

Research Article

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The ransom of mussels in the lagoon of Venice: when the louses become “black gold”.

DOI 10.1515/irsr-2017-0004

Received: February 1, 2016; Accepted: December 20, 2016

Abstract: The article presented here is rooted in our doctoral research in Ethnology and Social History developed in the lagoon of Venice in 2010-2013. It is a research based on the methodology of ethnographic field research, in parallel with the bibliographic and archive research. The fieldwork was conducted between March 2010 and August 2012 with 21 informants, fishermen aged 20 to 90 years. In this article we analyze how the formation of a new food taste is a process that can be defined “cultural”. We can meet an example in the history of mussel-farming on the island of Pellestrina, an island of fishermen in the southern lagoon of Venice, where the exploitation of this mollusk as food and economic resource appears rather late in history. Our research enabled us to find some frequent allusions to the alleged toxicity of this mollusk, called in Venice *peòcio*, that is to say “louse”, and once considered inedible. What mechanisms have transformed today the mussels into an appreciated and great demanded food, into “traditional food”?

Keywords: lagoon of Venice, mussel, maritime anthropology, folk classification, Pellestrina, origin of mussel farming

Introduction

Eaters are not a rational “homo oeconomicus”, but many disparate elements impact in their food choices. Indeed, the formation of a new food taste and its redefinition is a process that we can define “cultural”. We can meet one example in the history of the harvesting and mussel farming on the island of Pellestrina, an island of fishermen. It is the southernmost of the Venetian lagoon and it separates the lagoon from the sea. Here, locals called the mussels

(and still call them today) “peòci”, that is to say *louses*. They used to consider them not edible and sometimes even poisonous. However today, they are known to have an exquisite taste and all the inhabitants eat them as a habit. To paraphrase Hobsbawm (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), we are witnessing an example of insular “invented tradition”, applied to the local feeding. The mussels have become the object of a curious process: if beforehand they were perceived as venomous, as undesirable shells which were damaging fishing nets, they then became a refined and sought food served in restaurants and in the festive moments and user-friendly.

The main phenomenon of our study is the change of attitude particularly interesting from an ethnological point of view: mussels, whose culture and marketing seems normal today to the inhabitants of the lagoon, would actually be facing a recent “invention”. We therefore asked new questions: what was the phenomenon that determined this change of habit? What process has transformed the demonization of “louses” into the discovery of “black gold”?

To reconstruct the steps of this real food reclassification phenomenon in time, first of all, we will analyse the process of the formation of a new food taste. Then we will enter into the realm of perception and beliefs about this mollusc to find the motivations of its statutes “doubtful” and the origin of its dialectal denomination. Finally, we will see the historical reconstruction of this innovation that has contributed in recent years to the formation of this new eating habit and that transformed the island in the first national producer. This is an innovation that coincides with the history of the arrival of Alfredo Gilebbi in the lagoon, who was the real engine of a radical cultural change (but socio-economic too) which represents a key point of the research.

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The formation of a new food taste: the example of the island of Pellestrina

In the words of anthropologist Tullio Seppilli, if nutrition is the biological response to an instinct in man this behavioural response is strongly modified by the intermediation of various factors related to the social dimension and theirs define qualities, the amounts, terms and meanings of food (Seppilli, 1994: 8). Taking this hypothesis as a starting point, and referring to the consumption of mussels in the lagoon of Venice, it is reasonable to ask this question: what is the meaning of the definition “good to eat”? Another Italian anthropologist, Mario Turci, explains that to satisfying the food needs:

«What’s *good to eat* is defined as the starting pole and finish of a delight which in practice in the use and food consumption, individualize a space of *thought* (Turci, 1994:3)».

