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TRIPE SOUP AT THE SERVICE AREA: THOUGHTS ON AN INFRASTRUCTURE OF MEANINGFUL SOCIALITY*

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ABSTRACT
In this paper, I draw on ethnographic fieldwork (participant observation) carried out at a Bulgarian service area to argue that such spaces create a 'meaningful sociality' building on imagination and sensual experience, as well as on experiences of intersectional oppression or dominance. I draw on the history and adaptations of *shkembeto* (tripe soup) and my observations of its preparation and serving at one such service area. This soup, which is famous in Turkey and Bulgaria, offers some people disorienting sensory experiences that are associated with complex power relations, which makes the service area a site for reflection on discrimination and gender roles. The paper closes with reflections on the sociality of such places, which is ephemeral but meaningful both there and at home.

KEYWORDS: meaningful sociality • infrastructure • service area • tripe soup • ethnography

INTRODUCTION

I pulled out a dark green hose from under the dishwasher. Although cleaned regularly, it still felt both greasy and slightly sticky. Boyka, the chef that day, told me to turn on the water so she could top off an aluminium stockpot on the stove that was already full of tripe. I watched her carefully as it was noisy, and I did not want to miss her signal to turn off the water. After a couple minutes, I got the impression that she was signalling me to stop. Should I turn off the tap? I did, too early, and although I couldn't really hear I understood from the movement of her lips and hands that she wanted me to turn it on again. I did, and waited for the next signal since the pot held up to a hundred

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litres. After another 15 to 20 seconds, she turned away from the pot and aimed the jet of water into the drain in the middle of the kitchen floor: after all, the important thing was just to avoid flooding the gas cooker or overfilling the pot. All in all, the experience of cooking was not very romantic. The kitchen was cold and industrial, it was too noisy to talk or even sing, and the water came from a garden hose, not a wooden bucket. It was only when it got to the kitchen counter that the broth we had prepared turned into something that matched contemporary ideas of the legendary *shkembeto*.[1] In this paper, I show how the preparation and serving of *shkembeto* can be used to explore service areas as places and infrastructures of 'meaningful sociality'. By meaningful sociality, I mean flexible social relationships allowing for the exchange of formative experiences, ideas, and images. The expansion of the mobility function of central locations, and thus also that of the petrol station, from a purely functional to a social space is not entirely new. About 20 years ago, a strong opposition emerged among social scientists to the previous assumption that roads and their associated infrastructure lacked socially and culturally relevant moments (Augé 1995 [1992]; Merriman 2004; 2009). Eric Laurier (2004) points out that service areas can be understood as drivers' offices. Kurt Beck (2013: 426) argues that service areas are social places because they are "gateways to small towns" that "cater for the needs of transit travellers and vehicles". Building on concepts of provisioning and secure relationships, Beck promotes a social, yet function-driven understanding of the service area that is mainly limited by the duration of stops there. However, this understanding of service areas has itself recently undergone some changes. For example, Giulio Giovannoni (2016) describes those along Italian highways as meeting places and subcultural spaces, while Waldemar Kuligowski and Agata Stanisz concede that the habitual performances of drivers allow for a critical reflection on modernisation processes (Kuligowski and Stanisz 2015; Kuligowski 2019). Their contributions also pave the way for a more sense-oriented approach, which has been applied in the broad field of mobility studies but not in the context of petrol stations and service areas, 'meaningful sociality'.

As conceptualised by the Austrian anthropologist Gertrude Saxinger (2021), 'meaningful sociality' defines a rather loose, social relationship with new people joining in and others leaving. It includes radiating concerns and ideas, and imaginations that contribute not only to the formation of individuals but also to how they act and interact in different contexts. Building on 'sociality' (Ingold 2011 [2000]; Long and Moore 2012; 2013; Amit 2018 [2015]), Saxinger argues that for example long-distance commuters such as loggers and oil rig workers are informed by whatever they see, hear, and smell while moving along, stopping over at, and being on the road. This emphasis on sensory experiences proven particularly useful in rethinking the qualities of places more comprehensively (Feld and Basso 1996; West et al. 2006). Emphasising sensations linked to locally rooted experiences of power or, more explicitly, discrimination along the way, Saxinger (2021: 196) adds that a meaningful sociality "depends on the quality of basic social relations, interactions, and their structural processes". Including dreams, knowledge, and expectations of both positively connoted experiences and conditions of intersectional inequality, she highlights how attachments and senses of particular locations and places can differ (ibid.). However, given the author's focus on long-distance commuting by miners, loggers, and oil- and gas-field workers, it remains unclear whether service areas are meaningful to long-haul truckers in the same way, or whether we

