



Material culture and food: The evolution of tableware and the consolidation of behaviors during the mealtime

Cultura material e alimentação: A evolução dos utensílios à mesa e a consolidação de comportamentos durante a refeição

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Abstract

Consuming food is not the simple satisfaction of a nutritional and biological need, but it is also a mean of cultural expression, as it is permeated by conventions that stipulate behaviour standards and convey messages. The sharing of a meal is also a source of pleasure, and it plays a significant role in building and in the consolidation of social relations. The context of food eating, it is important to consider that, not only the type of food consumed, the amount or the way it is prepared, but also the circumstances of consumption should be given an equal importance. The utensils, their disposal at the table, the way of handling, order of use, among other protocols reflect symbologies inherited over the centuries and contribute to shape the contact between diner and food. This article proposes that the contextual interaction with the utensils applied in food consumption gradually consolidates certain habits and collaborates in identity construction, as variations in material culture result in distinct ways of dealing with food. An approach from a European starting point is taken, for its vast influence both in Brazil and worldwide, since the period of maritime expansion and colonization, in which their habits and products were widespread. In addition to an analysis of the evolution and diversification of the apparatuses used during the meals, and the intrinsic development of etiquette rules, it follows a brief exposition of the influences of such manners on the Brazilian table.

Keywords: Alimentation. Etiquette. Material culture. Habit. Meal.

Resumo

A alimentação não é a simples satisfação de uma necessidade nutricional e biológica, representa um meio de expressão cultural permeado por convenções que transmitem mensagens e em que imperam o bom comportamento. O compartilhamento de refeições também é fonte de prazer, e possui papel significativo na construção e solidificação de relações sociais. No âmbito da alimentação, é importante considerar não somente o tipo de alimento consumido, a quantidade ou a maneira como é preparado, mas deve-se atribuir igual relevância às circunstâncias do consumo. Os objetos utilizados, sua disposição à mesa, a forma de manipulação, ordem de uso, entre outros protocolos, refletem simbologias herdadas ao longo dos séculos e moldam o contato do comensal com o alimento. O presente artigo propõe que o interagir contextual com os utensílios empregados na alimentação consolida progressivamente certos hábitos e colabora na construção identitária, na medida em que variações na cultura material resultam em formas distintas de se lidar com o alimento. Utiliza-se uma aproximação do ponto de partida europeu, por sua vasta influência no Brasil e no mundo em decorrência dos modos e produtos difundidos no período de expansão marítima e colonização. Além de uma análise da evolução e diversificação dos aparatos utilizados nas refeições, e o intrínseco desenvolvimento das regras de etiqueta, segue-se uma breve exposição das influências de tais customs na mesa do brasileiro.

Palavras-chave: Alimentação. Etiqueta. Cultura material. Hábito. Refeição.

Introduction

Eating, breathing, resting and reproducing are primary elements for mankind' survival and perpetuation on earth. However, eating cannot be merely regarded as a nutritional act; it is also a vehicle for cultural expression in the way it conveys and requires impulse control.

Humans transform eating, which is a biological need, into a cultural need, using the eating practice as a driver of social relationships.¹ This justifies a series of mechanisms of integration and social distinction related to the rules that permeate the meals, creating the willingness to master table manners in order to ensure their inclusion in the environment. In this regard, Carneiro² postulates that “what is eaten is as important as when, where, how and with whom one eats.”

According to Fourier apud Carneiro,³ eating is also a cognitive act, since it involves attention, perception, memory, reasoning, imagination, thinking and judgement. Eating is interculturally

defined by varied mindsets, rituals, dietary and religious restrictions, ethical values, transmission of inter- and intra-generation behaviors, etiquette rules, gestures, individual and collective psychologies, and many other factors.⁴

The ingredients used in foods preparation – since the rupture of the continental isolation by land and sea trade routes – no longer differentiate cultures, but how food is prepared and eaten, even at present times, it does. Therefore, changes and preservation of habits and food practices meet their references in the social dynamics itself: constantly receiving, customizing, and hybridizing influences.