This thought-space contains a process of food acculturation, such as introducing new foods in Europe, following the conquests that marked the beginning of the modern age period. In fact, they cause a real revolution in tastes, through the dissemination, in the practice of everyday cooking, of food today considered “traditional”. We think, for example, of the Naples tomato sauces, of the cocoa and coffee in the town of Venice in eighteenth century, of the corn farmers “mangiapolenta” (eater of cornmeal mush) of Veneto, just to mention some of the most famous cases. On a much more local scale, on the island of Pellestrina, we were seeing a few years ago, a similar dietary change regarding mussels. Today, they are deemed to be of exquisite taste and there is not a single inhabitant who makes a habitual consumption. During the field work, housewives explain that they freeze them to prepare savoury sauces during the winter and local restaurants never fail to present them in their menus as a local specialty. In one of his studies of Venetian cuisine, historian Luca Pes says that in the past centuries among the wealthy and educated classes who provided their cookbooks, culinary preparations of meat were more common than to fish-based (and shellfish). It was not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that fish has become a basic ingredient (Pes, 2006; 47-62). According to Montanari, meat food spread throughout Europe since the Middle Ages, under the influence of the diet of barbaric populations at the time of the Great Invasions. Meat would then gradually imposed as a result of their settlement (Montanari, 2004).

On the island of Pellestrina, mussels have become the object of a curious process: if before they were perceived by fishermen as venomous and undesirable, then they have become a refined food in all the lagoons. We have already pointed out, the feeding is “a space of thought” and therefore we attribute to food symbolic meanings and different values. According to Seppilli:

«Individual classes of foods or special foods are responsible - compared to some of their characteristics of different kind (flavour, some effects, price, provenance) - symbolic meanings that are reflected on people or human groups that use them. This may connote, for example, refinement or vulgarity, low vitality or exuberance, unconventionality, wealth, exoticism, creativity or flat repeatability. In this context, real stereotype develop itself (Seppilli, 1994: 11)».

The case of mussels, compared to oysters is a very significant example. Based on our analysis, we can say that in Europe the oysters were perceived, historically, as a refined and therefore adequate food to the wealthier classes, while the mussels, are described in the literature of the past as a vulgar and indigestible food for the poorest people. Mussel farming seems to have been especially designed to feed the underprivileged. This perception is also found in the iconography, where oysters are always inserted in the aristocratic or bourgeois, elegant settings, while mussels belong to popular atmospheres. We can see examples in the works painted between the seventeenth and nineteenth century by Nunez de Villavicencio, Luis Leopold Boilly, Joos van Kraes Beek and Jean-François Troy.

At the end of the nineteenth century, we find an example of the perception of mussels in an Italian book of Carazzi, a mussels-farmer of Liguria Region, who writes about breeding these molluscs:

«This industry could also be extended easily to our shores. More resistant [of the oysters] to the causes of destruction, easier to raise and to reproduce, mussels constitute a cheap food, and therefore likely to be used especially by the less wealthy classes (Carazzi, 1893:175)».

Mussels appear again as the ordinary food of the poorest classes. Indeed, a few pages later, the author describes the mussels as “oyster for poor people”, a definition that will become a sort of slogan at the time, and will be included in a lot of number of publications. From a socio-economic point of view, from the nineteenth century, the remarkable interest in mussel has spread all over Europe, but recognizes stereotyped mussels, vulgar and cheap food for the people on the coast. In addition, the mussel industry also provides them with a useful and easy occupation (F. De Roissy 1804-1805: 262).

We have to wait until the end of the nineteenth century that the consumption of mussels from spreading gradually in European cities including Venice, but even there very quietly. In Venice, it is only since the Second World War and more in the post-war that a real revolution has occurred in the lagoon (Vianello, 2013).

The alleged toxicity of mussels

At this point, it is natural to ask: what are the reasons of distrust by the inhabitants of Pellestrina for the mussels? Where did it originate?

The lagoon environment and the sea have determined the economic fate of this small peripheral island. Unlike the city of Venice, which had a much more varied economy - the glass industry, the trade in silk and spices, salt production - on the island of Pellestrina, the economy has always been based on fish. Indeed, 36 per cent of men have jobs related to fishing (Vianello, 2004: 31-45). In 2009, 47.4 per cent of fishermen were allocated in the South Basin (Provincia di Venezia, 2009: 24). Faced with the economic situation, the traditional diet consists almost exclusively of fish, accompanied by the inevitable *polenta* and vegetables. The fish that consumed the island families almost always belonged to the less popular and less profitable varieties on the market, which is the mud fish, those who live on the bottom of the lagoon, as opposed to “sand fish” most desired living on the seabed. It is in some cases categories of interchangeable fish that lives either in the lagoon or the sea depending on the season (Vianello, 2004: 169).

