

Eating habits of the *caboclos* from Chapecó-SC, Brazil

Lucia Chaise Borjes¹
Camila Lazarin²
Michele Carla Marcon²

¹ Universidade Comunitária da Região de Chapecó, Curso e Nutrição. Núcleo de Estudos e Pesquisas em Alimentação e Nutrição. Chapecó-SC, Brasil.

² Universidade Comunitária da Região de Chapecó, Curso e Nutrição. Chapecó-SC, Brasil. Chapecó-SC, Brasil.

Correspondence
Lucia Chaise Borjes
E-mail: lborjes@unochapeco.edu.br

Abstract

Eating habits concern culture and should be taken into account to assess the changes occurred in the process of industrialization. This study aimed to show the changes in eating habits of the *caboclo* from a region in the West of Santa Catarina state, Brazil, identifying the differences and similarities in the process and their cultural connection. It is an exploratory descriptive research with qualitative approach. Individual interviews, guided by an initial question about past and current eating habits were conducted. The analysis was performed by the method of descriptive analysis. It was observed that the *caboclos* do not consume all dishes consumed in childhood, but, when possible, they prepare meals that resemble them, emphasizing that the food produced and consumed at that time were of higher nutritional value and less likely to develop diseases. Thus, it can be concluded that the *caboclos* remain connected to their food roots.

Keywords: Eating Behavior. Food Habits. Social Group. Ethnic Groups. Qualitative Research.

Introduction

Man's history is intertwined with food history.¹ Thus, eating is one of the major human activities not only by obvious biological reasons but also by involving economic, social, scientific, political, psychological and cultural aspects, which are fundamental in the society's evolutionary dynamics.²

In earlier decades, the act of eating involved a whole symbology characterized by a particular group. Many communities have been studied by anthropologists and sociologists in the light of their culture and its susceptibility to changes or miscegenation of habits.³ According to Canesqui,⁴ "urban and rural populations are studied under the perspective of the community of which they are part, considered as a homogeneous and organic grouping of social life that might or might not be subjected to processes of change that would disintegrate it" (author's translation).

Anthropology studies the cultural dimensions as expressed in the community's patterns, beliefs, ideas and thoughts. According to Murrieta,⁵ "anthropological studies on eating habits are primarily focused on a one-level analysis of mental and social frameworks, representation systems and economic and environmental infrastructure" (author's translation).

Dietary choices made by some communities are the result of an interaction between social structure, the *habitus* and material conditions of daily practices of a community.⁶ Thus, Fischler (apud Figueroa, 2004)³ indicates that Anthropology associates food habits with the peoples' culture:

Anthropological studies that address eating habits (influenced by tastes and desires) show that what is eaten and how it is eaten are elements heavily incorporated into the construction of a people's cultural identity, constituting one of the strongest barriers of resistance to changes. Somehow, foods represent the most primitive link between nature and culture, making part of the root that connects a people, a community or a group to their land and their history "soul" (Fischler *apud* Figueroa, 2004, p. 105-106)³ (author's translation).

In the same direction, Alessi⁷ says that since the birth of the Brazilian society to present times, the acculturation process, which expresses the contact between different cultures, has always played a key role in setting out norms and values for eating behavior. Each region of the country comprises a mix of cultures. One can say that a kitchen built in a colonized country is described as the sum of many influences. However, the process is complex and results in confrontations, associations and exclusions.

