

POSSIBILITIES OF USING WILD PLANTS IN THE TRADITIONAL CULINARY CULTURE OF SLOVAKIA

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Throughout the existence of humans people were acquiring and evaluating findings about their life space and they were creating knowledge from their findings, which was important in their daily lives and also in their life perspective. One of the sources of this ecological knowledge is ethnographic records. These sources give us an opportunity to get to know often forgotten knowledge about the wild growing plant species, which people used to normally eat. It documents the empirical material, acquired during ground exploration in different regions in Slovakia, which represents these plants and processes of their use in traditional culinary culture of Slovakia. These plants are known as superfoods, which can be as the opposite of modified food, which has almost lost its biologically active substances and is characteristic for the life in globalized community nowadays.

Key words: traditional ecological knowledge, wild plants, traditional culinary culture, Slovakia

Human existence has never happened in emptiness. Its character has been influenced by interactions not only between the members of a certain community, but also between people and the natural environment. During their existence, people have obtained and evaluated knowledge about their environment and constructed a system of knowledge containing information about plants, animals, earth, stones and minerals, climate conditions, weather and astronomic phenomena. Such systems of knowledge have always been based on the classification of their immediate natural surroundings and each of these classifications has been, at least at a certain stage, a cultural construction which has reflected the community's perspective of the arrangement of the world around. There have been elements which have been important for the practical life of communities and their perspective of the world. Most traditional communities have therefore preserved their ecological knowledge not only in everyday practice, but also in their spiritual cultures in the form of magic or religion. Given the specific features of folk culture, most of such knowledge has not been recorded, but has been handed over orally from generation to generation (Sutton, Anderson, 2010:

102–104). By knowing and revealing such knowledge we can reconstruct the *imago mundi* of culture, know the mentality and preferences of people, and see how people used to create their opinions and practice with regard to the world around them.

One of the sources of knowledge about such plants is ethnographic records made during field research in different regions of the world. Luckily, these sources can also be used in Slovakia, as this area was studied as part of the so-called “foraging economy”, which complemented farm production in the Slovak countryside until the mid-20th century. Foraging economy means the harvesting of everything offered to humans by nature: leaves, flowers, fruits, foliage, roots, plant tubers, honey made by wild bees, bird eggs, mushrooms – especially for nutrition and healing, but also for clothing, housing and the making of tools (Markuš, 1961: 190).

In the field of Slovakian ethnography, this area was for the first time professionally systemised in the monograph “Banícka dedina Žakarovce” (“Mining Village Žakarovce”, 1956) by M. Markuš¹. Markuš was mainly inspired by the works of German researcher R. Thurnwald (1931–1934) and Hungarian ethnographer B. Gunda (1948). Markuš intensively dealt with foraging economy also in his further research, particularly in Central Slovakia (Horehorenie region) where he collected materials for his PhD dissertation work. This research represents the most important source in Slovak ethnography on the picking and use of natural plants in human nutrition.

Markuš stated that the harvesting of plants assumed, although quite amateur, certain botanical, medical and pharmaceutical knowledge. Those who knew nature best among men were woodcutters, coalmen and shepherds who spent all their life outdoors. Among women, it was mainly poor widows who collected everything offered by the natural surroundings around villages. The collection of plants began in spring when the first plant leaves appeared, and ended in late autumn. People harvested plants for their own consumption, for trade or for sale (Markuš, 1961: 192–193).

This study presents the plant part of natural foods, such as leaves, plant tubers, seeds and fruits of the most common wild-growing plants from which meals were prepared in traditional Slovak cuisine. This information is based on the works by M. Markuš and other relevant sources. A botanical list of wild foods of Slovakia was compiled by Ľ. Ľuczaj (2012) using the above mentioned ethnographic sources. In this paper a more descriptive essay on wild food gathering in Slovakia is presented also using some sources not mentioned by Ľuczaj.