Formerly, they could also accommodate parts considered as waste, such as heads of sea-toad (*Lophius piscatorius*, L.) to do soaps. Sometimes they consumed species of fish and shellfish for which there was no same market. They ate large cuttlefish, those weighing up to a kilogram, whose flesh was very hard and were not marketed, or gobies (*Gobius Ophicephalus*, L.), a small fish spine. They also consumed the “anguèle” (*Atherina boyeri*, Risso), called in Venice “*pesce popolo*”, fish of the common people, and all the tiny shrimps (*Crangon vulgaris*, Mfg.) (Vianello, 2004). Yet despite the poverty of the inhabitants, which in most cases could not afford to eat anything other than the fish they had caught themselves, no one on the island would have eaten mussels since they were not considered edible, anyway, not before the rapid expansion of mussel farming that dates from the 1960s and 1970s.

If we consult the texts of the past (most famous are those of Linneus, of the Frenchs Buffon D’Aubenton

and De Roissy, of the Italians Chiereghin and Olivi, and of Aristotle and Plines the Elder), we find a “dubious” perception of this mollusc throughout Europe; the mussels were therefore considered venomous and carriers of disease not only in the Venice lagoon. Indeed, in bibliographic sources, we frequently find allusions to the alleged toxicity of mussels, already signalled by Linnaeus - the first classifier of these molluscs - the eighteenth century. According to Linnaeus «this animal, frequently eaten is harmful and often poisonous (Olivi, 1792: 126)».

In their texts, naturalists do not call into question the potential toxicity of mussels. The toxic seems to act as a sort of drug on the nervous system, producing anxiety states. Texts are limited to explaining how to counteract the side effects associated with their ingestion. Roissy suggested eating these molluscs with vinegar and other acidic substances; he, without explaining the reason for the toxicity of mussels, demystifies beliefs of the past, explaining that toxicity by the presence of a small crab that sometimes lives inside the valves, but he never questions the actual unhealthy mollusc (Roissy, 1804-1805: 268).

During our research, we found similar beliefs on the island of Pellestrina. Before the arrival of the mussel farming to Pellestrina, when these shells caused serious damage in fishing nets, they tore them with violence and rejected to the water after crushing with the fingers so they cannot reproduce and multiply, just as farmers do with weeds.

Otello Vianello, former president of the Pellestrina fishing cooperative, remembers that before the 1960s:

«If this mollusc ended in the net of fishermen when they were fishing, what would they do? They crushed and threw! They felt hatred, real hatred. Nobody would have ever thought of tasting a mussel. It was a poison. And how can you eat a poisonous thing?¹»

With some irony, it is precisely the island of Pellestrina which will become, in the second half of the twentieth century, the main mussel production area, not only in the Venice lagoon, but throughout Italy. Thus, in the early years, farmers began to export their products to markets in the south of the peninsula while they refused to eat mussel themselves. This is the case of Busetto Giannino, one of the first fishermen to have launched this new craft. A friend, of southern origin, has convinced him to eat a mussel for the first time in his life. He explains:

«[...] here, there was not the usual custom of eating louses. In the past, we did not eat them. Sometimes they ate clams, scal-

1 Interview with Otello Vianello, May 24, 2012.

lops, during the winter, but there was not the custom of eating louses²».

Even today, long time after the diffusion of mussel farming in the island, a lot of fishermen continue to be suspicious about mussel. One of the first fishermen who became farmer, who is now ninety years, gives us an example: « [...] prepare half a bucket of water dirty and put into fifty louses [mussels], in half an hour, water is very clean³». The mussel is seen as an effective ally to clean dirty water and therefore as something unhealthy to eat.

Among the many beliefs, always negative, related to food consumption of mussels, one of the most common and widespread in the lagoon of Venice and northern Italy is the following: it is believed that eating mussels during months with an “r”, that is to say the months that contain in their name the consonant “r”, can harm human health. This belief is also very common in all sea areas of Western Europe. This is the case in France, for example, where it is linked to the consumption of oysters that cannot be eaten during the months without “r”. This prejudice derives from a police ordinance of the City of Paris issued in 1752, which prohibits trade in oysters during the months of May, June, July and August, for hygiene and public health reasons (Torlo, 2010).