The meanings of eating rituals also find a strong means of expression in material culture. The very way of using fork or spoon to convey food to the mouth shows the convention of a behavior upon another, such as bringing food into the mouth with the hands, with the aid of another kind of utensil, or sipping it directly from the container. Eco⁵ addresses the topic as follows:

Using a spoon to bring food to the mouth is still the performance of a function that utilizes an artifact that enables and promotes it: but saying that the artifact “promotes” the function indicates that it assumes a communication function, it communicates the function to be performed; at the same time, the fact that someone uses a spoon, in the eyes of the society that watches it, also makes it a communication, an adaptation to certain uses.

Thus, it is important to emphasize that table manners – how to use utensils, the posture, gestures, among others – is not an automatically adopted behavior, but the result of social constructions created to convey messages. Etiquette rules are established for events and objects with the purpose of standardizing postures in order to make convivence pleasant and civilized. In this regard, protocols use non-verbal languages – gestures, symbols and codes – that shape the interaction of diners with one another at the table and, especially, with the food served.

The evolution and complexification of meal utensils

The Portuguese word *talher* (cutlery in English) derives from French *tailhoir*, meaning ‘plate for cutting meat’.⁶ Today, the word refers collectively to utensils used at table for serving and eating food. The most common forms, fork, knife and spoon, followed distinct pathways throughout history and became popular, as they are used today, only during the 18th century. Understanding the historical and cultural context of these utensils is vitally important when one intends to investigate the continuance of certain habits at the dining table.

It is speculated that most foods were eaten with the hands or spoons until the late 15th century. In the 16th century, the spoon became very important throughout Europe because most food was served in small pieces or in the form of stews.⁷ Still according to the author, in the Middle Ages, in general, banquet hosts provided only a few spoons, which were shared by all diners.

The knife, as it is known today, probably dates back to the Bronze Age, from 3300 BC.⁸ For a long time, there was no distinction between knives used for hunting or carving and those used at the dining table. They had a pointed tip and were also used to pick up foods served on shared platters. Franco⁷ reports that back to the Middle Ages, only the nobles had special knives to cut their food, which were considered personal objects, being carried in travel kits, sometimes accompanied by spoons.

According to Jones,⁹ the presence of knives at the table posed a constant threat, especially because significant sources of hydration came from wine and beer, which favored accidents and violent behaviors. About the use of knives at the dining table, Norbert Elias,¹⁰ in his work *The Civilizing Process*, writes: “The knife, because of its very nature of social use, reflects changes in human personality, with its changeable compulsions and desires. It is the materialization of historical situations and structural society’s fidelities.”

The pointed tip of the knife lost significance with the increasing popularization of the fork during the 17th century. In 1669, king Louis XIV of France banned pointed knives at the table, which contributed to the improvement of this utensil for eating.¹¹ According to Visser,¹ the way of holding the knife changed as it became specially designed for use at the table: it evolved from two to one edge only, and the top of the knife blade was then used to support the forefinger, considered the most refined way of holding the tool.

It is important to consider that the individual use of knife and fork sets coincides with the evolution to flat plates, since they require a smooth and hard surface to be handled comfortably.¹² Individual plates began to emerge in the 17th century, usually made of porcelain, wood and metals, such as tin and silver.¹³ Shallow ceramic plates were fairly common in France in the late 17th century, but became consolidated as a replacement for the bowls used as a dining utensil only in the 19th century.¹

The earliest uses of fork date back to ancient Egypt and the *Qijia* culture, who existed until 1900 BC where today is part of China. Biblical book I of Samuel, 2:13, written around 640-540 BC, postulates that Jewish *kohen* assistants used forks in animal sacrifice rituals.¹⁴ But the Western European custom of using forks at the table was relatively late, beginning in Italy only in the early 11th century and becoming popular in other areas of Europe only in the 17th century. The first fork registered in Central Europe dates back to 1004 AC, when the Byzantine princess Maria

Argyropoulina married an Italian nobleman, bringing with her a case of golden forks.¹¹ Her refinement, viewed as excessive, was considered heretic, as reported by Wright apud Snodgrass:¹⁵

[...] such was the luxury of her habits [...] that she deigned not to touch her food with her fingers, but would command her eunuchs to cut it up into small pieces, which she would impale on a certain golden instrument with two prongs, and thus carry to her mouth.