should discuss them and their services in a fresh light as more-than-social and meaningful infrastructure. To fill this gap, I test the meaningfulness of such sites by focusing on the preparation and serving, the contested history, and the representation of tripe soup at a Bulgarian service area. While the analysis might not be able to cover all the aspects of a meaningful sociality, I expect the prominence and controversy surrounding *shkembeto*, which is famously considered an acquired taste, to make it an ideal catalyst for a better understanding of the role of the service area.

Throughout this article, I juxtapose visibilities and invisibilities. After introducing my methodology and field site, I address the respective (in)visibilities related to preparing and serving *shkembeto* at the service area. An ethnographic note about how kitchen staff handle the soup ingredients when out of sight of customers and about what could be called building trust through transparency then set the basis for understanding the creation of a shared social space. I continue by addressing how the preparation and consumption of *shkembeto* is linked to historically contested identities, notions of belonging, and discrimination. A basic recipe for *shkembeto* conveys what Tim Edensor and Emily Falconer (2015: 605) describe as the "richly immersive visual, tactile, auditory, taste-full and olfactory sensations" that foods evoke and introduces a discussion of the effects of modernisation regimes on the environments in which it is prepared and served. I then address the question of who orders *shkembeto* to elaborate on how imagined masculinities have been pushed to the outskirts of cities before using this partial suspension of invisibility to kick off a discussion on how the breakdowns and intersections at the fringes of infrastructure allow for theorising (Star 2002). Such breakdowns, however, will offer an opportunity to reflect on my preliminary thoughts and pave the way for a closing discussion on how meaningful socialites form at service areas.

ETHNOGRAPHIC METHOD AND DATA COLLECTION

Between December 2019 and September 2021, I spent more than eight non-continuous months collecting data at and around the Sunny Oil petrol station just outside the northwestern Bulgarian provincial capital Vidin and near the Romanian and Serbian borders. This station was part of a service area along the E-79 European transit corridor that runs from Miskolc, Hungary to Thessaloniki, Greece, so it was mainly Bulgarian – but also Greek, Romanian, Turkish, and Iranian – truck drivers who passed through. During my stay there, which was intended to learn more about these peoples' relationship with the transport infrastructure, I learned about the importance of tripe soup. This was a kind of beacon: everyone in the region knew about it. But what interested me most was what was not mentioned. As Susan Leigh Star (1999; 2002) first pointed out in her methodological "tricks of the trade" that continue to inspire social science research on infrastructure (Hunsinger 2009; Bowker et al. 2010; Starosielski 2012; Furlong 2021), there are still great methodological opportunities in studying what is lacking in infrastructures that are otherwise characterised by clear and distinct functions. The (in)visibilities of *shkembeto* become a catalyst for understanding the spaces and processes of a service area.

To learn more about people's relationships with the long-distance highway, and particularly the service station, I participated in everyday life there. For several months, I researched and worked in first the kitchen, then the restaurant, and finally in the pet-

rol station shop, which mainly offered vehicle supplies and a limited selection of packaged snacks, drinks, and cigarettes and had intense and informative interactions with co-workers at each of these sub-units. At the same time, my relationship and interaction with customers was limited to hundreds of individual contacts with limited room for conversation. The service station itself was extensive, consisting of several buildings. In addition to the petrol pumps, the petrol station shop and the bathrooms, there was also a car park for truck drivers, a restaurant, and a small bar with gambling machines. At the service station, especially in the areas I was assigned to, my position was different from that of my colleagues as I had not been hired as a regular employee and received no pay. Some days I worked normal shifts; others I only 'worked' in the mornings and then spent the rest of the day circulating in the service area, talking to people, and taking notes. At the weekend, I went on side-trips, sometimes with colleagues from the petrol station, and sometimes alone. Occasionally, I met co-workers in town for coffee, but Covid-19 severely limited such interactions, especially outside work.