Concerning the Venice Lagoon, the feed ban may derive from a popular strategy, then distorted, and whose objective would be to manage the seasonality of production, much higher during the warmer months, which do not have the consonant “r”. In other words, it was, it seems, to exclude periods when the pick is not worth the trouble, their content and their protein then being minimal.

Knowledge relating to reproduction is also particularly interesting to understand the prejudice against mussels. Biologists explain that the sexual products are dispersed in water (where fertilization takes place) in the form of a white substance and fishermen say that the louses “have milk”. An informant, the fisherman Antonio Scarpa, says on the subject as mussels:

« [...] let go of spores, in fact, there are times when it is said that the louse has milk. This is because they unleash the spores and they do bore other louse. *Semina* [seed] born. There are periods during which they have milk. And they can do harm⁴».

² Interview with Giannino Busetto, June 24, 2012. He was born on the island of Pellestrina in 1944. Fisherman’s son, he has been engaged in the lagoon of Venice in the 50s then it became mussel. He is now retired, but still works with her two children, mussel growers too.

³ Interview with Rino Busetto, July 10 2012.

⁴ Interview with Antonio Scarpa, March 1, 2010.

During those times, around the month of October and then till April, mussels are considered indigestible by the fishermen and characterized by a different and less pleasant taste. In biological studies are not taken into account by fishermen when they explain that it is «at that time they [mussels] are really satisfied, because in addition, they also have milk, which means that they are particularly sweet⁵».

This is an interesting reference in the world of mammals, compared to other shelled molluscs like, for example, the clam. According to the fishermen, all shellfish produce this “milk”.

Another mussels-farmer of Pellestrina called Rino⁶, explains other beliefs how to neutralize the risks:

«When you eat louses, never drink water. You mustn’t drink. Even if someone does not have the habit of drinking a glass of wine, he must drink half a glass. Because wine is good for the health, but if he drinks water that can hurt, yes. Those who eat louses need a glass of wine».

In this interview passage, it appears that shellfish are not only considered dangerous during “months with r” or when they have milk, but permanently. Moreover, it recalls the suggestions of Roissy when he says to these molluscs season with vinegar and other acidic substances to counteract the side effects.

So we can say that the introduction of mussel farming in Pellestrina resulted not only in greater economic growth, but also in a profound cultural transformation, attached to the innovation of the habitual diet with the introduction of a product which was previously perceived as inedible and unhealthy.

***Peòcio*: a curious name**

Many archaeological remains found everywhere in the world confirms that shellfish are among the first aquatic organisms to have been used as a food. Clinging to rocks or deposited on the sand, often covered by only a few centimetres of water or exposed at low tide, they can easily be picked up using a small knife or other utensil.

Despite the ease of harvesting, we have seen that Pellestrina mussels were considered inedible to call the “louses”, a name still used today. This name deserves our attention and leads us to ask the question: what semantically message does it give us?

⁵ Interview with Stefano Gilebbi, biologist, April 18, 2010.

⁶ Interview with Rino Busetto, June 24, 2010. He was 90 years old at the date of interview.

From a scientific standpoint, the mussels are filter feeders that are distributed in temperate waters of the planet. As they are filter feeders, they may transmit to humans bacterial diseases. Indeed, we have already seen, they were considered more or less dangerous for our health. The mussels were already known in prehistoric times and in the Greco-Roman antiquity. We identify the first information about these bivalve molluscs in the writings of Aristotle (*Historia Animalium VII 603, 12-27*). During the Roman era, we find them mentioned in the *Naturalis Historia* of Pliny the Elder. We note with interest that the author speaks of the mussels using the word “louse”: *pediculus* in Latin. In his work, which dates about 77 A.C., he gives several descriptions of beliefs and superstitions prevalent among people of the time. Although experts say the writings of Pliny lacks scientific rigor, we should not forget that his work was regarded as a standard in the field of scientific and technical knowledge during the Renaissance and even later. We cannot ignore its historical and anthropological value.

