

CROSS- INTER- MULTI- TRANS-

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Kaunas 2018

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GLOCAL FOOD AND TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITIES: THE CASE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN DIET

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Abstract

In 1958 the physiologist Ancel Keys discovered that a specific nutritional regime was associated with lower rates of coronary heart disease and mortality. This was the origin of the “Mediterranean diet”, namely a dietary pattern defined by a high intake of vegetables, fruits, bread, legumes and unsaturated fats, a moderate intake of fish, and a low intake of dairy products and meat (Keys 1980; Nestle 1995). Since Keys’ discovery, interest in the Mediterranean diet has increasingly grown, making it extend beyond the simple definition of healthy rules regulating nutrition and embrace the social and cultural implications of a specific “lifestyle” (UNESCO 2013; Moro 2014; Stano 2015a). Building on these premises, we aim to analyse the processes of “translation” (Stano 2015b) of the Mediterranean diet into different foodspheres: which changes affect the material and structural dimension of food? And what happens at the sociocultural and symbolic level? The analysis of relevant case studies will lead to general conclusions on the transition of the Mediterranean diet from a merely “scientific” to a predominantly “cultural” paradigm. Furthermore, it will help shed new light on the processes of identity-building and the ideological implications of food traditions and their transnational adaptations.

1. Introduction: contemporary foodscapes between globality and locality

Whether eagerly exalted or strongly criticised, globalisation is a factual characteristic of contemporary societies, and it has increasingly affected food: as Sidney W. Mintz and Christine M. Dubois state in *The Anthropology of Food and Eating*, “not only do peoples move across the globe, so also do foods” (2002: 105). As a result, a particular taste for the exotic and the ethnic has rapidly spread within contemporary societies, making people incline to what Claude Fischler (1980; 1988) calls *neophilia* -- which drives us to adapt to environmental changes and explore a multitude of new foods and diets. On the other hand, a special praise of authenticity, typicality, and locality -- which can lead to forms of *neophobia* and even xenophobia, as Leone

(2016) argues referring to the so-called “Km 0 phenomenon” -- has also become increasingly evident in present-day foodscapes.

2. The Mediterranean diet between globality and locality

2.1. The discovery of the “Mediterranean way”

Within such a perspective, it is very interesting to focus on a peculiar case study: the so-called Mediterranean diet. It was 1958 when the American physiologist Ancel Keys discovered that a specific nutritional regime seemed to be associated with lower rates of coronary heart disease and mortality. This was the origin of the so-called “Mediterranean diet”, namely a dietary pattern defined by a high intake of vegetables, fruits, bread, legumes and unsaturated fats, a moderate intake of fish, and a low intake of dairy products and meat (Keys and Keys 1975; Keys 1980; Nestle 1995). The reference to the Mediterranean context therefore initially came from the place where such a diet was adopted at the time of Key’s intuition, which was also the place where its healthy foods were *naturally* and *materially* available.

2.2. The Mediterranean Diet Pyramid and the Inclusion in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity

In 1993, drawing on Keys’ observations, the American NGO Oldways, the Harvard School of Public Health and the World Health Organization (WHO) developed the so-called “Mediterranean Diet Pyramid” -- that is, a model illustrating the Mediterranean diet pattern by suggesting the types and frequency of foods that should be eaten every day. Already the original model (Fig. 1), which mainly consisted of simple words, included regular physical activity within it,