During spring, people collected the fine leaves of nettle (*Urtica dioica*). They prepared nettle soups or creamy sauces. The cut nettle leaves were boiled; the water was strained; they added cut potatoes to the leaves in a second pot of water. Once the potatoes were soft, the soup was thickened with roux. Thicker creamy sauces were prepared by boiling nettle leaves and by thickening the meal with a thicker flour roux or by adding sour milk. The sauce could also be seasoned with vinegar. Nettle leaves were added in soups instead of other green leaves. Nettle meals were widespread in Slovakia back in the 19th century – not only in rural, but also in urban areas. Nettle was added to the water used for the boiling of meat, or nettle water was added to the bread dough to improve the taste of bread. The sauce prepared from nettle is also mentioned in *Prvá kuchárska kniha v slovenskej reči* (*First Cook Book in Slovak Language*) published by J. Babilon in 1870. Nettle was a traditional part of ritual meals

1 But the very first pioneer of ethnobotanical research in the area of today's Slovakia was Jozef Ludovít Holuby in the end of the 19th century (Holuby, 1891, 1896, 1958).

made from eggs and smoked meat during Easter holiday. After World War II, rural women still used nettle as a preservation agent to keep meat fresh for longer (Lichard, 1871: 14–16; Markuš, 1961: 195–196; Stoličná, 2012: 136).

Within the Slovak folk environment, the terms “loboda” and “lebeda”² meant various species of plants from two similar genera *Atriplex* and *Chenopodium* (orache, good King Henry, lamb quarters). These were important plants during spring as they contained vitamin C as well as calcium, magnesium, iron and other substances. In traditional cuisine, these plants were prepared in a similar way as nettle. First of all, the leaves had to be cut into tiny pieces and boiled in salted water. If housewives wanted to eliminate the strong taste of the meal, they cooked the leaves in two or even three pots of fresh water, added some milk and thickened the meal with flour. A thicker meal could be seasoned with vinegar, sauerkraut brine or leaves from (*Glechoma hederacea*) plant; in this way, it resembled a sauce. Sometimes, orache leaves were dried and were used for preparing soups in winter, similar to sauerkraut soup. Orache meals were common during periods of famine. In the 18th and the 19th century, such meals were also prepared in urban cuisine as evidenced by materials from Banská Bystrica, Ružomberok and Košice. It was added to soups, sauces, meat and egg meals. In the folk environment, orache meals were prepared also during World War I (Markuš, 1961: 196–198, Stoličná, 2012: 242).

At the beginning of spring, people collected common sorrel (*Rumex acetosa*). It grew mainly on lands which were previously used for sheep grazing. Sorrel was popular among children who ate it raw. It was prepared by boiling the leaves in water to make a sauce, which was thickened by a milk and flour mixture or by sour milk. If sugar was available, the meal was sweetened to refine its taste. It was served with boiled or baked potatoes. Similar meals were also prepared from wood sorrel (*Oxalis acetosella*) or from the leaves of young dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*). Raw dandelion leaves were often consumed by woodcutters who ate them with bacon and bread. Coltsfoot (*Tussilago farfara*) was a popular plant in the folk environment. The young leaves of the plant are slightly sweet, and were therefore suitable for boiled meals and salads. They were used for the preparation of sour soups made of bacon roux and seasoned with vinegar. This meal was popular among poor families in Central Slovakia until the 1920s. Similar meals were prepared from the leaves of narrow leaf plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*), chicory (*Cichorium intybus*) or cress varieties (*Cardamine amara*; *Lepidium campestre*; *Nasturtium officinale*). People harvested narrow leaf plantain not only for cooking, but also for the treatment of injuries. In the 19th century, cress was also used in urban cuisine. Cress leaves were added to the meat gravy for better taste. Older sources suggest that people also collected hogweed leaves (*Heracleum sphondylium*), called “the salad of Slovaks” by Hungarians. Hogweed was consumed in a similar way to cabbage. Its fresh or dry leaves were placed in barrels and fermented. The mixture produced in this way was used for the preparation of soups, or it was consumed raw. The brine, with low alcohol content was drunk. All such leaves contain proteins and, in addition to various ferments, mainly vitamins C and A, as well as iron, calcium and other alkaline substances (Holuby, 1958: 159; 239; Markuš, 1961: 198–202; Stoličná, 2012: 36; 136).

During periods of crop failure, people collected the leaves of black mustard (*Brassica nigra*) and horseradish (*Armoracia rusticana*) for consumption. In the Slovak

2 These are dialectical variants of the same name used interchangeably for both genera.

countryside, this meal was known as “podlupky”. The leaves were cut into tiny pieces and were used to cook a sauce in a similar way to spinach. The taste was refined with milk and/or eggs or with flour. If there were enough horseradish leaves, poor people collected them and placed them into barrels and fermented them, just like cabbage (Podjavorinská, 1901: 358; Markuš, 1961: 199–200; Stoličná, 2012: 36).