This article is based on the results of participant observation, including careful notes from a specific work shift that included four cooks and two waitresses, as well as on repeated interactions between customers and clients in the restaurant area of the service station. Although not all my colleagues and interlocutors at the petrol station requested anonymity, I have changed the names of every co-worker and interlocutor from the kitchen, the restaurant, and the petrol station shop to help protect those who explicitly wanted to remain anonymous. Some of my co-workers rightly remarked that the names of those working here at the service station were known anyway, and indirectly criticised the fact that I could not guarantee complete anonymity. Nevertheless, it was important to me to loosely frame individual statements and actions, especially if critical with regard to, for example, the completion of tasks or with reference to superior managers, in such a way that they could be attributed to positions but not to the people working on the shifts. Providing relative anonymity impeded broader visual documentation.

SHKEMBE 300G: CREATING SOCIALITY

When someone ordered *shkembeto*, the kitchen procedure started with the closest worker to the soup bowls taking one and placing 300 grams of veal tripe from a small plastic container in the refrigerator in it. The cooks used their hands to shred it into the bowl, usually without weighing it. However, if the initial chunks were particularly large, the scales were always an option and even experienced cooks seemed to need to calibrate their hands and eyes from time to time. When weighing a bowl of innards, my colleagues rarely waited for the needle to stop moving but knew whether they had estimated the amount correctly as soon as it first swung back. Then, the cook used a large ladle to fill the bowl to the brim with *Shkembe* broth. My colleagues repeatedly pressed me to add more broth from the small pot in the fridge next to the tripe once I had started preparing the dish myself. This broth was covered not by globs of fat but a continuous thick, red, oily layer. It was only after stirring with the ladle that its typical milky or creamy consistency appeared when the red greasy coating turned into fine dots that spread through the broth. The final step in preparing a serving was to microwave the

full soup bowl on medium, which normally took three to four minutes but twice that for two bowls at once. While the soup was warming up, a line cook put the number of slices of bread that had been ordered on the carefully greased grill – no one ever ordered *shkembeto* without bread. By the time the soup started to steam and big blobs of grease had formed again, the servers were setting the table with a spoon, garlic pickled in vinegar, black pepper, and salt. Then, they brought out and served the soup. As with all the other dishes, the preceding steps in preparing it had been hidden from the customer.

Since the kitchen was a separate room and accessible only from behind the bar or the fire stairs, customers never glimpsed it. The only clear indication of the food that connected all the various people came from the menu. This offered the dish's name and price: "*Shkembe* 300g; 6 Leva", with no description or list of ingredients. Everything was printed in both Bulgarian Cyrillic and Latin letters and the price, six leva, was about three euros. This menu was not the only place that mentioned *Shkembe* 300g: it was also printed on the ticket for the kitchen order (without the price) and on the bill. The name of the dish and the weight of its ingredients provided enough information to allow for a repetitive, yet complex interaction between the cooks and the servers, customers, and others not yet mentioned here, such as butchers and the service area bookkeepers.

The dish's ingredients and preparation remained hidden from outsiders, but the contextual knowledge that came with the ordering and service process was visible to the service staff. However, customers who ordered *shkembeto* retained their reasoning and imagination, which has long been underestimated as a potential key driver of sociality (Long and Moore 2012; 2013). Respecting the various invisibilities, relying on a name, an indication of weight and a price tag was meant to sideline the physical demarcation separating the kitchen from the restaurant space and maintain the imaginations of how traditional food is cooked. And while *shkembeto*'s narrative meant cooking it was likely to be imagined as a dirty and greasy business (Shkodrova 2018; 2021), the cleanliness, coordination and separation of labour in the cooking tended to suggest that it was 'prepared' rather than 'cooked'. There was a risk that customers would have the impression of the food being warmed up rather than being freshly cooked. The spatial and temporal reordering of food production typical of industrial societies (Edensor and Falconer 2015; Steadman et al. 2023) meant that cooking and meal preparation certainly complied with sanitary standards, but the greasy water hose and the large batches of broth matched neither ideas of how *shkembeto* should be prepared nor of traditional cooking at home. A distortion with neither separation nor the alienation of the customer from the kitchen, and thus without the food production and food processing, could thus be expected.

