

Food as a link with others

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Food is a vehicle to anchor oneself in the collective and connect with others, whether by sharing food with others at the dinner table, through the social interactions involved in grocery shopping practices, when travelling and embracing food as a gateway to local cultures and related experiences.

Beyond the question of our relationship with ourselves (Chapter 1), food is a fundamentally collective matter that has connected humans for thousands of years. Social behaviour associated with food flourished with the domestication of fire some four hundred thousand years ago (de Lumley, 2006). The collective dimension of food emerged as social organization became more complex (Perlès, 1999), first in terms of the eating process and later through the development of activities such as agriculture and cooking. Food is thus a key means of connecting with others on a social, economic, identity and even spiritual level.

A social institution

Eating meals with others is a pivotal part of community life in many societies. This is referred to as ‘commensality’, a term derived from the Latin word *commensalis* (combining *cum*, meaning ‘with’, and *mensa*, meaning ‘table’ or ‘food’), which essentially denotes the act of ‘eating together’.

Sharing a meal involves being together in the same ‘commensal circle’ (Sobal, 2000). While this seemingly ordinary setting may appear to revolve around the performance of a series of movements all geared towards food intake, in reality it is far more complex. Mealtimes are structured by a set of codes that may define the daily time slots of meals and the order in which dishes are served, for instance, as well as the composition of the meals, the

way the food is prepared and eaten, and table manners (Poulain, 2002). These codes are naturally expressed differently depending on the socio-cultural context. For example, meals may have a so-called synchronic structure, with all dishes served at once, as in Vietnam or China, or a 'diachronic' structure, with dishes served one after the other, as in France since the introduction of 'Russian-style service' in the nineteenth century (previously, the grand service à la française was synchronic!) (Aron, 1976; Poulain, 2002). Depending on the occasion, it is also common to use cutlery, chopsticks or fingers to channel food into one's mouth.

Not everything is allowed or deemed appropriate at meals, and diners' behaviour (in terms of consumption and interaction with one another) is governed by what sociologists call 'social norms'. Jean-Pierre Poulain stresses (2006) the composite origin of these norms, describing them as a 'cluster of injunctions rooted in cultural, social and family traditions'. These norms are often underpinned by strong values such as sharing, social hierarchy, respect for elders, control of overindulgence and concern for hygiene, which are not to be violated or tensions could arise (Poulain, 2002). Meals are also a special time for adults to pass on these values and rules of social life to children – a process referred to as 'food socialization' (Larson et al., 2006). However, commensal meals do not bear the same importance in all societies and are gradually becoming less structured in some places, particularly as a result of the individualization of food practices (Fischler and Masson, 2008).

On a symbolic level, eating together also implies 'food communion' with others (Chombart de Lauwe, 1956). According to Claude Fischler (2015), 'the process of eating together is considered to bring people together – eating the same thing means producing the same flesh and blood, and symbolically constructing or reconstructing a common destiny'. Similarly, Émile Durkheim (1965) spoke of 'artificial kinship' achieved through food sharing. Symbolically, sharing the same flesh provides a sense of belonging while strengthening bonds within the community. The term 'companion' (one who shares our bread) reflects this connection. In Cameroon, a young child truly becomes part of the community only once they have eaten from the family food pot (Kouokam Magne, 2021). Another example concerns meals at funeral wakes, where the deceased person's living relatives come together and the grieving process begins (Biotti-Mache, 2019). Sharing the same food is also a sign of trust, providing a basis for forging alliances (marriages, trade agreements, peace agreements). Refusing to share food offered to one is also a symbolic denigration of a relationship and may be perceived as offensive (Fischler, 2015). In this regard, poor people dependent

on food aid are often unable to engage in food sharing, thereby deepening their social isolation (Abi Samra and Hachem, 1997; Caillavet et al., 2006).