We report here a significant excerpt from the Latin version published by Einaudi, in Book IX, “Aquatic animals”:

«There is nothing that is not born in the sea to the point that in the sea there are also animals Summer taverns, tedious for their quick jumps, or that remain hidden in the hair; [...] It is believed that this is the cause that during the night, the sea, the fish sleep is disturbed. They are born in truth the same body of some fish [...] (Capitani and Garofalo, 1986: 385)».

For Pliny, the aquatic world is a reflection of his world at the time: among the fish you would see reproduced everything that happens on the surface of waters and we could even equivalent parasitic taverns that disturb the rest of the fish. In this case, not only does Pliny operate a linguistic associative process, establishing an analogy between an earthly name and a marine animal, but he also assigns it the same characteristics and attitudes as its namesake. It nevertheless should be stressed that Pliny says that in his time, the mussels were commonly called *louses* (Capitani and Garofalo⁷, 1986: 581). The association of this mollusc and parasites of humans, animals and plants from the mainland, like the use of the same names for them, seem so rooted in human cultures for centuries. The fact that in the lagoon of Venice the mussels were

⁷ “Nihil Adeoque not in gignitur husband, ut etiam cauponarum aestiva animalia, Pernici molesta saltu aut quae capillus maxim celat, existing and circumglobata escae saepe extrahantur, causa quae somnum piscium husband in Noctibus infestare existimatur. Quibusdam vero ipsi innascuntur [...]”.

- and still are - commonly called *peòci*, among all the inhabitants, is curious and deserves our attention because they use the same term already employed by the Latins.

An interesting question, but difficult to solve, comes to mind: why is it that in the regions of the Northern Adriatic, the habitude to give to mussels the name of these parasites present on men and animals, unsightly if not downright repulsive, is it still diffused today? Would this be a linguistic “fossil” inherited from the Latins? Or are there other reasons?

Some fishermen of the lagoon, interviewed during the field survey, said that the name *peòcio* comes from the resemblance between the mussels and head lice for their black colour, and their way cling cluster to a support, in the same way that the parasites cling to hair. According to the fisherman Antonio Scarpa of Venice Lido:

«You see the louse plant? It is ugly, it is grouped. Even the louse of dogs is regrouped and if you also look at a group of louses [mussels], especially if they are small, they look like louses. That is the reason⁸».

In this case, the aesthetic perception of the fisherman is negative, since he thinks that the association is only incidental and is based on the same ratio of ugliness. Other informants gave a similar explanation. In Chioggia, Andrea Boscolo answered tersely «Because they are all attached as louses!» before net cut off the discussion⁹.

That name being so common, one does not even question about his origins. Among the interviewed informants, a negative perception of these molluscs is still evident. It is related to the name, the external appearance, their way of living attached to each other, as if it were something dirty, unpleasant and might carry diseases. During the fieldwork, we have observed that in the spoken language, the same word, *peòcio*, is also used metaphorically, always with a negative connotation. Attributed to a person, it can refer to a greedy temperament, while in other contexts it means dirty. The fact that these terms are still valid today tends to show the cultural roots of the language use.

The arrival of the civilizing hero Alfredo Gilebbi

In Pellestrina isle after World War II - so there is a value delay of this food resource and adoption, just as late,

⁸ Interview with Antonio Scarpa, March 1, 2010.

⁹ Interview with Andrea Boscolo, October 23, 2010.

technical innovations for its operation. Before then, mussels were not considered in economic terms. But what was the phenomenon that has led to this recovery?

One must remember that after the war, Italy is experiencing a very serious poverty situation. In this context, the northern regions, especially the Northeast, revives the economic miracle of the post-war. The old craft tradition is developing a network of small family businesses, which in the 70s will lead the region to the first place in Italy and Europe, in terms of gross domestic product (Brunetti, 2015).

In Pellestrina, spreading around the mussels, a “founding myth” has been circulating. Indigenous informants attributed the introduction of mussel farming to a fisherman, Alfredo Gilebbi¹⁰, who opened the first company in the production and marketing at Alberoni, in the isle of Lido Venice (separated from the island of Pellestrina by the harbour mouth of Malamocco).