If, in general, the populations that moved to the Americas brought together their habits, customs and needs, it is worth noting that various influences are not merely “contributions”, but part of a colonial process that confronted different peoples and, consequently, the most diverse food systems.⁸

The western region of Santa Catarina was part of a route that connected the state of Rio Grande do Sul to the state of São Paulo, whereby “drovers” travelled searching for livestock and beasts-of-burden used by farmers to transport coffee. Colonization brought to the west of Santa Catarina a different lifestyle, influenced by immigrants, usually Italians and Germans, coming from Rio Grande do Sul. Colonial companies were installed, which took over the most productive lands with the purpose of trading them. Indians and *caboclos* who lived in these lands but not had the legal means to remain there were forced to move out from the lands, migrating to less fertile regions, in hills and slopes.⁹

In this region, *caboclo* is considered “the second Brazilian. The first is Indian.” “He does not have an origin, like Italians and Germans. He is Brazilian. He is from Brazil.” When asked to explain what a *caboclo* is, this people do not refer to a genesis, but remember that “*caboclo* is a mixture of races; they are people of courage, people of good”. In this sense, they say: “I am proud of being a *caboclo*. I do not run after money. I work for a living.” Or, “the *caboclos*’ philosophy is their will to live, not owing to the whites”.¹⁰

In several groups, including *caboclos*, the eating patterns support the collective identity, the position in the hierarchy, in social organization. But some foods are also markers of individual identity.

Food is a basic need, a human right and, simultaneously, a cultural activity. Eating does not represent only the incorporation of important nutrients to the body; more than anything else it is a social act and, as in every relationship between people, it brings conviviality, differences and expresses the world of necessity, freedom or domination.¹¹

The attitudes towards food are usually learnt very early and well and, in general, are inculcated by affectively powerful adults, usually mothers, conferring to our behavior long-lasting feelings.¹² According to Marciel,¹³ memories of mothers’ cooking involve emotions, a display of affection in the dishes cooked and in the form of preparation.

In this context, the aim of this study is to learn about the eating habits of the *caboclos* from Chapecó-SC, the foods that their parents and grandparents usually ate and still remain in their daily dietary habits, identifying differences and similarities in this process and their cultural link. Also, to learn in more details the aspects that identify this culture, with the purpose of studying the permanence of the dietary habits in the *caboclo* culture.

Methodology

This study was conducted with *caboclos* living in the city of Chapecó, members of the *Associação Puxirão dos Caboclos* (a *caboclos* association) located in the Efapi neighborhood, which has about 500 members. Nearly 30% of these associates are over 55 years old. The sample comprised 20% of *caboclos* aged 55 years and over, of both sexes, in a total of 30 individuals. It is an exploratory, descriptive and qualitative survey.

The survey consisted of visits to the houses of each participant, with individual interviews, guided by an opening question: “*Which are the foods that you usually ate when you were a child and that you and your family continue to eat?*”

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee for Human Research of the *Universidade Comunitária da Região de Chapecó* under number 031/2010. All participants were informed about the general objective of the study, their confidentiality rights and non-obligation to answer the questions, since the interviews were recorded. Upon acceptance to participate, they signed the Free Informed Consent Term.

The recordings were transcribed as reported in the interviews, and the analysis of the data was made by the descriptive analysis method.

Analyzing the discourses would mean to give account of historical relationships, very concrete practices, which remain alive in the statements. It is as if in the core of each discourse, or in an earlier time, one could reach the truth, untouched, awakened then by the researcher.¹⁴

Results and Discussion

Studying the eating habits in a cultural context is like knowing the identity of a people or social group. Today's *caboclos* are not different from those in the colonization period. They work for subsistence. Although 50% of the interviewees live in the city, they are still linked to the habits with which they were raised. Among the *caboclos* who live in the rural region, we can see that they work to survive, and the respect to nature makes them different from most of the capitalist population.⁹

The *caboclos* reported that when they were children they usually had for lunch the following foods: rice, beans, cassava, homemade pasta, polenta, grits, potatoes and cornmeal. According to Maciel & Menasche,⁸ when you want to refer to something usual, common, familiar, ordinary, frequent, trivial, you say “it is rice-and-bean”. This metaphor appeared and gained meaning because most of the population in the country eats rice and beans on a daily basis.