Although she does not discuss this in her work on 'meaningful sociality', Saxinger's (2016a; 2016b) earlier publications on long-distance commuters argue that an intact triad of the home, travel, and work site (collapsing into a single site for long-haul truck drivers) was key to their wellbeing in all social environments or places of sociality. Making the food production visible to the drivers and customers, let alone cooking it in an open kitchen or offering it on the kind of buffet line common at service areas along highways in Western Europe, would be likely to challenge customers' habitual expectations (Gyimóthy and Mykletun 2009; Võsu and Kannike 2011). Confronting the customers with how meals have been prepared away from 'home' – whether that is a conceptual description linked to their geographical location or to any regional or cultur-

alist geography – would have encouraged all parties involved to rethink their position and power within relationships and interactions (Ingold 2011 [2000]). Instead, the separate kitchen and hidden preparation left guests room to imagine how the meals were prepared. While some curious guests tried to glimpse the kitchen when they entered the restaurant or when they were paying their bill at the counter, one sales strategy for establishing confidence in the quality of the food was a calculated discrepancy between imagination and reality that supported shared understandings of what made a specific service. The precise indication of the weight of the ingredients played a significant role, not only at the service area where I was doing my ethnographic fieldwork but also at most eateries and service areas along the road by linking the people involved in making, serving, and consuming *shkembeto* at the service area to the characters these various people imagined. Together, they underlay what I understand as sociality in the flexible arrangements of mobility.

A *CHORBA* OR A *SUPA*: NOTIONS OF BELONGING AND DISCRIMINATORY IDENTITIES

All traditional restaurants along the Bulgarian section of E-79 offered *shkembeto* (I want to underline 'traditional' here as I have also come across fast food restaurants and small-scale cafeterias with no table service and only a limited choice of food). Such restaurants offer *shkembeto*, as well as other soups, various grilled meat platters, cold starters, and different kinds of salad. To prepare *shkembeto*, staff needed veal tripe and water, a little oil and milk, and paprika and black pepper to spice it up, although each kitchen followed its specific recipe. If the soup became too dense, you added some more water and reheated the stockpot: the longer the *shkembeto* cooked and the more often it was reheated, the better it finally tasted. At the service area where I worked, the cooking procedure typically lasted three to four hours and included several cycles of reheating. During each cycle, we usually used the cooking time to peel and grate garlic to soak, salted and pickle, in vinegar. Finally, everyone agreed that the soup had to be served piping hot, with a spoonful or two of garlic, a roasted hot pepper, and bread.

Like other foods that challenge people's usual expectations of appearance, taste, and smell (Steadman et al. 2023: 5), *shkembeto* is surrounded by narratives loaded with hyperbole and controversy which shape the notions of 'home' and of rootedness through imaginations along the way. The two things everyone seemed to agree on was that the Bulgarian dish was derived from the Turkish *İşkembe çorbası* and that you eat it to prevent a hangover after a night of drinking. Referring to the special olfactory, visual, and haptic experiences in the collective preparation, this concession, as well as the partial adoption of the term *chorba*, a conscious, culturally supported demarcation or discrimination needs to be assumed. Exploring the dichotomy between *supa* and *chorba*, which are both synonyms for 'soup', explicates a transition from a pre-modern Ottoman to a European sense of identity,[2] including assumed superiority (Perianova 2019). However, it also targets the first decades of the 21st century, as the transition from a socialist economy to a market-based system presented its own challenges, amongst others a flawed land reform that failed to adequately prepare new landowners for the competitive market. As a result, many newly independent small-scale farmers had

been forced to sell their land to larger agricultural enterprises that had the resources and expertise to thrive in the new economic environment and were able to access new markets (Bencheva 2005; Shopova 2023). Because of these unsuccessful reforms, which paralleled developments in other countries in Europe and around the world, fewer people saw farms and slaughterhouses. Immaculately clean warehouses for processing and packaging food, refrigerated cases in supermarkets, and ready-made meals evidenced how society was decoupling food production from consumption (Evans and Miele 2012; Canniford and Bradshaw 2016). It was these very changes that culminated in the recent dispute. While the new *supa* represented a gradual process of internationalisation of new production schemes and hygiene standards, the new *chorba* neither critically interrogated the loss of linkages and relationships as well as production and consumption patterns nor reinstated hands-on food production for Bulgarians. Instead, it may be understood as a response to growing anxiety over failed globalisation, including the anxiety of ultimately falling victim to the "McDonaldization" George Ritzer (1996) describes. Indeed, the Bulgarian food historian Albena Shkodorova (2019: 15) has revealed how food-related European consumer protection policies were and continue to be instrumentalised in nationalist protectionist discourses.