Alfredo Gilebbi was born May 17, 1901 in a peasant family sharecropper installed in a small village in the Region Le Marche¹¹, a region of central Italy overlooking the Adriatic. In 1926, he married the daughter of a fisherman. With the help of his stepfather, Alfredo left the business from his parents to devote himself to fishing, especially fishing clams. When this product began to fail, he endowed with a great spirit of initiative and a remarkable entrepreneurial attitude and he was not discouraged. He started to look along the shores of the Adriatic in search of new fishing areas, more fruitful. During his travels, he found a part of the coast which was rich in clams, opposite the coastal beaches of the Venice lagoon. It is by chance or by fate to that in 1929 he decided to move on the island of Venice Lido where local fishermen neglected this type of crop.

This is the first innovation of Alfredo in the world of Venetian fishing. This also represented a great resource for local fishermen, who began to imitate the technique, particularly well assimilated by the fishermen of Pellestrina.

Not only was Alfredo an expert fisherman, he was also gifted with leadership and an innate ability to exploit to its advantage the laws of market. At that time most of the goods were sent by rail in the southern cities. During their travels, Alfredo would have had the opportunity to observe the mussels industry of Mar Piccolo of Taranto. And from that he might have decided to introduce the practice of farming in the lagoon of Venice.

The first artisanal mussel farming was born in 1939 near the port of Malamocco.

In addition to the active and constant support of his family, Alfredo was also able to rely on skilled workers he had specifically imported from Taranto. If we look at the images of the first farm, we can notice that the method adopted is effectively the same as that practiced by the farmers of this town. But the strings of such facilities were still under water. For this reason, some phases of the work were very tiring, especially at high tide¹². Over the years, this method has been successfully submitted to change, to adapt to the characteristics of the lagoon environment.

Alfredo is able to introduce mussel farming in the lagoon of Venice. Yet it is a success only in terms of production because a new problem arises: the market.

In the surroundings of Venice and in the city, there was not a good market to sell the production. Until the mid-fifties, all merchandise, as it was already done for the clams, was sent by rail mainly to the cities of Naples and Bari. Indeed, in these two cities, the mussels were consumed in large quantities, but there was no local production. During the 1950s, a small business started to grow in the cities of Padua, Treviso and Venice. In the early fifties, the Venice fish market allowed selling around two or three quintals of mussels per day, a request which may be partly constituted by a population of southern origin, given the needs for labour the industrial centre of Marghera. Today, it should be considered that in the whole of the Italian territory, the Veneto is the region that has the highest number of mussel farming companies with 134 companies and 169 active installations in 2008. On the contrary, if you look at the statistics on domestic consumption, the south represents the highest consumption with almost 50 per cent of the total, against just 10 per cent in the Northeast¹³.

As production increased, the annual problem of seed harvest began to appear. Noting that the fishermen of the neighbouring island of Pellestrina rejected these shellfish with contempt, Alfredo decided to offer them to free them of all the mussels they were recovering, especially the smaller ones, for a financial reward. At that time, Pellestrina was a poor community and the most backward in the march to progress; for this reason fishermen welcomed the proposal of Alfredo as a blessing. The islanders began, for the first time, to reap the *peòci*. Vianello Otello recalls:

¹² Tide in Venice lagoon is higher than in the other areas of Adriatic Sea.

¹³ Data presented in November 2011 by the biologist G. Prioli in Rome at the Higher Institute for the Protection and Environmental Research (ISPRA).

¹⁰ All data about the Gilebbi family were drawn from interviews.

¹¹ This company is still active today and is managed by his direct descendants.

«This gentleman arrived and saw the fishermen threw them in disgust. And he told them, 'Let us do this way - if you find any, you put them aside for me and we'll see if we can do anything in any way, because there are people who will buy us for pennies.' Fishermen were also happy because we gave them a little money for something they threw away, and they began to bring them back to this gentleman Gilebbi¹⁴».