At lunch, they drank sugarcane juice mixed with water. Pork was the most consumed meat as well as poultry and beef. Pork was also largely used in some foods, such as salami. From pig, it was also obtained lard, with which they fried the meat and put everything together in cans to preserve. The meat was taken from the lard and heated, ready to eat. They heated the piece of meat cut in half and ate it with cassava and beans. Beans were seasoned using lard ladles. To preserve, they also made jerkies from meat.

They also grilled meat in fire pits, as well as jerkies and other meats, this way: they placed the meat directly over the glowing coal. After cooking, they put the meat on a table, beat off the ashes, and it was ready to eat. They said that this cannot be done anymore because it is prohibited by the health inspection service. Some respondents said that in the weekends they ate fish that they themselves fished. Others said they ate meat, especially beef, when it was obtained in exchange for services.

The animals were raised loose in the yard. From cow, they took milk and made their own cheese. According to Lucas & Perin,⁹ the whole family helped in the care of the animals, which were raised loose and were for subsistence and consumption. In some cases, they used to hunt wild animals for food, which, according to the respondent, was not prohibited by law.

The breakfast of young children consisted of pureed rice mixed with beans broth. The adults usually ate beans and bread, cheese or fried eggs, fried dumplings, polenta or fried polenta, and pork. Corn bread was largely consumed. Tamale, farofa, cassava dumpling, sweet potato with milk and cassava were common foods. Fried eggs with bread and pork rinds, brown sugar and salami. They ground rice and wheat using a mortar or water mill and also made fried wheat dough to eat with milk. They also made bread (from wheat or corn), which was eaten with coffee and cow's milk. Soybean coffee (roasted soybeans, crushed in mortar and prepared like coffee) with brown sugar. They cut couscous to eat with milk, which was prepared with wet flour and cooked on the pan cover. Soft corn was grated in oil cans with which they prepared cakes and tamales. Bread was also cooked in the pan.

They also cooked sweet potato to eat with the meat that was left from the lunch eaten in the day before. Honey-sweetened water and corn bread, which, according to the respondent, provided "strength", i.e. vigor to the body to support the hard manual work. At that time, breakfast should provide "sustenance" to the body in order to endure the hard work in the fields.

In this concept of food, a very subjective system of classification appears, as "strong/weak" foods.¹⁵ The food that was appreciated was that "capable of providing sustenance to the body, strength and energy to work, foods that make us feel full, satisfied, well nourished".²

To socialize with neighbors, they would kill a pig, grill the meat with garlic and spices, and with music they celebrated. The most common salad was wild chicory. They also used to eat fruits, and the most cited was banana, which was also consumed with milk. They made sweet and savory tamales and homemade jams, with orange, pumpkin, pine nuts, sweet potato, and said that they were healthier and synonymous with longevity. To eat with bread, they usually used milk cream, from which they made butter.

It can be said that the group under study considers eating as an act that encompasses a whole preparation ritual.

Some respondents said that when they moved to the city they began to buy foods in supermarkets, which are not so natural as those they consumed in childhood, that is, they are aware of the damages that excessive industrialized foods cause to the body.

According to Moreira,¹ the influence of new dietary patterns, which consist of processed and ultra-processed foods, also reach those living in rural parts. As a result, the identity of regional foods tends to present a pattern of consumption that mixes farming foods and processed foods, both in the cities and in the countryside. This was observed in the present study, where the respondents reported that they still consumed dishes they used to eat but with some industrialized ingredients.

Industrialization is perceived as a process that makes people avoid processed foods because of the difficulty they have to understand the origin of the ingredients therein contained.²

The foods above described were part of the *caboclos*' everyday life. Today, in their opinion, they cannot cook cornmeal with chicken because this meat "dissolves" during preparation. They commented that rice, wheat and corn flours, meats, cassava and corn itself were healthier foods because they were natural, "from the colony". The use of processed ingredients may lead to the adoption or rejection of new habits and will also be the result from the practice and experience of social groups as well as what they mean to them.⁴

As discussed in the study by Renk & Salvoldi,¹⁰ the *caboclos* value homemade foods. In their comments, they remember that they were much tastier, mentioning the tapioca flour, which was made in water mill as well as pork rinds, bacon and lard, also used in the preparation of beans.