Fresh salads seasoned with oil or fried smoked bacon, vinegar and salt were prepared from the leaves of wild-growing ramsons (*Allium ursinum*), nettle (*Urtica dioica*), dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*), common sorrel (*Rumex acetosa*), chicory (*Cichorium intybus*), or lesser celandine (*Ficaria verna*). Lamb’s lettuce (*Valerianella olitoria*) was a popular salad plant, and was mentioned in medieval cook book manuscripts. Common mallow (*Malva neglecta*) is also an old kitchen plant used for salads or as spice. Salads were also prepared from the leaves of field milk thistle (*Sonchus arvensis*). Green salads represented an important part of human nutrition mainly during the spring period, preventing fatigue and scurvy. These plants were sold at markets in smaller Slovak towns as late as the 1950s (Markuš, 1975: 743; Stoličná, 2001:168).

Folk cuisine often used the aromatic plant ground-ivy (*Glechoma hederacea*, *Glechoma hirsuta*). Because of its strong aroma, folk beliefs attributed to this plant a magic power which was supposed to repel evil from humans. In the past, this plant was harvested also for sale; people took it to urban markets or exported it from Slovakia to annual markets in Budapest. Women used to prepare sauces from this plant, which was eaten with potatoes, or the cut leaves were added to cooked barley. This plant was mostly used as a spice for soups, sauces or roux from flour and fat. Mint (*Mentha* spp.) was also used as a spice, and was added to pierogi fillings or poultry giblets (Holuby, 1958: 159, 175; Markuš, 1961: 206; Marec, 2009:157; Stoličná, 2012:136; 454).

Just like leaves and sprouts, people harvested plant roots and tubers. They were consumed raw, or were cooked or baked in embers. According to ethnographic records, the range of such plants was relatively broad. People used to consume wild-growing parsnips or carrots the tubers of bulbous chervil (*Chaerophyllum bulbosum*) with kohlrabi- or chestnut-like taste, tuberous pea (*Lathyrus tuberosus*), dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*), lesser celandine (*Ficaria verna*) or green-winged orchid (*Orchis morio*). During periods of famine, people also consumed the crispy roots of couch grass (*Elytrigia repens*). Sweet flag (*Acorus calamus*) grew on flooded meadows. People consumed its stalk which has a sweet end and resembles the taste of a nut salad. People also consumed stemless carline thistle (*Carlina acaulis*) in spite of its prickly leaves. The fleshy petal, once picked off, is crispy and tastes like kohlrabi. In the Spiš region, the digging and harvesting of plant roots was a special kind of job throughout the 18th and 19th century. The harvester- “Wurzelgräber” sold the roots at markets or to inn-keepers, pharmacists and oil-makers. These plants were gradually edged out from Slovak menus due to the growing consumption of potatoes and vegetables (Holuby, 1958:159; Markuš, 1961: 210–215; Markuš, 1975: 746; Marec: 2009, 156).

Traditional cuisine also used plant seeds. People collected wild caraway (*Carum Carvi*) from meadows and dried them in bundles. The seeds were threshed in autumn. Caraway was added to soups, bread dough and other meals, or was used to prepare a simple soup: it was fried in fat and boiled after adding water. Eggs and dumplings were also added sometimes. It was served, for example, to women after giving birth in order to have enough milk. People collected the hulls of spring vetch (*Vicia lathyroides*) in oat fields. The green hulls were salted and consumed raw; ripe hulls were threshed out and the seeds were used to prepare a mash. The seeds of wild-growing hemp

(*Cannabis*) were also harvested. Mature seeds were consumed or were crushed. Such seeds tasted like milk and were used to season boiled or baked flour dishes (Markuš, 1961:223–225; Stoličná, 2012:17; 408).