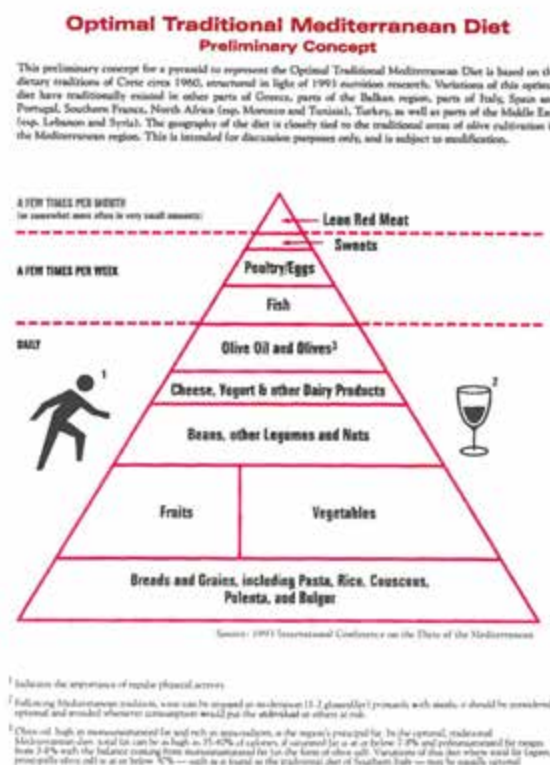


Figure 1. The 1993 Mediterranean Diet Pyramid (© Oldways Preservation & Exchange Trust; <https://oldwayspt.org/>).

therefore recalling an ample definition of the word “diet” -- which, coming from the Greek *δίαιτα*, *diáita*, goes well beyond the simple ingestion of food and embraces a real “way of life”. Moreover, the 2000 edition (Fig. 2) gave an iconic form to the advices on physical activity and brought them inside of the pyramid, within the daily section, further increasing the need of combining exercises to food choices.

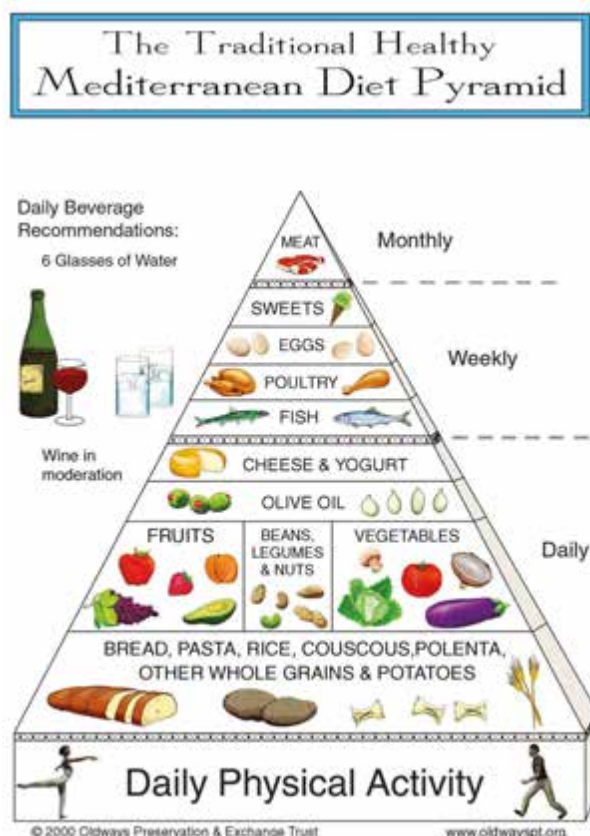


Figure 2. The 2000 Mediterranean Diet Pyramid (©Oldways Preservation & Exchange Trust; <https://oldwayspt.org/>).

The 2009 update (Fig. 3) then introduced other interesting novelties: herbs and spices, for instance, were added for reasons of both health and taste, as well as on a cultural base – since they were recognised “to contribute to the national identities of various Mediterranean cuisines” (Oldways n.d.: n.p.). Furthermore, together with images recalling physical activity, it introduced a reference to a new element: a family sitting at a table figuratively recalls the words on the right (“Enjoy meals with others”), highlighting the importance of *conviviality* as a key element of the Mediterranean diet.

Since Keys’ discovery, in fact, interest in the Mediterranean diet has increasingly grown, making it extend beyond the simple definition of healthy rules regulating nutrition and physical activity to embrace the social and cultural implications of a specific “lifestyle”, in which conviviality plays a crucial role. In this sense, the genealogy of the inclusion of such a diet in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity is emblematic. When the first proposal was submitted to the agency of the United Nations, in 2008, it was rejected. Among