They also mentioned that water was not contaminated, that the older people used to say that running water could be used but not still water, because running water does not "hold any harm". They also commented that meat was healthier and today meat "is like water". They also said that they do not eat natural foods as they did in childhood, when even salad was natural, without pesticides. Today, when they do not have the money, they do not eat, because everything is bought and before everything was harvested from home orchards and plantations.

The respondents consider their health as a differential from present times, attributing it to natural foods that they cultivated in the past without the use of pesticides, which for them are true *caboclo* foods. According to Loiola,¹⁶ to eat in a healthy manner it is necessary to know the origin of the foods and choose them correctly.

They commented that foods were fresh, natural, and today everything is “chemical” (processed foods). Because of this there are many diseases caused by foods. As staple foods, they ate cornmeal with pork. The babies were fed with bottles of white hominy broth, and their children never needed doctors. Every day they ate sweet potato with milk. They added that the animals were also healthier because were fed with foods that they cultivated in the farm without the use of pesticides and food leftovers also produced locally.

The animals had a longer growing cycle, and hormones were not used – that is why the meat was healthier as well as the colonial lard. Oil was not used, only lard, because it provides the energy and strength that the body needs to perform hard work and prevent diseases. Many respondents said that oil is bad for health, that they do not feel safe in consuming it today, with especial emphasis on transgenic oil, also commenting that many people do not observe what they are buying in supermarkets, and many times they buy “poison”.

The lard has been considered evil because of its harm to health in terms of cardiovascular diseases, but this scientific knowledge has been reviewed today regarding the injustice made in warning against it. The *caboclos*' arguments are not based on scientific evidences but on the antecessors' longevity.

Study conducted by Pollan¹⁷ mentions that when the rate of heart diseases increased, North Americans stopped using animal fats and increased the consumption of vegetable oils, but continue to have heart attacks. However, information on the amounts of animal fats and oils used by this group are not available, but the physical activities of the *caboclos* at the time of the interview were much more intense, increasing their energy expenditure.

The majority of the respondents said that they were hardly affected by diseases and, when it occurred, they used teas they themselves prepared. They claimed that in the past children and adults were healthier than today and this is due to the change of dietary habits and poor preparation of foods. As one woman described during the interviews about teas:

To make tea for child hoarseness we made ash from good wood and then put one tip of a knife of ash into a cup and then added boiling water, then covered it a little, you know, until the dust came down. Then I strained the water and added a droplet of kerosene, depending on the child's age up to three droplets, and gave it to the child to drink, and in half hour, the child was clean from hoarseness (author's translation).

In Willems' studies,¹⁸ the *caboclo* was viewed by urban societies as a “sick”, “indolent”, “ignorant” person, and was despised, repudiated because they preferred medicinal teas and healers to doctors. The interviewees believe and claim that at that time many ailments were cured with herbal teas. In the *caboclo*'s culture, older women are highly regarded for the knowledge they have, which are passed on from generation to generation.¹⁰

The comparison between “older times” and “today” is used by the respondents to explain the relations of social exchanges (past and present) of people among themselves and with the nature of the region where the food is produced. “Older times” are idealized.⁴

Conclusion

The relation that the *caboclos* make between foods produced naturally and the foods consumed is noteworthy. It is worth taking into account that the time described by these individuals was a time when corn was grown without the use of pesticides or herbicides and processed without additives. Preparation and intake of these foods were claimed not to develop diseases. The *caboclos* realize, without the guidance of professional nutritionists, that the excessive consumption of industrialized products is directly associated with the development of diseases.