The fruits of trees and shrubs were also used as food. The fruits of the oak-tree – acorns – were fried, shelled and milled to produce flour. In addition to proteins, acorns also contain fat and starch. In Central Europe and Slovakia, acorns were consumed until the Middle Ages but people returned to them also later, during periods of famine when acorn flour was used to bake bread. For this purpose, acorns were dried and fried, and in order to get rid of their bitter taste, they were leached in lime water. Afterwards, they were milled to produce flour. This was the case, for example, during the Napoleonic wars. In 1817, special instructions were issued, giving advice to householders on how to properly process acorn flour. During World War I, the Austrian-Hungarian nutrition authority ordered the collection of acorns for the production of flour. Villages long kept the habit of adding acorn flour to grain flour, stating that such bread was always better than bread baked from pea flour, so common among small farmers in the Middle Ages and at the beginning of modern times. People also picked the fruits of beech – beech nuts, which were consumed fresh or were shelled, dried and scalded with hot water to eliminate their bitter taste. They were milled and added to grain flour during periods of food shortage to bake bread or simple pastry.

Shelled beech nuts contain 42–48% of fat, and were used to make oil. Beech-nut oil, if properly prepared, was used as table oil. According to sources, if it was cold-pressed from freshly shelled beech nuts, it was delicious, aromatic, transparent and durable, and was compared to olive oil. On the other hand, warm pressed oil from unshelled beech nuts was yellow and bitter. This old method of extracting oil was also used during World War I when it was prohibited to feed cattle with beech nuts because of oil production. Home-made production of oil and its use in traditional cuisine was preserved until the 20th century in rural areas, for example, in the Slovak-Moravian border region. It was used for frying, as fat for potatoes, and also for spreading on dry or roasted bread. Beech-nut oil was also used as a medicament. The sweet shelled beech nuts were eaten as a delicacy. The chronicle from Slovenská Ľupča from 1867 states that during periods of famine, women picked the flourishing aments, dried and milled them, added some flour and baked bread from them. Similar records can also be found in the Liptov and Horehronie regions. In Hont, children enjoyed black locust (*Robinia pseudoacacia*) flowers as a delicacy.

The harvest of juniper fruits (*Juniperus communis*) also had a long tradition in Slovakia. Juniper was used for the production of the spirit called “borovička” in the White Carpathian region. Juniper could also be used for jams, and sometimes it was consumed fresh. In the kitchen, it was used as spice. Men added juniper into their tobacco when smoking pipes (Úlehlová, 1945: 19–20; Markuš, 1961: 195; 218–219).

The water caltrop (*Trapa natans*) has been almost completely forgotten. It grew in lakes and ponds. The fruits of this plant, rich in starch and nitrogenous substances, were commonly called “Jesuit nuts” or “water chestnuts”. In Central Europe, it was described in Matthioli’s herbarium: “It is a red fruit, chestnut sized with three tips. The outer skin is hard, thin and black; inside, there is white flesh of almost chestnut taste. It is eaten mainly by poor people, but also peasants cook and dry them during shortages of grains, produce powder and bake bread, just like from other chestnuts.” The harvesting of water caltrop was common in southern Slovakia as late as the latter half of the 19th century (Matthioli, 1596 according to Úlehlová, 1945: 24; Maurizio, 1926: 89–91).

Traditional Slovak cuisine also used a wide range of wild-growing fruits. The meals prepared from them were typical mainly for the regional cuisine of the mountainous and sub-mountainous regions of Slovakia where cultivated fruit species were scarce.

Wild strawberries (*Fragaria vesca*) were always popular because of their unique aroma, but also because of their high vitamin C content. Strawberries were commonly consumed with bread, followed by sour or sweet milk, which represents an almost perfectly balanced combination of nutrients. Bilberries (*Vaccinium myrtillus*) were often processed in villages for preparing syrup, which was also used to heal stomach ailments. People also prepared bilberry jam, or dried the fruits and consumed them in the case of intestinal problems. Cowberries (*Vaccinium vitis-idaea*) grew in coniferous forests and on mountain sides. Since they are quite bitter, they were not consumed fresh, but were preserved with sugar water. In the Gemer region, cowberry layers were laid in a crock pot alternated with sugar, and were baked in a bread oven. Small cranberries (*Oxycoccus quadripetalus*) grew on peat and in swampy forests. The fruits were harvested after the first frost. Wild raspberries (*Rubus idaeus*) were also picked very often. In regions with an excess of wild raspberries, one could find fermented raspberry juice or jam in every household. Older sources suggest that aromatic raspberry and strawberry mashes with honey and wine used to be prepared in richer families. Jam was also produced from dwarf elder fruits (*Sambucus ebulus*). There was an excess of blackberries (*Rubus* subgenus *fruticosus*) in the Slovak Carpathian region. Blackberries were used to produce jam and wine. All these forest fruits, rich in vitamins C, A and calcium, complemented the menu during summer months. In autumn, after the first frost, people used to harvest other wild-growing fruits such as whitebeam fruits (*Sorbus spp.*), containing the special alcoholic sugar sorbitol. In Slovakia, these fruits were consumed raw, slightly frozen, or were used to produce spirits. In the Spiš region, whitebeam berries were served as a side dish with meat. In the 16th century, Slovak peasants harvested whitebeam berries for soldiers fighting against the Turks, and supplied them dried to castle chambers. Guelder-rose berries (*Viburnum opulus*) were laid in hay and were consumed when ripe (Úlehlová, 1945: 26–33; 37; Nováková, 2012: 55; Stoličná, 2012: 136; 430).