The decision of Gilebbi to turn to the Pellestrina fishermen to find the seed and a portion of its workforce pushed them to notice that this *foresto*, stranger, sent trainload to the South of Italy and at the same time he began to sell its products on the local fish markets too. Slowly – because almost twenty years had passed since the first breeding - the Pellestrina fishermen, attracted by the possibility of making a profit, began in turn to take interest in farming and trade mussels. Initially, they had only to pick them up from the wild and then, very quickly, they started to place small ponds in the lagoon to the point that became the main place of mussels' production.

Thus many Pellestrina fishermen have turned to this new profession they then passed on to family members with such efficiency that today we consider it a typical activity¹⁵. This was possible because, unlike the ideology of fishermen among whom discretion is absolute, Alfredo was very opening minded and was charitable in teaching to local fishermen their fishing techniques. Through his commitment, his newly selected locations are soon imitated by neighbouring villages and become the theatre of the major economic and socio-cultural transformations (Vianello, 2013).

Years passed and mussel asserted completely from the activities of the lagoon. Alfredo died in 1975, just as many people who met him and worked with him. The generations have passed and he has by now become a legend on the island. Beyond its origins, it should be noted that all the inhabitants of Pellestrina, regardless of age, recognize that Gilebbi was the inventor of the mussel farming. So they operated a transformation process: this enterprising man has become a myth of the founding of the lagoon mussel farming. The case of mussel farming in Pellestrina is not a simple innovation that would be broadcast in the lagoon during the twentieth century: a similar phenomenon appeared on the island of Burano in the 50s, when some fishermen have become *moéche*, soft crabs, producers. In this case, the origin of the new job is

assigned to a group of young people who were inspired by inhabitants of Chioggia, the town who have for centuries the secret of this technique (Bonesso, 2000).

The lagoon of Venice is not an isolated case. We can find similar cases in Europe. In the North of Brittany, in the 50s, Roger Salardaine pioneered mussels farming *sur bouchots*, mussels breaded around wood stakes, from Region Poitou-Charente, in the Bay of Mont St Michel (Le Vivier-sur-Mer). Again, this pioneer is recognized by locals as the “founding hero”, still admired and respected today.

In anthropology, it is recognized that feeding generates sacred representations and magical-religious rituals that refer to the production of food. Seppilli reports that:

«In almost all populations, technical knowledge about agriculture and the fire for cooking food is given to ancestors, in a distant time, from a deity or civilizing hero: in these myths of origin [...] food production is sacred (Seppilli, 94: 11)».

The content of this passage is well adapted to the context of the mussel farming in Pellestrina. Indeed, we can say that we are dealing with a modern version of the process described by Seppilli, if we want to risk giving a common *forma mentis* to the whole human race and all eras. So we would be in the presence of a modern origin myth, represented by Alfredo Gilebbi, who learned this new activity and allowed the entire island to abandon centuries of poverty to become very rich.

About the symbolic aspects

As Cardona explained (Cardona, 1993: 112-113), tendency to anthropomorphic vision is common in many hunting and gathering society by creating linguistically oriented models about the human behavior. In the course of our research, we have observed the same process when the fishermen become mussel farmers. During this step they begin to develop new metaphors and similes with the animal and plant world. According to farmers, the mussels have mouth, lip and a beard. The mouth is the more rounded side of the shell. Similar to a human person, the mussels' mouth is wide open when they die. Giannino tells:

«Once [early 80s] I came home and I told to my wife 'Mabile, there are all the *peòci* with open mouth!' They had given the fertilizer in the country and they have died for heart disease¹⁶».

¹⁴ Interview with Otello Vianello November 15, 2012.

¹⁵ We can affirm that the innovation brought by Alfredo Gilebbi was a food revolution, but he also saved this little island of fishermen in preserving it from the depopulation and a future migration to industrial towns or to foreign countries, a fate happened to other small Italian villages.

¹⁶ Interview with Giannino Dato, June 19, 2013.

In this case Giannino attribute our own illnesses and the somecausesofdeath tomussels:apoinsoningduetopollution from fertilizers causes to mussels a fatal heart attack. Farmers think also that the byssus looks like the beard of men and therefore they attributed them the same name. This is a part of mussels to which they devote so much care and attention and is also sometimes called “root”, using a lexical reference borrowed from the plant world. The importance of the byssus is recognized by the most careful farmers also by the definition of “umbilical cord”. They explain that if you remove it the mussels lose their life force, even to death, as told by the breeder Vincenzo Busetto: «if you take away the umbilical cord, the stuff does not last much, you have to eat it within twenty-four hours¹⁷».