Back at the rest stop, I read out the orders. "Three meatballs. One tripe. One chicken soup. Another tripe. One portion of peppers and rice." Every now and then, truck drivers checked for *shkembeto* before taking a seat. A few did not even ask and just grabbed the pickled garlic, the most obvious indication that someone would order tripe soup. While it remained hard to say if truck drivers were only stopping at the service area for *shkembeto*, research into what motivates truck drivers to choose a particular rest stop for their rest suggests there is a decisive link between the choice of a service area and what drivers consider good quality food, which they equate with healthy food that they would accept at home (Whitfield Jacobson et al. 2007; Bschaden et al. 2019; Venkataramanan 2023). 'At home' is the important thing here, I assume because it adds another layer to the meaningful sociality of service areas. As the last service area before or first after crossing the border between Romania and Bulgaria, being at home and the idea of eating healthy and familiar food might influence drivers' decisions to stop there. Even though tripe soup is also available to the north (in Romania), south and east (in Greece, Turkey, and Iran), and the west (in Serbia), truckers on routes to or from Germany and elsewhere to the north or northwest appreciated this first or last opportunity to enjoy 'proper' *shkembeto*. They would do this before leaving or after returning home. Here at Sunny Oil, an imagination seemed to be triggered of *shkembeto* that was still prepared in a 'traditional' manner.

ROLE MODELS AND DISCRIMINATION

One Saturday at about one in the morning, three young men from neighbouring villages entered the restaurant. Maja, the waitress on duty that night welcomed them but informed them that they had a policy of not serving alcohol to local young men on weekend evenings, only to foreigners and experienced drivers who were done with driving for the day. The disappointed young men complained that such a rule was discriminatory. After a short argument, however, they decided to stay anyway and Maja

asked them to choose a table, sit down, and order from the menu. Meanwhile, she told me that drunk young men had repeatedly gotten into fights and scuffles in the car park of the service area. Only recently, her co-workers had had to call the police and ambulance when two drunks attacked each other with bottles. I was no stranger to this subject: in the past, other co-workers had told me about occasional violence in the car park, which also made them feel uncomfortable because it kept them from providing a peaceful overnight stay for paying guests. When the three young men were ready to order, each asked for a soft drink, *shkembeto*, and some bread. Within ten minutes, they had received their drinks and food. After another 20 they paid and left, but Maja had concluded that these young men were not the troublemakers they were used to dealing with at the weekend. She even said that she would have liked to offer the three boys beers, but rules were rules. It remained quiet for the rest of night: the strict no-alcohol policy had done its job.

The reason for the excesses on other weekends was certainly not *shkembeto*'s "lethal concoction of tripe, horseradish, vinegar and industrial doses of garlic" (Todorov 2006), but rather excessive drinking, drug abuse, and toxic masculinity manifested in boasting and bragging (for example about one's own tolerance for spicy food) (Istomin 2016). As a complex and multilayered construct affected by social, cultural, and historical factors, including the remote infrastructures in which it is enacted (Wetherell and Edley 1999; Kenway et al. 2006), *shkembeto* again provided a perfect starting point for observation. While numerous objects and services in the service area could be examined in terms of their masculinities, the historical association of excessive drinking culture with consumption of *shkembeto* (Shkodrova 2018; 2021) suggests that continuing to focus on that dish would prove fruitful. In the 19th and early 20th century, *shkembeto* was ubiquitous in Bulgaria. One found it along roads and in villages, as well as in city centres, where it was served in smoky dive bars and greasy spoon joints. Following modernist urban redevelopment under socialism, which replaced such establishments with canteens and barbecue restaurants in the recreational and commercial areas of the newly erected apartment blocks and at factories, highway service areas came to provide a new home for *shkembeto*. According to Shkodrova, the people involved in its production, processing, and consumption at the taverns and greasy spoons had been displaced from the city centres because stereotypical masculinity, including obscenity and displays of physical strength, were not the models the administration-oriented city centres aspired to. Thus, since the 1960s *shkembeto* has become above all linked with districts and areas associated with physical labour and street life. To this day, published guides to finding the best places for *shkembeto* do not give addresses but suggest looking near "places such as cemeteries, public toilets, petrol stations, ports, railway stations, police stations, or 'the Roma quarter'". (Shkodrova 2018: 3–4) Later, in addition to its association with disreputable behaviour, the lack of solidarity made *shkembeto* the perfect meal for intellectuals out of grace with the Communist Party as it was all they could now afford. Ironically, some usually bourgeois academics who distanced themselves from the self-proclaimed dictatorship of the proletariat claimed that they had only regained their artistic and academic freedom by resorting to tripe soup as a central food, a symbol of the idealised masculinity of the working class (Shkodrova 2018: 4).