The wild nature also offered Cornelian cherries (*Cornus mas*) and barberries (*Berberis vulgaris*) which used to be abundant on dry hillsides. Barberries were later destroyed because the wheat leaf rust parasite developed on their shrubs, attacking cereals and endangering crops. These small red berries, growing bundled in small grapes, have almost disappeared from our wilderness. According to sources, barberry juice was used to heal scurvy. Matthioli suggested that Cornelian cherries and barberries could be fermented with honey to quench thirst and blazing heat during a cold fever, and were dried or preserved with salt for later periods. The economic encyclopaedia from the 18th century stated: “*The sour juice of barberries can be used instead of lemons, for example, to prepare English punch.*” Indeed, these fruits have a high content of citric acid and malic acid, and vitamin C is also well-preserved in such an environment. Cornelian cherries were used to prepare jam, wine, juice and also vinegar. Wild gooseberries (*Ribes uva-crispa*) also belong to the category of forgotten wild fruits, growing mainly on limestone. In Slovakia, it was used to make sweet-and-sour sauces with milk, usually served with meat in urban cuisine. Blackthorn fruits (*Prunus spinosa*) were even more sour and bitter, and are still common throughout Slovakia. Women consumed dried blackthorns while spinning flax to produce enough saliva. People made blackthorn wine or consumed the fruits boiled.

Blackthorns were harvested after the first frost when they became softer (Matthioli, 1596 according to Úlehlová, 1945: 39; Markuš, 1975: 746).

As for wild-growing fruits, mainly apples, pears and plums were harvested and preserved in hay or were dried. Slightly frozen dried wild apples were considered a delicacy. In the rural areas of eastern Slovakia, wild fruits were used to prepare refreshing drinks even after World War II. After the fermentation of dry crab apples, the drink was boiled and sweetened with sugar, and was consumed mainly in winter. When thickened with flour, this meal was eaten with boiled potatoes or potato pancake. At urban markets, it was possible to buy a sour drink from wild pears and apples called “plačanka” or “kvas”.

Dried pears were used to make soup with potatoes. There are records from the south of Central Slovakia according to which, during periods of poor crops, dried pears were milled for flour to make pastries. Dried and crushed pears were popular as crumble topping on pastries in western Slovakia. Meat was served with sauce from grated horseradish and dried plums and pears. Soft wild pears were used to prepare jam. The jams were preserved in earthenware, covered with lard to prevent the formation of mould. Boiled dried crab apples represented a traditional Christmas ritual meal, mainly in the mountainous regions of Slovakia. Vinegar was prepared by fermentation of fresh crab apples and used particularly during periods of fast, when people prepared mostly sour soups and sauces (Dillnbergerová, 1984: 271; Stoličná, 2001: 168; Stoličná, 2012: 37, 221, 282, 455).

Even today, rural people collect rose hips, the fruits of dog-rose (*Rosa canina*). Especially in mountainous regions, rose hips have always been appreciated for their high vitamin C content. Rosehips were used to produce wine; the fruits were also dried and used to make thick jam. Rosehip jam was good for preparing soup or a thicker sauce served with meat. Drinks with a vitamin C content were prepared from dried fruits. Hot drinks were also made from the flowers of linden (*Tilia* spp.), elderberries (*Sambucus nigra*), young wild strawberry, raspberry and blackberry leaves from the forest, and the flowers and leaves of chamomile (*Matricaria chamomilla*), common agrimony (*Agrimonia eupatoria*), lesser celandine (*Ficaria verna*) and other plants (Markuš, 1975: 746; Úlehlová, 1945: 34–42; Stoličná, 2012: 221).