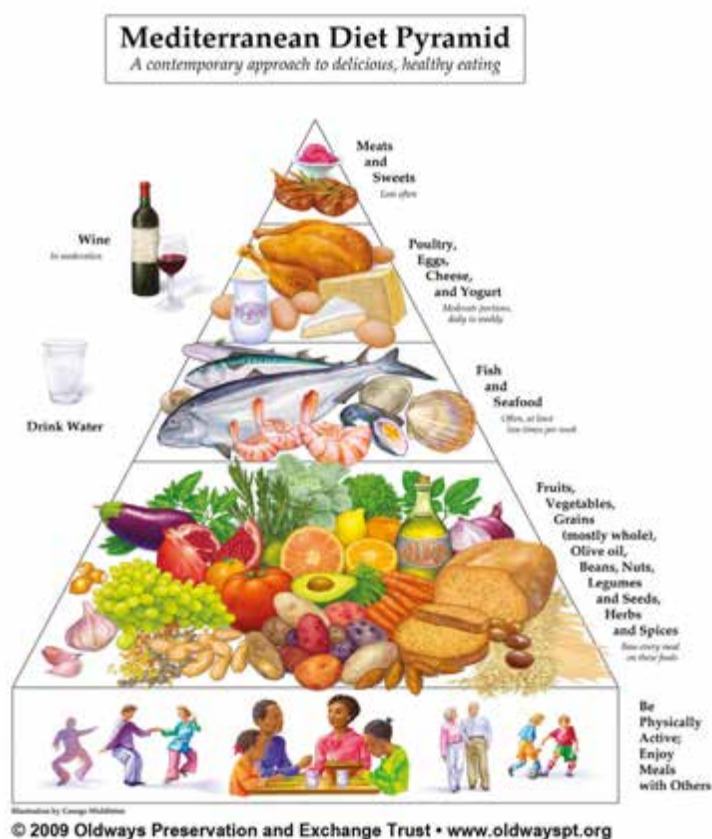


Figure 3. The 2009 Mediterranean Diet Pyramid (©Oldways Preservation & Exchange Trust; <https://oldwayspt.org/>).

the reasons for such a refusal, UNESCO reported that the definition of the Mediterranean diet provided in the request was limited to nutritional criteria and factors, almost disregarding anthropological and cultural aspects. This made it hardly applicable to the extensive and very varied context (i.e. Spain, Italy, Greece and Morocco) to which the application made reference.

Only in 2010, after substantial redefinition, such a problem of “translatability” found a solution, and the Mediterranean diet was included in the List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, also coming to encompass Portugal, Croatia and Cyprus in 2013. What made its acceptance and extension possible was precisely the inclusion of sociocultural elements in its definition:

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

Such a definition, which evidently recalls Tylor’s description of culture, i.e. “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (1871: 1), does not merely refer to the peculiar climate and geographical conformation and so the foods characterising the Mediterranean area, but encompasses social interactions and cultural values which are inherent to food systems. This