The connection between alcohol and *shkembeto* was another aspect of the discourse on masculinity and place, there were deep-seated narratives about how to prepare

proper *shkembeto* that insisted that every step from the slaughterhouse to the table ideally be performed by and for men. Just like *rakija* (fruit brandy made from either grapes or plums), the distillation of which has remained a male domain into the 21st century, *shkembeto* is rarely seen being prepared or consumed by women. The reason for this separation can be found in the distribution of gender roles, as men are more generally considered responsible for the preparation of meat dishes and alcoholic drinks, but also in health concerns solidified in cultural taboos related to offal's association with death and decay (Shkodrova 2018; 2021). Nonetheless (as I saw at the service area), women took on a hefty share of the preparation of *shkembeto*. What had happened? When the socialist bloc collapsed, the job market for male industrial workers in Bulgaria also collapsed, and many unemployed men became unable to meet the expectations imposed by gendered role models. At the same time, women who had been fulfilling gendered social roles within their families since before the collapse of the Soviet bloc but had, like men, gained some independence from traditional gender roles because of their economic dependence on the socialist state, were now increasingly pushed into new, gendered, workplaces. One such environment was food service and processing. However, as elsewhere in Europe, links between workplace and gender turned out to translate into differences in material standards of living in Bulgaria (Ghodsee 2005: 41). Men started small construction businesses or drove trucks and taxis, occupations commonly associated with masculinity. Over the last few decades, these male-dominated sectors turned out to be economically more successful, which also had an impact on the personal and family level. After an era of equal access to goods under socialism, men working in the transport and logistics sector re-established the idea of the male breadwinner.

This restored masculinity, however, was not for everyone. Since women rather than men now cleaned the pre-processed tripe and assembled the soup in the kitchen of the service area, and (most relevantly to my argument) served it with or without alcohol, ideals of masculinity were subject to approval by the mainly female servers. The three young men saw a woman hindering them from enjoying their night out with alcoholic drinks and *shkembeto*. From Maja's perspective, however, the three youths did not qualify as men who were allowed to enjoy the combination of *shkembeto* and alcohol since they were locals who were neither travelling nor working in the logistics sector. Even if they had arrived by car and thus of legal age for both, driving and drinking alcohol,[3] they were not considered 'old enough' to be proper men. This may be a synonym for responsible, educated, or relaxed. From this point of view, especially since it was yet another, more mature, man who had imposed the rules on both my co-workers and the customers, the occasion in which three young men at the service area were allowed to eat *shkembeto* but not drink alcohol revealed differences in what ideal masculinity may look like and whether masculinity or lack of masculinity may be used to disqualify some people from receiving full treatment. The three young men had to leave without alcohol, and the service area was turned into something more than a place of social functionality that provided services vital to reproduction (Beck 2013; Beck et al. 2017). The multiple inequalities enacted through role models and a flexible ideal for masculinities resulting from the transition from a socialist to neoliberal society cannot be denied.

REPAIRING THE KITCHEN: MEANINGFUL AND INVISIBLE

Early in the morning, the manager of the service area called and ordered one of my co-workers to the basement warehouse to find empty jugs and buckets and bring them upstairs. Meanwhile, the cooks remaining in the kitchen had started pouring water into any containers available: bottles, pots, jerrycans. Another co-worker washed the vegetables and meat. Instead of cutting up the washed ingredients, she put them back into the fridge whole. Another co-worker at the sink rinsed all the items that had accumulated overnight, and Gabriela, who was the chef for today's shift, poured water into the stockpot standing on the cooker. It seemed as if no one would be there to turn off the tap when the stockpot was full. However, when Gabriela signalled my co-workers to stop the water, the one next to the tap immediately stopped what she was doing and bent down to turn off the tap. Because the tripe was still thawing on top of the dishwasher, she would add it to the broth later. I stood in the doorway watching and asking a few questions and eventually my colleagues explained what had happened. A crack had been discovered in the main water supply pipe the night before, so the pressure was low and there was only water intermittently: it had already been interrupted for several hours overnight. Since the plumber was not expected until around eight and needed to inspect it in person before estimating how long repairs would take, it was still unclear when full functionality would be restored.