In some cultures, 'eating well' necessarily involves the pleasure of sharing a meal with family or friends (Fischler and Masson, 2008). It is important to note, however, that the bonds formed during a collective meal can also be negative, and thus feared or even shunned (Corbeau and Poulain, 2002). A meal may in fact be a backdrop for power dynamics or conflicts that raise tensions (Wilk, 2010). For instance, drawing on fieldwork conducted in a French medicalized elderly care home, Laura Guérin (2018) demonstrated that some residents' behaviour – such as falling asleep at the table, shouting repeatedly or moving around the space instead of remaining seated – was not welcomed by others and often disrupted the collective eating routine. Finally, although conviviality may be associated with temporary excesses, such as during festive events or restaurant outings (Fournier and Poulain, 2008), other interpretations suggest that commensality helps regulate eating behaviours while preventing obesity and other eating disorders (Fischler, 2012). Commensality, by exposing eaters to the social dictates of togetherness, tends to reduce the scope of individualistic eating behaviours and related excesses (e.g. heavy snacking). Either way, close friends and relatives – often unknowingly – influence our eating habits: We do not always eat in the same way or eat the same things depending on our tablemates.

A socio-economic interaction

Food is a field of activity spanning both the domestic and economic spheres and involves several stages, including agricultural production, food processing, distribution, cooking and consumption. These stages underpin the functioning of food systems, defined by Louis Malassis (1994) as 'the way in which people organize themselves in space and time to acquire and consume their food'. These activities are rooted in interactions between actors, intertwining economic dynamics – relating to time or financial management – and social ones.

On a domestic level, the household is a preferred space for the organization of daily food activities. In many societies, women shoulder most of the practical responsibility for food and the associated mental load, from farming to cooking (Allen and Sachs, 2007). This division of food labour raises the issue of gender relations (Chapter 16). While these relations are partially shaped by forms of male domination (Counihan and Kaplan, 1998), food is also a means

of rebalancing them when it is embraced by women as a vehicle for creation, resistance (Avakian and Haber, 2005) or empowerment (Robson, 2006).

Besides cooking, grocery shopping is also a key socio-economic activity (Perrot, 2009). Going to a market or a shop is not just a matter of buying food; it is a way of meeting neighbours or, alternatively, of blending into and thus feeling part of an anonymous crowd. Some consumers consider that the supermarket is the ultimate place for social mixing, where one may meet a diverse range of people. Moreover, the market is a space where people can catch up on life in the neighbourhood and where everyone may simultaneously experience the same events. Strolling through shop aisles or gazing at market stalls is also a way to find out what is on offer, what is new and the prices of products. It is an opportunity for shoppers to fully immerse themselves in their food environment with all of their senses (Bricas, 2010).

Farmers selling directly to consumers at markets sustain the local economy and foster urban–rural relations, as well as interactions between locals and visitors (Bessière and Annes, 2018). Through haggling, buyers and sellers develop a bargaining relationship that serves economic interests while enhancing mutual understanding. Likewise, restaurants are both sites of economic activity and meeting places. A range of different social relations unfold in these spaces, such as neighbourly relations at the *warung makan* (street restaurants) of the *kampung* (slums) in Jakarta (Arciniegas, 2021), friendships at *garbadromes* (outlets selling *garba*, a highly popular cassava- and fish-based dish) in Abidjan (Egnankou, 2020), and even ties between ethnic groups at food courts in Malaysia (Tibère et al., 2019). Informality often seems to help strengthen the social ties associated with food provision.

Upstream of the economic sphere, seed producers, farmers, processors and distributors are all links in the same food chain, connected through a trade network. According to Ronan Le Velly (2002), these commercial dealings ‘take place in an intricate context of interpersonal relations, formal rules, tools and collective representations’. This perspective suggests that economic action is embedded within its social context (Granovetter, 1985). Economic activity can be regulated: actors trading comply with standards set by external regulatory bodies that settle disputes. Yet the existence of regulation does not preclude power asymmetries. Economic actors may also strive to build trust, particularly on small scales that foster tacit compliance with social norms. The collective dimension of trading may be instrumental in building this trust. Emmanuelle Cheyns (2004) has shown that consumers in Ouagadougou more readily trust women’s groups than individual women in the preparation of quality *soumbala*

(a fermented condiment made from West African locust beans). The groups convey social values, while their mode of functioning, including the self-monitoring of group members, minimizes the risks of opportunistic neglect of the *soubala* preparation procedures.