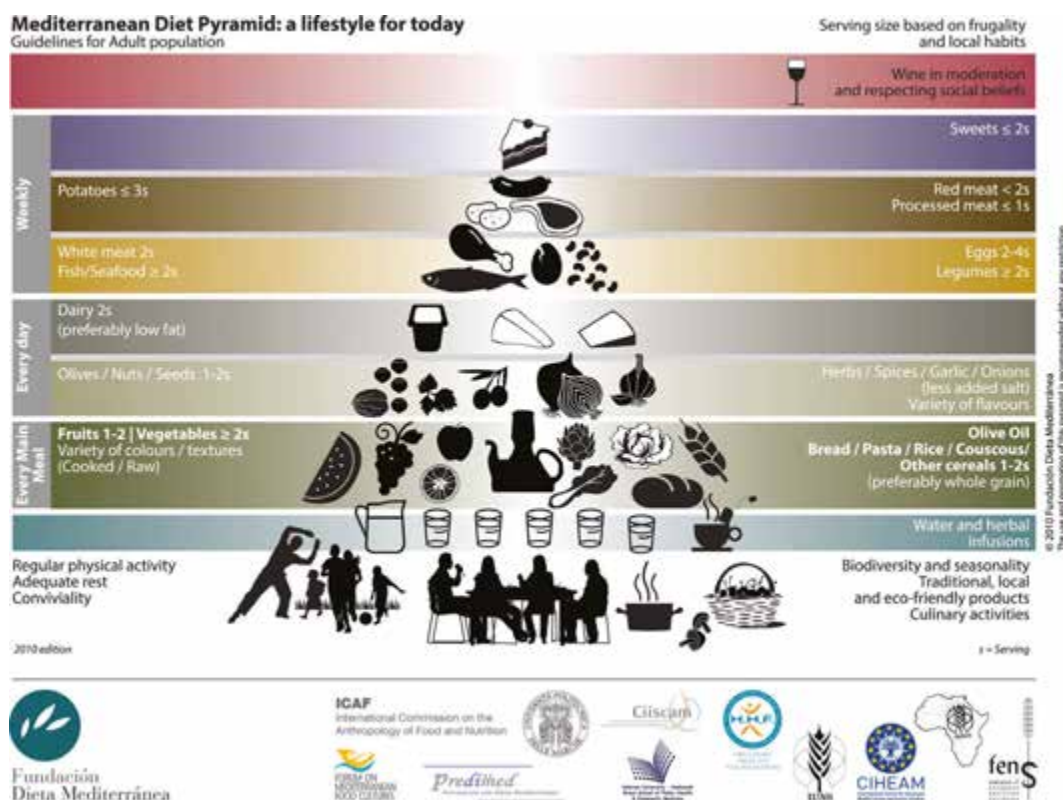


Figure 4. The 2010 Mediterranean Diet Pyramid (©Fundación Dieta Mediterránea; <https://dietamediterranea.com/nutricion-saludable-ejercicio-fisico/#pyramid>).

in turn stresses the need of emphasising such elements at the visual level, as Oldways did immediately after the initial rejection.

In addition to Oldways' models, a number of other Mediterranean diet pyramids exist. The pyramid designed by *Fundación Dieta Mediterránea* (Fig. 4) highlights another crucial element, that is, the role played by “traditional, local and organic food” in the definition of such a diet. This in turn emphasises two interesting aspects:

First of all, a sort of supposed “naturalness” thought as inherent to the Mediterranean diet; according to a well-spread contemporary trend, such a naturalness is generally conceived both as the praise of everything that opposes artificiality – as the adjective organic suggests – and as a return to an original and idyllic past, namely a “tradition” crystallised in “authentic” recipes, “typical” restaurants, etc. (Marrone 2011; Stano 2015; Sedda 2016).

Furthermore, a particular emphasis is put on locality, following another current trend in the food realm, as it was argued above.

But if, on the one hand, locality is emphasised, on the other hand, the Mediterranean diet has soon gone well beyond the borders of the Mediterranean area, becoming very popular abroad (cf. Moro 2014). What has this caused? No evident changes seem to have affected the material and structural dimension of food, since the Mediterranean diet can be mostly seen as the “non-diet” *par excellence* (Ventura Bordenca 2015): while common diets rely on regulating systems

requiring the subject to strictly follow a number of peremptory prescriptions and procedures, which are generally dictated by an external authoritative entity (cf. Grignaffini 2013; Stano 2014), the Mediterranean diet is a safe nutritional model *by definition*, which does not imply acting as an *engineer* (that is, following a system of strict regulations and prohibitions), but allows acting as a *bricoleur* (Lévi-Strauss 1962; Floch 1990), inventing new contingent solutions by reusing and readjusting the various tools (i.e. food products and practices) at one's disposal. So, if common diets involve programming and predictability, the Mediterranean way rather implies adjustments and unpredictability (cf. Landowski 2005). By contrast, more consistent changes can be noted on the sociocultural and symbolic level, as it will be described in the following sections, which will deal with two relevant case studies referred to the collective imaginary of the place where Key's intuition originated: Italy.