Calm had returned to the scene by the time the office manager, the manager of the service station, and two plumbers entered the kitchen. Buckets of water covered the worktops and much of the floor. The two waitresses working that day followed the workers but stopped in the hallway outside the kitchen and lit cigarettes. The managers and the chef in charge that day met in the back part of the kitchen and discussed how to encourage customers to order the items that required the least water. They decided to have grilled meat as the daily special and put fried potatoes on the menu. *Shkembeto* would have to be prepared for the evening but would not be advertised during the day. Meanwhile, one of the plumbers had turned off the main water supply to the kitchen while the other walked from one fixture to the next, disconnected them, and drained the pipes. After the pipes were all empty, they decided to get the other rooms ready before starting the repair and the manager left. On his way out, however, he stopped and returned to the kitchen. Even though he had only just left, he scanned all the vessels and asked if they were sure that there was enough water. The repairs were to start in about 20 minutes and from the service area would have to operate with limited water for an unknown period. It was only early the next morning that the water supply was restored.

How does this plumbing system repair add to the understanding of a service area as a place for sociality? What does it add to frame this specific interaction as meaningful alongside the previously mentioned interactions? For the focus on 'the meaningful' and 'the sociality' at the service area, the concern about whether there would be enough *shkembeto* for the evening service provides another example of how invisibility is cultivated in order not to jeopardise certain ideas, in this case, that of the service station as a comprehensive service provider. Confronted with malfunction and repair, and thus operating at the edges of materiality and service capacity, it extrapolates the conditions of the socio-spatial materiality of infrastructures (Star 2002; Martínez and Laviolette

2020; Ramakrishnan et al. 2021). While I have highlighted the collapse and resurgence of culturalist and nationalist discourses on whether *shkembeto* is a *chorba* or a *supa* (Perianova 2019), as well as the composition and decomposition of idealised and dominant gender roles leading to the rebirth of masculinity based on physical strength (Ghodsee 2005; 2011), it is the material breakdown that sparked reflection on whether the service area would be able to continue to deliver acceptable service. Like steering people away from choosing dishes that required fresh water to prepare in order to prevent customers from noticing the trouble the service area was having at the moment, whether to prepare *shkembeto* for the evening that would need to be reheated several times was never open to discussion. In addition, since preparing *shkembeto* was already a messy affair (as discussed earlier), there was no assumption that preparing it with water that had been kept in buckets and pans all day would harm its quality and taste. This was certainly different from clear beef or chicken broth, which was also processed and served at the service area. Yet another meaningful dimension is how the restaurant tried to conceal the kitchen and the work that happened there. It was no longer the view of the kitchen from the outside, nor the dishes and names listed on the menu, but the view of this particular lunch menu that provided the most revealing impressions for the outsider. These attempts became meaningful by rooting them in the service area's very flexible sociality, which was segmented, located on the city's outskirts, and settled in a context of global fluidity and uncertainty.

CONCLUSION

Can the service area, a place and infrastructure that was first neglected and then reduced to a 'functionalist sociality', be elevated to an infrastructure providing space for a 'meaningful sociality'? Before addressing this question in my findings and analysis, I return to how I understand 'meaningful sociality' (Saxinger 2021) as characterising a dynamic social network in which individuals can come and go but their shared concerns, ideas, and imaginations shape personal identities and influence behaviours across diverse settings. Recalling social connections imbued in *shkembeto* at the service area, 'the meaningful' is found in preparing and serving, ordering, and ensuring availability, in taking on roles unavailable or only selectively available in city centre or domestic contexts. All these actions and the sensory experiences they provoke, contribute to the reflection of images of men and women, and put under scrutiny nationalist and culturalist ideas, as well as mechanisms of displacement.