The death of the princess, two years later, victim of an epidemic plague, was deemed a divine punishment. It is speculated that the problem with the use of fork is due to its similarity with devil's iconographic fork.¹⁵ Over time, it was accepted for occasional uses, except for foods with gravy, sticky or tacky like desserts, and especially for women.

Introduced in France in 1540 by Catherine de Médicis, the fork became a success because it differentiated the rich from the poor, who ate with the hands. At that time, the fork was a luxury good, and only noblemen owned a set of cutleries, which travelled with them in cases that could be hung over one shoulder or around the waist.¹⁴

The slow incorporation of forks to the tableware is also justified by the fact that they did not work well. Initially, they had only two prongs, which were not sufficient to hold the food.¹¹ In the early 18th century, the Neapolitan Revolution added the fourth tine to the fork to make it easier to twirl the spaghetti around the fork, giving to this utensil the shape as we know today.⁸

The fork became more popular as hygiene ideals changed, because they began to be considered benefits, such as keeping both hands and foods cleaned and not in contact with one another. Probably it was a response of protection against pests.¹⁶ At that time, for instance, it was still common for diners to spit on the hands or on the tablecloth, using it also to clean the cutlery that was shared.

In Europe, the use of cutlery was also often associated with significant changes in fashion trends – such as, for instance, the introduction of high neckline collars, exuberant ruffles, large wide and long sleeves, and French cuffs – which made eating with the hands quite uncomfortable and inconvenient.

Only in the 17th century, the dominant classes introduced the practice of eating with their own cutlery and individual plates, and fork began to be used together with knife, which continues to be the main utensil, handled with the right hand. Individualism than began to be marked by a set of utensils arranged at an absolutely regular distance from the table neighbors.¹³

In the late 17th century, cutlery cases with spoons, forks and knives appeared. Large scale production of cutlery in England after 1650 played a key role in improving the table manners.¹⁷ But only in the early 18th century, multiple cutlery sets began to be produced and, according to Goldsmith,¹⁴ silver cutlery began to become popular in Europe for those who could afford it.

According to Lima,¹³ in the 19th century, the movement towards more individualization and specialization in objects reaches the food area in all its expressions. Progressively, tableware becomes complete with all dishware, including soup bowls, gravy boat, fruit bowls, cream bowls, among others. Three different plate formats are consolidated: shallow, bottom and small dessert dishes, suited to the meet the prevailing three-course meal model. Cutlery also became more specialized, with smaller pieces designed for dessert, coffee and tea, and special models for cheese, fruit, oyster and fish. Even drinking glasses have their formats adjusted to different kinds of beverage served during the meal.

Finally, in the 29th century, the invention of stainless steel enabled the creation of cutlery that was easy to fabricate and maintain, becoming very popular in the colonies and settlements outside Europe.

Development of table protocols

Given the historical context of incorporation of cutlery and other utensils to the table, it is important to emphasize that “they were not invented as technical utensils with obvious purposes and clear usage instructions. Over the centuries, in social relations and direct usage, their functions have gradually been defined and their forms investigated and consolidated”.¹⁰ All hand movements – e.g. how to hold and handle cutlery – have gradually been standardized,¹⁰ and other conventions relating to their use were created. Therefore, it is understood that table behaviors have been coded along with the process of dissemination of auxiliary serving utensils.

Figueiredo presents an interesting definition of the concept of etiquette, which can be used in the scope of table protocols (apud Nakagawa¹⁸):

Etiquette deals with rules that govern social behavior. It is how one should behave according to the norms set by a society, aiming to be pleasant to others. Such rules are conveyed by gestures, conversation, attitudes, appearance, dressing properly, and its deepest meaning shown by the degree of courtesy and humanity.

Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* also contributes to the understanding of these rules: a set of ‘provisions’ that are not self-determined or predetermined by external environmental factors. They tend to operate on a subconscious level and are “inculcated by explicit experiences and teachings”, being produced and reproduced by social interactions.¹⁹

It is believed that many habits currently used at the dining table had their origin around the 5th century through the Jewish religion works – the *Talmud*.²⁰ During the Renaissance, Italy led

Europe in everything that involved courtesies and good manners. Although the priority of diffusion of good manners is in the family sphere, manuals of civility gained more publicity in 1440 with the invention of the press by German Johannes Gutenberg.²⁰ In the period between the 13th and 16th centuries, the most prominent literary works already emphasized what should be the most appropriate manners at the dining table, which played a key role in social relationships. The most important manuals for teaching table manners were:

- *Fifty Courtesies for the Table*, written in 1290 by Fra Bonvincio da Riva.
- *The Book of the Courtier*, 1507, written by Baldassare Castiglione,
- *Galateo*, 1558, by Giovanni della Casa.

According to Lima,¹³ “in the 16th century, when sketching out with the absolute monarchies a new aristocracy and a rigid social hierarchy, there was an increasing rigor in relation to conducts, which became more and more refined at the table”. This led to the development of protocols regarding dining table setting, order of seating and places, utensils and respective etiquettes, body language and conversation.

However, the most practical change was the individualization of the eating act. How to sit at the table and the introduction of the fork and personal plate revealed a change of perspective not only regarding food but also the growth of a social movement of isolation and individualization.¹⁶

Etiquette rules were also revolutionized by the meal courses introduced by the French. The various dishes were served according to the nature of the foods and combined with the appropriate beverage, in accordance with the successive physiological stages that are developed in the body during the meal.²¹ The influence of the French food culture was strongly extended as to the aesthetic requirements – in the dishes presentation and dishware – which ritualized the behavior at the mealtime, which was “an artistically designed complex that would serve as a means of belonging to a certain social group” ,²² and became the main reference in Europe and in other countries in the 18th century.

Considering the changes in the material culture in the 18th and 19th centuries, Lima¹³ argues that the specialization of dishware and silverware was added to the “progressive complexification of the diner ritual to increasingly strict protocols, to the increasingly intricate codification of gestures and body movements, attesting the rearrangement of the entire food subsystem.” At one point, it was not enough to provide and use a knife, fork and spoon instead of the hands, but it was also required the change of specialized dishes and cutlery between the meal courses. Another consequence of the changes of eating rituals in Europe is the creation of a special room for the meals in the mid-19th century, which was until then served in rooms with other functions.⁷

The creation of new house floor plans and the emergence of the dining room; the specialization of furniture and adequacy to the functions of displaying and keeping the tableware, and of serving and consuming foods; layout and arrangements; the changes in the serving habits and in the mealtime structure; table manners and equipment sophistication, all these changes in the material culture are part of the same process, being socially produced to convey messages.¹³

Even today, the table setting, i.e. the place of the utensils on the table, reflects symbologies inherited over the centuries. Knife blades facing the plate comes from the Middle Age. The intention of the host is to show that he is unarmed, in a sign of trust and peace to the guests.²³ Another aspect that reminds the times of violence at the table is the rest position of the cutlery. Not gesturing with the fork or knife at the hand and lowering the knife when not using it was associated with good manners.²⁴

The fact that the fork is hold with the left hand and the knife with the right hand comes from the times of King Louis XIV of France. The order remains to this day because all etiquette rules were designed for right-handed people due to discrimination against the left-handers.²³ Cutlery should always rest and left on the plate – not on the table - because the introduction of individual forks and napkins raised hygiene and cleanness standards at the mealtime, and any stain outside the food area or even on the tablecloth would no longer be admissible.

