves what can be experienced sensually and physically. In biographical work, there is no judgement or condemnation; its first goal is the re-appropriation of one's own biography. (Gudjons, Pieper, Wagner 1986)

Our life story may have been damaged or even got lost in the course of life. If constellations of perpetrator-victim dominate the biographical narrative, life review can play an essential role in the process of mutual reconciliation. The review is successful, as soon as the narrator gains back sovereignty of acting and learns to constructively shape his or her future. In life review, Eriksen's famous stage model of psychosocial development is still often referred to. It describes eight stages of human development from the first year of life to mature adulthood and postulates, on the basis of pairs of terms, a conflict that a person has to overcome in his or her psychological, social and historical relationships. For the last phase of life, for example, the tension between ego integrity and despair is highlighted. A guided life review aims to help the subject learn to accept his or her complex life story (with all good and bad experiences), in order to find access to well-being, mental health and wisdom.

Life Review and Biographical Work in the Field of Interdisciplinary Recognition

Life review and biographical work refer to important scientific traditions, like history, sociology, psychology and psychoanalysis. The topic of food culture is relatively new in this field of research - although food can trigger particularly impressive memories. There is a significant merit in applying life review to one's experiences of food and eating. We carry our very personal eating biography (Wild 2018), our "culinary body memory," with us all the time, our physical constitution gives eloquent information about our self. None of our senses is as strongly associated with memories as our sense of smell. Complex associations can be triggered as if by magic by an olfactory or gustatory stimulus. I recall Marie-Pierre's strong emotional reaction to couscous! Her tears were certainly not directed at the question, unresolved among historians, in which of North Africa's countries the first *couscoussière*⁵ was detected in a Berber cave.

The fact that psychological and psychoanalytical methods are strongly integrated shows how enlightening the life review method can be, especially in the context of food history and culture. The contemporary witnesses of

the Cuisine Pied Noir were children or adolescents at the time of the exodus in 1962. In the last months of the Algerian war, they experienced murderous violence and terror as daily events. Many have still not come to terms with this childhood trauma - of course it stays part of their biographical self-disclosure. Traumatized people in particular cannot distinguish between personal episodic experiences and the overarching meaning of events. (Westerhof 2019, 320) In his study *Psychanalyse d'une déchirure*, Denis Kremer explores the crucial question of why many Pieds-noirs have still not been able to cope with mourning concerning "their Algeria." (Kremer 2018)

German psychoanalysts Margarete and Alexander Mitscherlich analysed a comparable constellation in post-war Germany in their work *The Inability to Mourn* (1967) and revealed the defensive attitude of the individual and the masses towards guilt and complicity in Nazi crimes. The act of repressing personal and family entanglements led to a fatal development: the mourning for the victims did not take place for a long time. (Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich 1967)

A comparable diagnosis can be ventured for the Pieds-noirs. Colonial violence is ignored and replaced by nostalgic flashbacks to a persistently asserted peaceful, intercultural and interreligious colonial society and an excessive addiction to the Tricolore, France's symbol of cultural superiority and its *mission civilisatrice*. Kremer's thesis points out that the Pieds-noirs are incapable of mourning because France has not recognized their fate to this day. In fact, French public likes to banish the Pieds-noirs on the far-right political fringe. This may well be true for a few vocal individuals but the majority of Pieds-noirs living today are fully integrated into French society. Their psychological wounds have not healed - even after sixty years. Children and adolescents define their self-image as dependence on their parents. In the optimal case of a happy childhood, an ideal-typical image of the parents is stored in biographical memory. The psychological circumstances of the Pieds-noirs raise the intriguing question of why those living today so passionately emphasize their cooking traditions (with its feminine connotations) of their mothers and grandmothers. (Chalendar 2005, 2015. Ducret 2011) The convivial table fellowship *chez nous, dans notre Algérie heureuse* is full of positive values: motherliness, hospitality, good and healthy food, intercultural encounter. The masculine aspect, which is more strongly associated with colonial violence, is hardly echoed in the narrative of La Cuisine Pied Noir. You don't have to be a trained psychiatrist to practice life review successfully. However, one should know essential terms and methods: Sigmund Freud's topical model (awareness, preconsciousness, subconsciousness), or mechanisms of defense as described by Anna Freud (repression, transference and countertransference). Since psychoanalysis in particular is dependent on the spoken word, Humanistic Psychology (Miethe 2017, 55) with its complex view on the human being

and its wide range of therapy offers is increasingly recommended for practical life review.