Starting from what is visible or invisible (Star 1999; 2002), it has first become obvious that what defines the sociality of service areas are the dichotomies between the imagination of the place and its realities: its processes and products, and in our case its soup. Based on discrete yet repetitive processes and materialities, it has been possible to outline which imaginations and perceptions may be relevant to the interactions that takes place around *shkembeto* at the service area and when. In following the processes related to this soup, I outlined multiple, sense-based mechanisms that create opportunities for people to connect that are also based on trust and transparency or opacity, both of which are worthy of further consideration. The sociality I see in the service sector also includes actors other than service providers and customers; above all, it also rec-

ognises the pivotal role of new things and ideas, which have a formative effect not least on the first-mentioned, established groups of people. Linking people through products, services, and ideas, i.e. not just provoking imagination but also preparing and serving a soup, thus dissolves the differentiation between local service providers and customers (Beck 2013) and leads to people inhabiting the same place at the same time (Ingold 2011 [2000]).

Moving on to the meaningfulness inscribed in service areas, the invisibilities, as well as certain moments of visibility, contributed to questioning traditional knowledge and understandings without expecting immediate consequences. Corresponding examples of this could be found in the protectionist, nationalist interpretation of *shkembeto*, as well as in the resistance to the restrictive alcohol policy for young people. What could it potentially mean to be identified as young men, rather than simply men, or maybe even just people? Confirming Giovannoni's (2016) assumptions, one explanation is that service areas provide significant opportunities to test assumed and contested identities and self-understandings that, given the volatility of their composition, cannot be tested in other, more stable – and thus to the individual more cautious – contexts. The 'meaningful' lies, then, in reception and use, but above all in the impressions that people gain when populating the service area for a shorter or longer, singular, or repetitive period. In summary, the meaningful sociality of the service station consists of the effect of challenging experiences and debates, as well as conflicts in different constellations and the attempts to avoid them. It is in the debates or the avoidance of contestations that customers, as well as my co-workers who worked at the service station for the most diverse reasons and in the most diverse roles, and I, realised that the service area was more than a petrol station, a shop, or a restaurant with an adjoining car park. The space was social and contested, just like other places where people gather and are challenged not only by unusual tastes and smells, but also by unexpected conversations. I thus suggest that we start to think of service areas as places of 'meaningful sociality' (Saxinger 2021).

But what could that add to the most recent discussions that had already begun to address service stations as social places? Analytically, the categorisation is of little added value. However, methodologically (which is where I would like to focus) an understanding of the service station as a place of meaningful sociality supports efforts to perceive transport infrastructure sites as socially relevant and diverse places. It helps to identify new actors and in grasping the service offer of the service station in general and the inclusive power relations operating within it. Service stations and other comparable places demand to be examined not in terms of their function, but in terms of their use and effect.

Thus, whether it is eaten or rejected, *shkembeto* is a snapshot that leaves an impression that has become the topic of several scientific papers, as well as novels, and poems. The harsh, garlic scent on one's breath, like the memory of the smoky, boozy atmosphere, fades away only a few hours after leaving the restaurant, but the memory of roadside *shkembeto* and social life comes back in spurts. Thus, the soup acts as a trigger, constructing a dynamic relational matrix for the existence of an infrastructure of meaningful sociality. Events at the service area influenced people who were not there at the time, provoking images, understandings, and perceptions that only unleash their power many kilometres away, at other service areas, abroad or at home. The number of people, and amounts of material, knowledge and underlying infrastructure in their relationships suggested such an extension.

NOTES

1 In the context of my research, tripe soup is called *shkembe chorba* more often than *shkembeto*. To avoid contributing to the nationalist discourse that surrounds the first term, I prefer to use the second, which is used as a short name for it at the service area and literally means 'the tripe'.

2 While the terms are synonymous, they have had different connotations since the turn of the last century, 'Occidental' civilised and modern, and 'Oriental' backward and more archaic. Scholars in the fields of English language and globalisation studies confirm that using *supa* in place of the term *chorba* has Europeanised the food's status as it suggests a modernist superiority due to decoupling society from food production and consumption.

3 The legal age for the purchase and consumption of alcohol in Bulgaria is 18. In the presence of a parent or guardian and in private areas, young people may consume alcohol from the age of 16. The minimum age for obtaining a driving licence for passenger cars is set at 18, as is the age for obtaining a licence to purchase alcohol. While the minimum age for the purchase and consumption of alcohol is only loosely controlled, much stricter controls are applied to the acquisition of a driving licence.

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