The use of utensils in the European style and perception of ‘etiquette’

Tableware cannot be understood only in terms of function – since there are a few things that can be done with them that cannot be done directly with the hands – but also in their socially-built meanings.¹² The way how these artifacts are handled has always been linked to a series of mechanisms of differentiation between cultures or between classes within a same culture.

The codes set out by ‘civility manuals’ between the 16th and 18th centuries aimed at social segregation and the assurance of sharing moments with those who were imbued of similar instructions in all life aspects.²⁵

Over time, cutlery became more and more strong as mediators between the ‘state of nature’ and the ‘state of culture’.¹³ The act of using only the hands to carry the food to the mouth began to be associated with sloppiness and bad manners. From this perspective, Lima¹³ pointed out that in the 18th century the civility manuals strongly recommended not to use the hands to eat – suggesting that only cannibals ate with the fingers.

According to Carneiro,² in a subtler context, food-related habits and customs also contributed to the silent revolution that constituted the ‘civilizing process’, where table manners played a crucial role when introducing new customs, such as the use of napkins, sousplat under the plate where food is placed and the use of cutlery. The civilizing process – which is nothing else but the diffusion of the European culture and values – occurred mainly through the colonization process and trade, both driven by the Industrial Revolution. In part, it was also disseminated by the European emigration, stimulated by religious, ethnic and territorial conflicts and resources and food shortages.

The Western products and table manners were spread by European communities that settled in diverse locations in Africa, Asia, America and Oceania, especially during the 19th century, which marked the summit of the bourgeois standards. This diffusion turned out to be a two-way process, a merge with local products and customs.³

In many Asian countries, the European cutlery was adopted by the State as a symbol of modernity. In the 20th century, under the Russian influence, the use of forks and spoons became usual in the Soviet countries of Central Asia. It can be seen, in these cases, that the proliferation of these utensils began in the urban centers and in the most important sources of power.²⁶ With regard to the symbolic factors that accompany the use of dishware and cutlery, the widespread popularization of these items contributed to the dissolution of some meanings and rituals, favoring customization and creation of others.

Today, the way that etiquette rules are perceived has a strong influence of the so-called culture industry. Its assimilation by the mass communication media resulted in the weakening of etiquette rules considered a practice exclusively associated with the upper layers of the population.²⁵

Mastering etiquette rules is today associated with the social intelligence of an individual, because it shows respect and consideration for others. Since then, the ideal of ‘useful’ etiquette has been developed, either in the personal or professional life, emphasizing the need for refinement focused on personal marketing. In this regard, mastering good manners, mainly at the dining table (since it is the place where relationships are created and strengthened), can be a differential, giving certain prominence or prestige to those who practice it.

Nakagawa¹⁸ states that this cultural mechanism nourishes the social imaginary on what are good and high manners and fosters the consumption of etiquette as a symbolic good, favoring the development of books, websites, TV shows, videos and the search for professionals specialized on these protocols.

The incorporation of european table manners in Brazil

To which degree have these influences extended – and still does – to Brazil? The milestone of intensification of the European style in Brazil was the arrival of the members of the Royal Family in 1808. Fearing Napoleon's invasion, Prince D. João moved out to Brazil with approximately fifteen thousand people.⁸ Together with this commission of noblemen, also came the most varied ingredients, habits and sophisticated food utensils to serve and please the monarchs. Braga²⁷ comments that:

The Royal Family's emigration to Rio de Janeiro and Brazil's opening to foreign trade favored the circulation and adaptation of new fashions and table manners and stimulated the adoption of new consumer habits, primarily visible in the capital of the country.

In the early 19th century, the French habits gained grounds in the routine and social events of the royal family and the aristocrats. In addition to Rio de Janeiro, other Brazilian cities were also influenced by the French cuisine and their table behavior patterns.²² This shift, however, did not occur uniformly in all regions.