2.3. The 2013 commercial by Nicola Paparusso

In 2013 the Italian Ministry of Agricultural, Food and Forestry Policies decided to celebrate the confirmation of the inclusion of the Mediterranean diet in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity with a commercial¹ realised by Nicola Paparusso. Since the first monochrome frames, the isotopy of rural tradition is evident: the first sequence shows a cart pulled by a horse, which brings a young woman, her husband and their son back home through a sunny street in the countryside. The next sequence introduces a strong opposition by showing a military car (modernity vs. tradition) that crosses the same environment. When meeting the young boy in a field of olive trees, the two American soldiers who are driving the car ask him in a broken Italian where they can eat macaroni and wine ("Hey boy! Come on, come on... we mangiare maccheroni ...vino, vino"). The young boy answers with the stereotyped paraverbal sign expressing his inability to understand them, therefore symbolising a substantial incompatibility between the two semiospheres that these characters represent. This is when the animated rhythm of Glenn Miller's *In the Mood*, which opened the commercial, gives the way to Dean Martin's *Mambo Italiano*, whose first verses, song by a choir, recall the acoustics typical of folk songs and explicitly refer to the Italian context through their lyrics ("A boy went back to Napoli because he missed the scenery / The native dances and the charming songs"). In the meanwhile, very short sequences show a young lady dancing with an elder woman, then a plough tilling the soil, and finally the previously introduced young couple joyfully running through a field of spikes. Then the camera moves to some fruits and vegetables on a big table, and finally it is captured by the sensual dance of another young couple, whose harmonious movements re-interpret traditional food rites (such as setting the table or pressing the grapes by feet, as it was usual in Italian rural societies) with a ludic tone. Suddenly, the American soldier reappears on the screen, moving closer to the young lady dancing on the grapes and offering her an apple (a sin fruit?). She winks at him and takes the fruit, but finally pushes him away, just a second before the arrival of another young bare-chested boy (whose outfit reveals his rural identity), who takes her off the barrel where she was pressing the grapes and continues dancing with her.

The soundtrack then slightly changes to a more recent version of the previous song, *Mambo Italiano* by Flabby Feat. Carla Boni. At the same time, polychromy invades the scene and fading figures referring to different cultural backgrounds (such as Asia, France and the United States) appear on the screen. The final sequence takes place in a restaurant, where the child appearing in the opening of the commercial brings some "maccheroni" to the American soldier, who is now wearing a different outfit. The screen then turns black to host the white mes-

¹ Available at <http://www.nicolapaparusso.it/2016/09/22/spot-dieta-mediterranea/>.

sage: “DIETA MEDITERRANEA – AMBASCIATRICE DELLA SALUTE NEL MONDO” [THE MEDITERRANEAN DIET: AMBASSADOR OF HEALTH IN THE WORLD]. Finally, the emblem of Italy and the name of the Italian Ministry of Agricultural, Food and Forestry Policies appear on the screen, together with the Italian flag, thus legitimising the entire message.

“Here” and “there”, local and global, past and present, which are at first radically opposed (so as to originate incomprehension and incommunicability), find in the end their point of contact in the Mediterranean diet — which is presented not only as a set of healthy foods, but also and above all as a real “lifestyle”. In Flochian terms (Floch 1990), the resulting valorisation is a *uto-pian* one, since the basic values of local identity and global otherness are here opposed to each other. A *ludic-aesthetic* valorisation is also noticeable, and finds expression in the fusion of food rituals and the passionate dance of the young characters. Health, which is made explicit by the verbal language in the closing of the commercial, is also incarnated by the Italian characters’ toned and beautiful bodies. Such a “form” (Boutaud 2013), as opposed to the clumsiness characterising the American soldier (who is also muscular, but lacks the other characters’ “innate” lightness and easiness of movement), allows the Italian men and ladies to take part in the sensual and harmonious dance that embodies Italian identity. Definitely, health does not merely depend here on the nutritional value of food products, but rather on identity, nature, and tradition. In Ferraro’s terms (1998), the first part of the commercial is therefore marked by a *positional* regime, according to which participating in the harmonious dance requires belonging to the represented rural “here”, while no access is given to “others” coming from any “there” (as the young lady pushing away the American soldier, or the lack of communication between the soldiers and the child prove). Yet the end of the commercial somehow celebrates inclusion, partially recalling a *multiperspective* regime by means of specific figures (i.e. the ideograms, the Eiffel Tower and the Statue of Liberty) and plastic formants (i.e. polychromy).

2.4. RAI commercial for Expo 2015

A more critical perspective is presented in the commercial² released by Italy’s national public broadcasting company RAI on the occasion of Expo2015. The first scenes of the video show a natural environment that is similar to the one characterising the previously analysed example: the image of an insect moving on lettuce follows that of a plough tilling the soil, and finally gives the way to an aged hand cutting a bunch of grapes and another one picking up a tomato. At the same time a voice over says: “Nella Campania povera del dopoguerra, il medico americano Ancel Keys nota un fatto singolare: i contadini che fanno una vita dura e mangiano una grande quantità di frutta e ortaggi, oltre a pane, pasta, pesce e pochissima carne, hanno un cuore più sano dei ricchi borghesi napoletani dalla dieta molto più ricca” [In poor post-war Campania, the American doctor Ancel Keys noticed a curious fact: the farmers, who made a hard life and ate a lot of fruits and vegetables, as well as bread, pasta, fish and a very low quantity of meat, had a healthier heart than the rich Neapolitan bourgeois, whose diet was much more varied].