It has often been emphasized that migration cuisines (like all national and regional cuisines) are inventions to which “traditions” are only attributed in a subsequent process. (Barlösius 1999, 169) Such cuisines are assertions against a dominant culture, about demarcation of one’s own social group and about the consolidation of one’s image of history shaped by one’s own life experience. It is no surprise, then, that in the carefully arranged spaces of culinary memory of the Pieds-noirs, notions of “authenticity” dominate the frequently stereotyped dishes. So as not to be overwhelmed by nostalgic feelings, the notion of “culinary folklore” needs to be critically contrasted. Indeed, there are indications that the idea of invented traditions (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983) plays a significant role in the narrative of La Cuisine Pied Noir. In life review, however, the crucial question is not whether the resulting narratives are somehow authentic or truthful, but, much more importantly, why stories of invented traditions are propagated so passionately. The historical truth is currently inaccessible in the complex context of the history of French Algeria. Of course, one can brand the colonial occupation and exploitation of Algeria as a “crime against humanity” (Macron 2017). Categorically allowing this single viewpoint may well definitively prevent one from becoming a fan of La Cuisine Pied Noir. Which would be a great pity.

Painful Memories: La Nostalgie

After their arrival in France, the Pieds-noirs settled preferentially in the south and showed tendencies to form ghettos. The hostile attitude of many French people in the context of their arrival reinforced their initial unwillingness to integrate and exacerbated their trauma of exile and expulsion. They founded influential associations, initially to represent their economic interests⁶. The *Cercle algérieniste*, founded in 1973, shifted its focus to cultural image maintenance: exhibitions, commemorations, literary prizes and the preservation of the peculiar language of the Pieds-noirs (le Pataouète). (Eldridge 2016) During this decade, La Cuisine Pied Noir became increasingly popular as a cultural matrix (*la cuisine de chez nous*). (Groud 2009). Magazines published recipes and aroused the curiosity of French housewives for this exotic cuisine with its preference for hot spices, such as *ras-el-hanout* or *harissa*.

Due to its lack of sophistication, an image as a cuisine of the humble people, its typical attributes of an immigrant cuisine (Arabic, Ottoman, Spanish, Italian, Jewish), La Cuisine Pied Noir still represents a powerful counter-concept to the established French cuisine.

In the context of religiously motivated pilgrimages, the adored delicacies from *la bas* are enjoyed in a convivial company, typical for the Pieds-noirs but unfamiliar and tempting to many Hexagon Frenchmen before the early

1960s: l’Anisette, la Kemia, la Mouna, Merguez and Longanisse; additionally the seductive treasures of the *pâtisserie orientale*, like Macrouts, Montecaos, Zlabia and Baklava, to name just a few highlights of this rich cuisine. An annual highlight is the (culinary) pilgrimage to *Notre Dame de Santa Cruz* in Nîmes. In the sense of a territorial transfer from lost French Algeria, a statue of the Virgin Mary has been venerated there since 1966, brought to southern France by Pieds-noirs from Oran. It is precisely at religious events such as these that the Pieds-noirs continue to write their very own counter-history: their French Algeria was not a setting of colonial violence, but home to peace-loving European Christians. Injustice had been done to them in particular, since the French state had given away the land of their ancestors.

The complex culture of memory of the Pieds-noirs is often summarized in the portmanteau word *La Nostalgie*. The term is not without controversy. Nostalgia (greek: *nóstos* = homecoming and *álgos* = pain), the painful, longing turn to the past, is a special form of biographical memory. Nostalgic feelings can arise when people are unable to grieve or come to terms with painful events. Nostalgia can be understood as a process of repression - with quite healing effects. Instead of recalling complex memories, nostalgia creates a simple but stable idea of the past to escape the chaos of the present. Since the desired effect of nostalgic reminiscence is to unfold especially in the present, the images called up can be very far removed from what was actually once experienced. This mental process also includes the permanent temporal rearrangement and re-evaluation of events assumed to be historical.

The culinary nostalgia of the Pieds-noirs is counted among the *restorative* nostalgias (contrast: *reflective* nostalgia), in the same way that the preparation of a dish the old state can be restored and celebrated with all the senses as concrete proof of the happy past. Of course, there never was a *Cuisine Pied Noir* in times of French Algeria, it was only invented years after the exodus. In the 1950s, mainly French dishes were served in urban European families in Algeria: *gigot d’agneau*, *daube de boeuf*, *steak frits* (information by Marie-Pierre Dimek).