In this period, table etiquette varied among the social groups. People living near the coast were closer to the European habits due to the most frequent contact with foreign people and imported goods. This, however, did not occur in the countryside, where the most common table utensils were still unknown.²⁷

In the 19th century, in Brazil, as in Europe, people ate meals at home, in inns, hotels, restaurants, cafés, eating houses, taverns, grocery stores, liquor stores, pubs and in the street.²⁷ Given this, Lima¹³ suggests that two eating models were concurrently adopted, in opposite domains:

[...] two clearly different behavior profiles emerged: one resulting from the import of the French-English model by the upper classes for 'external consumption', aiming at their own recognition and legitimation. The other, undoubtedly related to Portuguese habits, became the primary model for 'internal consumption', composing the daily life of the medium class.

In the end of the 19th century, the French-English dining structures were followed more closely in Portugal, which, as Brazil, was marked by food and eating hybridity. Likewise, the eating habits in Brazil followed cultural fashions in this period. "The private space became more and more privileged as the bourgeois culture expanded. The center of social relationships moved to the dining room, indicating a clear transition between the public and the private", says Strong (apud Soares and Corção²²).

The tableware consumption wave in the 18th and 19th centuries intensified the assimilation of the European habits at the table. Brazil received the huge impact of the expansion of the British manufacturing goods after the opening of the Brazilian ports.

The country was flooded by the exuberant glazed crockery, and in its eagerness to be identified with the French-English values, seeking for recognition, the society gradually absorbed their indissociable behaviors. Blending them in a peculiar way with their own traditions, strongly based on the settlers' habits, the country created hybrid expressions, marked by sharp contrasts.¹³

Given this scenario, it is clear the variety of styles and influences that took place in Brazil during and even after the colonization period, which certainly contributed to the formation of a hybrid identity at the table.

Today, it can be seen that eating plays a key role in Brazilians' social relationships and in leisure times. Da Matta (apud Santos⁴), claims that "food has the role of outlining identities and, depending on the meals context, they can be national, regional, family or personal". Regarding the primary European protocols imposed or assimilated during the colonization period, Matarazzo²⁸ argues that "in a young country, without millennial traditions, as is the case of Brazil, and in times like the present ones, when communication changes concepts in a very fast way, British rigor is not expected regarding etiquette and behavior".

Final considerations

The conjuncture of many eating rituals and meanings can be justified by its inherent need for human subsistence. It can be seen that since ancient times, food-related utensils formalize certain eating manners. Jeudy²⁹ argues that the cohesion of an object comes from the serial association of 'stable representations' that mark its history. Therefore, it is understood that the objects have appropriated the meanings as known today only by their contextual interaction,³⁰ that is, the qualities of an object are not intrinsic, but attributed according to a cultural repertory or experiences, which establish that a given signifier denotes a given signified.⁵ This process is guided by social behaviors that prioritize some of them in detriment of others.

Since its stabilization in the 19th century, handling dishware, cutlery, napkins and other utensils at the table remained almost unchanged in their key aspects, in their primary functions. According to Norbert Elias,¹⁰ "even with the emergence of technology in all sectors – including the kitchen – did not change the dining techniques and other forms of behavior".

However, both tableware and contemporary table manners are products of cultural miscegenation, revealing traces of exchanges and adaptations. Even though a central Europe approach has been adopted, it is important to consider that Europe also received several influences from other peoples until reaching a number of 'stable' habits and utensils, carried on by trade and colonization – which proceeded in a two-way process of influences. Later, Santos⁴ states that “post-modernization driven by globalization has posed new forms of food consumption, new eating customs, habits and patterns”, thus changing conventions historically guided by tradition and customs. So, it can be inferred that although apparently stable, the permanence of certain rituals, behaviors, apparatuses and even the environment – among other factors associated with the mealtime – are continuously subject to changes. The changes in the food and eating system may be the result of the assimilation or hybridization of external customs or by the reflection of internal social changes – such as, for example, changes in managing the time dedicated to eating.

Thus, material culture and table manners are indissociable aspects of the eating practice. The objects define not only the presentation and the way foods are consumed, but also the perceptions of the food served, defining interaction, formality, sacredness, and helping form figurative value judgements about civility and other cultural associations.

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