At this point an infographic is added in order to clarify this concept: while fruits and vegetables correspond to a pulsating heart that gets bigger and bigger, meat and sausages are associated with a broken heart. So the voice over continues: “La stessa cosa la osserva nel resto del nostro Sud e in Grecia. Nel 1975, con un libro che diventa subito un best seller, Keys annuncia al mondo le virtù della dieta mediterranea. Nel 2010 viene persino riconosciuta dalle Nazioni Unite come patrimonio immateriale dell’umanità” [The same fact characterised other southern Italian regions and Greece. In 1975 Keys announced to the world the great virtues of the Mediterranean

² Available at <http://www.expo.rai.it/non-sola-salute-vive-dieta-mediterranea-expo/>.

diet, through a book that immediately became a bestseller. In 2010 the Mediterranean diet was even recognised by the United Nations as part of the intangible heritage of humanity]. Then the camera moves from the rural background to a metropolitan setting, showing the United Nations headquarters and, finally, — a restaurant. Accordingly, the relaxed rhythm characterising the presentation of the places and subjects inhabiting the former suffers a sharp acceleration, leading to the frenetic movements of some waiters, who are in fact barely visible. The voice over then introduces the crucial issue animating the commercial: “La dieta mediterranea, insomma, si è globalizzata, ma la seguono soprattutto quei salutisti che si possono permettere vegetali freschi e pesce, piatti ben cucinati e ore di sport alla settimana” [The Mediterranean diet, definitely, has been globalised. But it is now mainly followed by health-conscious people who can afford fresh vegetables and fish, well cooked meals, and hours of sport a week].

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

Interestingly, in this case the emphasis is put primarily on the beneficial effects of the Mediterranean diet, which can rely on natural food products and traditional practices, or rather on physical activity, depending on the case. In rural past societies health was a characteristic natural to all people, therefore finding expression in the quiet smiling figures of elderly men and women. By contrast, in globalised present societies it necessarily involves playing sports and physical activity, whose lack leads to “deformation” (Boutaud 2013). This change reveals a practical valorisation of the Mediterranean diet, which is here associated with a causal regime: the “Mediterranean way” — with all the benefits deriving from it — is no longer enabled by geographical or cultural belonging (that is, a “being” that is natural to human beings), but rather by people’s will and actions (namely a “doing” characterising only a few individuals — the health-conscious ones — who play sports and do not succumb to junk foods). And such a condition is presented precisely as a direct consequence of “globalisation”.

3. Conclusion

As the above-analysed case studies effectively show, the case of the Mediterranean diet significantly recalls the oxymoronic tension between globality and locality characterising contemporary foodscapes: while the definition of such a dietary regime emphasises locality, by making reference to a specific and circumscribed geographic area, as the considered pyramids also highlight, the collective imaginary concerning it rather insists on its globalisation, and the effects deriving from it. Such effects, as it was highlighted above, have a highly dysphoric connotation,

since they are charged with having caused the contamination and in some cases even the disappearance of the Mediterranean diet. More precisely, oppositions such as tradition vs. modernity, or rural vs. metropolitan environments, are used to emphasise the shift of the Mediterranean diet from a utopian valorisation and a positional regime based on *being* (“Mediterranean”, which generally means “naturally healthy”) to a practical valorisation and a causal regime based on the dogmatic *doing* typical of common diets. Such a doing somehow challenges the pyramids analysed in the first paragraphs, since it seems to deny the complementarity of nutrition and physical activity, and even the conjunction between the material and cultural dimension of food, by strongly opposing them. To conclude, therefore, the case of the Mediterranean diet clearly shows that the globalisation of food is not just a matter of the movement of food stuffs between nations; nor is it simply the amalgamation or accommodation of different cuisines. On the contrary, it is a complex interplay of meanings and values continuously redefining our relation with food, and hence our relation to the world surrounding us and, last but not least, the way we conceive our very identity.

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