French colonial society was hierarchical and heterogeneous, and it was the common exile that formed the community of fate of the Pieds-noirs. Many Europeans who were better off in their old homeland only got to know couscous after their arrival in the Hexagon (Domergue 2005). In this context, it is interesting to note that couscous in particular is one of the most popular dishes in France today. A remarkable post-colonial success story! Nostalgia thus wants to fix this idealized image of the past. If you flip through the slim cookbooks of *La Cuisine Pied Noir*, you will discover the omnipresent topos of a “cuisine of our mothers and grandmothers,” which is celebrated as an immovable icon and memory anchor. However, food culture is a process of permanent

change, the unwavering clinging to a glorified past is “folklore,” the opposite of culture and thus also the opposite of authenticity (Barlösius 1999, 2016). Now we touch on the central point of any nostalgic recollection of happy childhood days. People are mourning something that cannot be restored: childhood itself. Criticism of the concept of *La Nostalgie* is therefore not directed against the legitimate efforts of the Pieds-noirs to come to terms with their dramatic family histories and the associated traumas. They practice life review and biographical work, with the well-known goals of the method: well-being, self-esteem, resilience, grief work. The effort they put in only hints at how damaged their desperate souls still are. Nevertheless, questionable aspects of this memory concept should be pointed out.

La Cuisine Pied Noir: a Cuisine of the Three Cultures and Religions?

Without question, the strongest narrative of La Cuisine Pied Noir is its self-image as an intercultural and interreligious cuisine, at whose table Christians, Jews and Muslims are equally welcome (Isnard 2005). Thus, with the help of their proclaimed food culture, the memory workers of *la Culture Pied Noir* construct the image of a harmonious and peaceful colonial society in French Algeria. Their continuing indictment of the French state focuses on the accusation that this ideal model of an intercultural community had been sacrificed to a purely political calculation, against the wishes of the overwhelming majority of the whole population of their lost *Algérie heureuse*.

More objectively described, however, French Algeria in the 1960s, a settlement colony (Jansen, Osterhammel 2013) planned and implemented by the French since the mid-19th century, was inhabited by approximately one million Europeans with the status of French citizens (the three departments of Algiers, Oran and Constantine had been declared French territory since 1848) and nine million Algerians, with a legal status as *sujets*, second-class citizens, as enshrined in the fateful *Code de l'indigénat* of 1875. Especially during the Algerian War, the French military forced mass resettlements of the rural population in *camps de regroupement*, with devastating consequences for the people. A good third of the Algerians (three million people) were made destitute in these camps, with no prospect of returning to their homes. In 1955, the (later) famous French sociologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu came to Algeria as a conscript. From the autumn of 1957 he taught at the University of Algiers. His research on the transformation of the urban and rural world and the proletarianization of the Algerian rural population in the final phase of the French presence vividly describes the destruction of traditional food cultures of the Kabyles, Berbers and Arabs. The loss of family structures, the isolation of the uprooted people, a precarious reality of life

that forced them to get their daily meal on credit in most shabby *gargots*, unfortunately do not give rise to any intercultural joy at the table. (Bourdieu 2008)

A short quote from Franco-Algerian writer Albert Camus marks the end of our search for the lost taste. Maybe I have succeeded in transferring the spirit of his words into my thoughts on La Cuisine Pied Noir.

Bien pauvre sont ceux qui ont besoin de mythes.
(How poor are people who need myths.)

Notes

1. *tchatche*: colloquial expression from the dialect of the Pieds-noirs (*le Pataouète*); informal exchange of ideas in friendly company; chit-chat.
2. Harki: Algerian auxiliary soldiers of the French Army.
3. *La valise ou le cercueil*: “the suitcase or the coffin,” a popular expression to describe the dramatic circumstances of the exodus of the Pieds-noirs.
4. The term *Pied-noir* was not used in French Algeria. Even the Algerians called the Europeans *roumis* (following the Roman occupation in ancient times), or *kafirs* (infidels). Various explanations exist. There is a reference to the black military boots of the expeditionary corps in 1830; another explanation refers to the blackening of the feet of French winegrowers in Algeria, caused by stamping the grapes. Also conceivable: reference to the pejorative motif of the “*sale arab*” (dirty Arab) in discriminatory colonial language.
5. Couscoussière: Steaming pot for preparing couscous.
6. ANFANOMA: *Association Nationale des Français d'Afrique du Nord, d'Outre-Mer et leurs Amis*; already founded in 1956, first powerful association of the Pieds-noirs to protect their economic interests. (Eldridge 2016)

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