The changes in eating habits over the years have given room to industrialized, processed foods that are more successfully added to the communities' plates than those produced in an artisan manner and used by families in former times. Methods of work are easier but less concerned about keeping the food integrity. This situation has often been associated with food choices, which may be related to the social groups to which families belong, which end up adopting new eating habits, distancing them from the cultures in which they were raised.

It was observed that some dishes are still being made, but with some adaptations resulting from the change in lifestyle. It was clearly evidenced that people today no longer have the time to prepare meals, replacing them with foods that are easily and quickly cooked. Even so, people are aware of the damages that the excessive intake of industrialized products cause to the body. The respondents said that in older times when they were children, because they consumed only natural, fresh foods, health problems were fewer. Health problems, if occurred, were cured with medicinal teas.

The present study concluded that the way how foods are obtained and prepared has changed, but the same dishes are eaten, which seems to indicate a new meaning of the *caboclo* culture in western Santa Catarina.

References

1. Moreira SA. Alimentação e comensalidade: aspectos históricos e antropológicos. *Cienc. Cult.* 2010; 62(4):23-26.
2. Proença RPC. Alimentação e globalização: algumas reflexões. *Cienc. Cult.* 2010; 62(4):43-47.
3. Figueroa DF. Padrões alimentares: da teoria à prática - o caso do Brasil. *Revista Virtual de Humanidades* 2004; 4(9):104-114.
4. Canesqui AM. Antropologia e alimentação. *Rev. Saúde Públ.* 1988; 22(3):207-16.
5. Murrieta RSS. O dilema do papa-chibé: consumo alimentar, nutrição e práticas de intervenção na Ilha de Ituí, baixo Amazonas, Pará. *Rev. Antropol.* 1998; 41(1):97-159.
6. Barbosa L. Feijão com arroz e arroz com feijão: o Brasil no prato dos brasileiros. *Horizontes Antropológicos* 2007; 13(2):87-116.
7. Alessi NP. Conduta alimentar e sociedade. *Medicina* 2006; 39(3):327-32.
8. Maciel ME, Menasche R. Alimentação e cultura, identidade e cidadania. Você tem fome de quê? *Democracia Viva. Especial Segurança Alimentar* 2003; 16:3-7.
9. Lucas JF, Perin O. Manifesto caboclo. Disponível em: http://encipecom.metodista.br/mediawiki/images/1/1a/GT3-_09-_Manifesto_Caboclo-varios.pdf.
10. Renk A, Savoldi A. Comida e gênero num contexto de etnicização. *Fazendo Gênero 8 - Corpo, Violência e Poder*; 25-28 ago. 2008; Florianópolis, Santa Catarina.
11. Tonial SR. Desnutrição e obesidade: faces contraditórias na miséria e na abundância. Recife: IMIP; 2001. 189 p.
12. Mintz SW. Comida e antropologia: uma breve revisão. *RBCS* 2001; 16(47):31-42.
13. Marciel ME. Cultura e alimentação ou o que têm a ver os macaquinhos de Koshima com Brillat-Savarin? *Horizontes Antropológicos* 2001; 7(16):145-156.
14. Fischer RMB. Foucault e a análise do discurso em educação. *Cadernos de Pesquisa* 2001; (114):197-223.
15. Magalhães C. Comida de comer comida de pensar. *Cadernos de Debate.* 1995; 3:29-57.
16. Loiola R. O futuro da comida. *Revista Galileu* 2010. Disponível em: <http://revistagalileu.globo.com/Revista/Common/0,,EMI129201-17773,00-O+FUTURO+DA+COMIDA+TRECHO.html>

17. Pollan M. Em defesa da comida: um manifesto. Rio de Janeiro: Intrínseca; 2008.
18. Willems E. O problema rural brasileiro do ponto de vista antropológico. São Paulo: Secretaria de Agricultura, Indústria e Comércio do Estado; 1944.

Received: January 03, 2015

Reviewed: September 10, 2015

Accepted: February 04, 2016