This overview of the most important wild-growing plants consumed in the traditional cuisine of Slovak regions proves that these plants held a significant place in human nutrition in the recent past. In peasant communities, these meals were usually supplements to common meals, yet very important mainly during spring periods when food stocks in households were exhausted. Over time, under the impact of modernisation in agrarian culture accompanied by increased food production and the development of trade, which also secured food that people were not able to produce, people's dependence on nature became weaker. Unlike in Western Europe, Slovakia saw a rapid decline in this source of nutrition relatively late, in the latter half of the 20th century. This trend related to agricultural collectivisation and industrialisation, as was preferred by the socialist state politics. This resulted in a substantial change in the lifestyle of mainly rural people who gradually changed their eating habits. The willingness to consume wild-growing plants fell, and their use also changed. Some of these plants, originally used for the preparation of meals, are now used only for folk healing or as feed for cattle, and most of them have been forgotten.

Fortunately, we can witness in post-modern and, in particular, urban communities a new trend of “return to nature”. The term *superfoods* originated in the USA and refers

to a consciously healthy way of eating. It was introduced mainly by vegans and vegetarians seeking optimum food for their nutrition. Superfoods can be found everywhere in the world and have a long tradition in nutrition and healing in their countries of origin. The research on superfoods and their effects are just at the beginning, however, many studies already show today that their composition can become an effective weapon against cancer and many diseases, such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases or the Alzheimer disease. These natural products often have a higher content of vitamins, fibre, minerals, trace elements and other specific substances with a high biological value compared to cultured plants. Thanks to their valuable nutrients, they are an excellent supplement for our body and our immunity system. The human body can absorb and use them easily. This, however, only applies to completely natural foods which, in the ideal case, grow wild or are grown under organic conditions (Bingemer, 2015: 8–9).

Humans have been better adapted to digest food from their immediate surroundings, as a result of which it is probably more appropriate to consume local food. Experts appeal to people to respect the natural cycle, divide food according to warmer and colder months of the year, and consume specifically what is available in the given period in the region in which they live (Kindl, 2012: 13–20).

For people, such food can become a counterbalance to processed food which is largely deprived of biologically active substances and is typical of the current way of life in a globalised society. People have started to return to the set table of nature, to the useful habits of our predecessors – consuming plants which grow freely in the wild. The supporters of healthy nutrition pick, especially during spring, young leaves and shoots of plants which have very strong effects on the human body during this period and on increasing their metabolism, and use them as part of their detox diets. Scientists also search around the world for plant species which could expand the natural sources of food, return to the forgotten practice and habits, explore the composition of wild plants, once consumed by different ethnic communities (Lánská, Žilák, 2006: 6). More and more of them recognise that the agrarian sector and food with excess chemical substances, so typical of post-modern societies, have reached a state where people become seriously threatened by food, which is the essential prerequisite of life. These concerns have also resulted in a new trend of returning to traditional natural resources. The means for such returns is the cultural memory of people who, not so far in the past, regularly consumed what the nature around them offered.

The natural environment of Central Europe includes around 2,500 plant and animal species. More than a third of the plants are edible. For people who lived closely-tied to nature, their surroundings were like a large “supermarket” from which they could pick what they needed. They did not need to have money; they only had to have enough time and knowledge to be able to use these species which fed them and were beneficial for their health. If people knew their natural “chamber”, they could always find something to eat (Luczaj, 2004: 6–7).

People seek information about the use and effects of wild-growing plants – “superfoods” – to improve their nutrition and health. They have started to discover once again the huge potential of nature. And this potential is enormous! This fact is also confirmed by this study which explores the ethnographic records reflecting people’s memory about the use of edible plants from the wild in traditional Slovak cuisine. After all, these plants may still play an important role in human nutrition during periods of crisis in the production and supply system.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was prepared in the framework of VEGA projects 2/0126/14: Continuity and discontinuity in ethnological research with regard to non-tangible cultural heritage, and project of the Institute of Ethnology SAS: Natural food as an alternative to human nutrition.

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