Yet market trade is also a realm of power relations, subjugation and violence. Montesquieu's claim that 'trade mollifies morals and leads to peace' is far from always being true. Long-distance trade has historically been developed through the use of violence, whether through land-grabbing for farming purposes, securing trade monopolies (e.g. the spice trade monopolies of the Dutch and English East India companies) or relying on slave labour to ensure the low-cost production of commodities such as cane sugar. Until the nineteenth century, economic powers and hegemonies were forged on the basis of countries' ability to harness energy and materials from (food and non-food) biomass, particularly from remote sources (Daviron, 2020). Unequal power relations are not specific to international trade; they are also apparent in local trade, where wholesalers, processors and supermarkets are accused of abusing their dominant positions to drive down farmers' prices (Chapter 7).

In response to these power asymmetries, fair trade and short supply chains have emerged as platforms for the integration of marginalized producers, rebuilding ties with peers, institutions in the agricultural sector and society at large (Chiffolleau, 2012). Social ties can thus help promote economic activity.

Food as a form of anchorage in the collective identity

Food, like language, is a powerful vehicle for mediation between people. Through its intake, food shapes individual identities (Chapter 1), yet at the same time it also transforms individuals in terms of their attachment to a collective cultural, social, religious or generational identity (Fischler, 1990): our food practices enable us to signal our belonging (or differences) within different collectives. Food is a means of symbolically linking ourselves to an imaginary 'Other' with whom we identify by seeking to share beliefs and practices – sometimes simply over the course of a meal.

Food is not just a random combination of commodities; it is a consistent and unified system of social practices, values and representations (Stano and Boutaud, 2015). Food is a mooring for cultural specificities and for strengthening links between individuals who share the same collective identity. So-called totem or ritual dishes are thus prime vectors of family memory (Calvo, 1982), while

also contributing to people's self-identification (Douglas, 1984). All the material elements of food cultures (food, recipes, tools etc.) as well as their immaterial elements (table manners, rituals, values etc.) constitute a shared heritage (Bessière et al., 2010). This heritage is both an object of transmission, perpetuating a portion of the collective identity, and a space for invention and recomposition (Bessière et al., 2010). This is exemplified by *bâbenda*, a traditional dish of the Mossi ethnic group in Burkina Faso, the recipe for which is in the process of being 'modernized' to satisfy city dwellers' tastes (Héron, 2021). Food heritages, which remain firmly rooted in a regional rural identity and may be attached to a place through the concept of *terroir*, benefit from diverse enrichments – intergenerational, intercultural and other enrichments – and are thus in constant flux. Hence 'tradition' is embedded in an unceasing process of legitimization of new activities, resulting from the improvisation of individual culinary practices that blend, pick from or deviate from family or regional practices (Warde, 1997).

Through cooking, eaters can therefore both reconnect with their origins and open up (or not) to otherness, that is, to people who eat differently. In societies with high cultural diversity, food enhances the sense of 'living together'. It encompasses both that which is 'in common' – through hybrid cuisines or those commonly regarded as 'national', such as *nasi lemak* in Malaysia (Dasgupta et al., 2021) – and differences (Tibère, 2013; Tibère et al., 2019). In cities, through culinary innovations, food provides a medium for building a specific identity that transcends city dwellers' rural regions of origin (Soula et al., 2021). *Ceebu jën* (a rice and fish dish) was invented in Senegalese cities in the nineteenth century using broken Asian rice, groundnut oil from Central America, vegetables introduced by the Portuguese and later the French, vegetables of African origin and fish caught off the coasts of these cities. It has become a dish emblematic of urban areas, and like Senegalese cuisine, it is currently spreading throughout the continent (Tibère and Leport, 2018). Likewise, *garba* was invented in Abidjan by Nigerian immigrants and has followed the same trend, becoming a cuisine embraced by a new urban culture (Sédia et al., 2021).

Eating with people who have different tastes and prohibitions may require some adjustments, but it helps build cultural bridges between groups (van den Berghe, 1984). Travelling eaters may also assume several positions with regard to foreign cuisine. They may be 'neophilic' and seek to sample the food of the location visited as a symbolic incorporation of part of the local identity. Yet they might also be 'neophobic' and opt to eat familiar foods that are reminiscent of their own food culture to feel safe and comfortable (Cohen and Avieli, 2004). In situations of migration or exile, food choices are central to fostering a sense

of belonging and integration. They thus constitute a resource for finding a place between one's home country and the host society (Étien and Tibère, 2013). Within the same country, food practices allow for navigating different collective identities. In South Africa, for instance, people make different food choices depending on whether they are at home or in the workplace. At work, in order to fit in, a person may deliberately refrain from following their own personal food-consumption habits and embrace those of the 'Other' (Zembe, 2017).