Younger mussels are called *sémina*, seed, and treated as children who need protection and care. Vincenzo explains that: «the seed is delicate, is like small children, it is less resistant than the greats¹⁸».

With the development of farming, mussels passed from the status of annoying shells that break the nets to delicate creatures (like children) to care for and protect all along their growth. A new step of status invests mussels that have reached commercial size. In fact, among the lagoon mussel farmers there is the distinction between the living animal that must receive all necessary care and the animal ready for the sale that is ready to become food. During this step it loses its membership in the living world to be transformed into a general “stuff”. Under the symbolic aspect, it passes by the perception of delicate animal for processing into product with a strong material connotation and detachment: the animal becomes an economic good.

With the mussels farming diffusion, also the negative connotation of the *peòci* will be subjected to a radical transformation when these molluscs become a source of well-being and wealth. Between 1960 and 1970, when it was regarded in Europe as the poor’s oyster, just apt to supply only popular kitchens, it become the *black gold* of the island (whose name was at the same time given to oil). With the increase in demand and thanks to the spread of cold rooms, refrigerated trucks for transport and to building a network of highways connecting the north to the south of the country, trade and consumption of mussels are continually being developed. Today, mussels changed status: every summer fest provides consumption and restaurants of the lagoon insert them into their seasonal menus. In Venice lagoon where the mussels begin to be

considered “good to eat”, it will be the culmination of a process of acculturation after which they will become a typical dish of the traditional local food by the locals as by tourists, essential at parties and in restaurant menus¹⁹.

The reflections made during the history and ethnographic analysis led us to consider another very significant aspect. This is creating a new taste in the populations involved in the mussel farming and one that can be defined as an invented tradition applied to food. As we just noted, even if on Pellestrina economy and food were always based on a small-scale fishing, the inhabitants did not have the habit of eating mussels. But the practice of farming led him to integrate it into daily meals.

Thus, thanks to the “filthy louses” the island of Pellestrina is entering in her golden age. This was then extended in 1980 and 1990 with the fishing of *caparòsoi* (the lagoon clams), but that’s another story.

Conclusion

After having been considered harmful for long, today we could put the history of mussels in a broader perspective in which they form almost spontaneously: where should we place these days this hybrid food, once feared and now rehabilitated? Consumers are now looking for healthy foods and therefore it is especially the “natural” aspect of mussel farm that is repeatedly stressed. Indeed, this aspect is offered by farmers, and perceived by consumers, as synonymous with safety and genuineness. Mussel farmers say they are selling a product alive, which has been subjected to any preservation process. This is a natural food because mussel farming is not a real animal breed and must only follow the growth of shellfish, without the use of artificial food and allowing them to grow in their natural environment. As explained by one of the informants, mussels grow with the tides and it is the waves - not man - which bring them food. The “wild and pure” environment where shellfish farming is installed not only is sought to improve the quality of the product, but is promoted to the level of his image. We are witnessing a transformation as well as rehabilitation of the natural dimension. If in the past, the mussels were seen as something “not good to eat”, now the reports were reversed. They have become synonymous with “healthy” and “naturalness” which is perceived as good (even if the

¹⁷ Interview with Vincenzo Busetto Dato del 23 settembre 2010.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ In 1968, a summer party periodical has also been established (suspended in 1989), at Lido Venice, dedicated to the black mollusk: *La festa del peòcio* (Day of mussel).

cleanliness of the water sometimes leaves us with some doubts...²⁰).

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20 Because of the diffuse pollution many lagoon fish species are decreased in number; other, if caught in the areas most attacked by pollution are inedible because of phenols, cyanides and ammonia dispersed by industries. In addition to the damage caused by factories and by the petrochemical industry, we must not forget those caused by oily residues into the sea and the lagoon from large tankers directed to the chemical factories of Marghera (Fortibuoni, 2009: 12-16).