In France, the example of the 'new millionaires' (people who have recently become wealthy) discussed by Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot (2010) highlights the dynamics surrounding changes in social class: new codes must be acquired, particularly regarding food, for instance, in terms of the behaviour to adopt at a luxury restaurant. Hence, food is in many ways a tremendous vector of collective bonding but also a space of distinction reflecting the lines between groups, senses of belonging and assigned identities (Stano and Boutaud, 2015).

A relationship with spiritual entities

Diverse beliefs have permeated humanity since its origins, based on which humans envisage the existence of supernatural beings or invisible entities, gods, spirits or ancestors to whom they attribute properties (Boyer, 2001). Guided by these beliefs, people are driven to interact with these supernatural agents, gifted with intellect and willpower (Albert, 2009), through ritual acts that may involve offerings of food or meals. Without trying to be exhaustive or drawing general conclusions, we here offer a few examples to explore the ways in which food may foster ties between human beings, their deceased kin and deities.

The question of life after death is a major concern in all human societies. Funeral rites strive to facilitate the passage of the deceased from the world of the living to that of the dead – a process that may possibly include a food sequence. According to Mesopotamian popular belief between the second and first millennia BCE, when they passed away, the dead would begin a long journey to the Western edge of the world, to 'the place where the sun sets', by the Great Gate of the Netherworld. Provisions for the journey of the deceased, including water, beer, cereals (oatmeal, barley, bread) and honey, were placed in dishes near the tomb. When the deceased reached the Netherworld at the end of their journey, their only source of sustenance was the food offerings, without which they would be unable to rest, at the risk of becoming errant and a danger to the living (Da Silva, 1998). In Romania, the living eat to nourish the dead. They consume *colivă* – a cake prepared by the oldest

woman in the house of the one who has died – which symbolizes the body of the deceased (Vassas, 2001). Beyond the offerings, funeral meals are a celebration of the passage of the dead into the afterlife, while these feasts may also play an atoning and liberating role for the living ‘who remain’, as is the case in Japan (Giraud, 2015).

Yet food-based interactions with the deceased are not solely limited to the immediate post-death period. For the Mixe people of Mexico, food offerings in cemeteries are an everyday means of seeking permission from the dead (Pitrou, 2014), while ancestors may be worshipped through commensal activities, with their essence preserved in the form of food (Rowlands and Fuller, 2009). In West Africa, when opening a bottle of beer, even commercial beer, it is customary to pour the first drops on the ground as a libationary tribute to the memory of the ancestors. In Bali, the spirits of the dead are offered the foods and other items they loved during their lifetimes such that sweets, fruit and cigarettes are commonly seen on altars.

Food is also sometimes believed to be a vehicle for interaction with spirits or gods. Food rites – meals or offerings – may, for instance, serve to appease the gods (Rowlands and Fuller, 2009), to ask for the help of nature’s entities when a human undertaking is deemed uncertain (Pitrou, 2014) or to ward off evil spirits (Charlier-Zeineddine, 2014).

Conclusion

People meet and interact through food in many ways, whether through commensality, sociability in the marketplace, the discovery and transmission of food heritage and related cultural practices. A closer look reveals that these food-driven interactions shape human societies – days are organized according to mealtimes, the vibrancy of a place can be gauged by that of its food supply, solidarity often begins by helping a hungry person in need, and exceptional food makes events special. Finally, our modes of food production and consumption shape the ways in which we live in society. They bring us together but also prompt us to work together to invent new alternatives (Chapter 19). In studying a field as profoundly rooted in the living world as food, this social cooperation cannot be grasped without reflecting on our links, as humans, within the biosphere (Chapter 3).

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Eat Tomorrow? (2015), *Pleasures in Food* (2017), *Food Journeys* (2018), *Life Abounds in Food* (2019) and *Being Together* (2021).

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