

Mealtime

European Traditions of Etiquette and Midwestern Customs

Author: Pete Goché, 2007



Ritual is a series of actions constantly repeated. Repetitiveness serves the meaning being expressed, for if the pattern is at least generally constant we can concentrate on the message embodied in the performance. Repetition soothes us, apparently, in and by itself. Human beings rejoice in the action of patterning. Rituals are about lasting.²

– Margaret Visser

Introduction

Anthropology is the science that studies peoples past and present, their cultures, and their histories as groups. When anthropologists undertake a study of an unfamiliar culture, they typically write ethnography. Ethnographic studies look at the patterns of interpretation that members of a cultural group invoke as they go about their daily lives.

An ethnography is a highly descriptive overview of a group's knowledge, its beliefs, its social organization, how it reproduces itself, and the material world in which it exists.³ In short, ethnography is a process referred to by Clifford Geertz as "Writing Culture". The purpose of this ethnographic field report is not only to describe and explain, but also to unfold a view of the world in which cultural alternatives can be measured against one another and used as a guide for the production of space.

Our engagement of constructed environments within a particular material culture is affected by the physical items associated with defining its setting. In an effort to narrow this experiential field of study, this case study assesses the traditional Midwestern mealtime situation as informed by northern European traditions. The customary development of this social construct will be studied within the context of a farmstead, owned by IñRes and his

wife, one mile south of Prairie City, Iowa. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate the significance of the various customs related to the preparatory aspects of place setting and eating.

Site History

The farm operation is located on the east side of a gravel road identified as 109 S. The farmstead currently consists of a house, a machine shed, a granary, a livestock processing unit, a cattle barn and two grain bins. The house was constructed in the 1920's by a potato farmer and his wife (the local schoolteacher). The property, including 40 acres of farmland, was purchased in the early 1930's by IñRes' mother and father. Together, they farmed the land and established the balance of out buildings. IñRes' widowed father retired from the farm in 1974. Later that year, IñRes and his wife took over the land and started a family. IñRes and his wife continue to live on the farmstead and work 280 acres of ground four miles to the north. Their two daughters have since left the farm to pursue their own careers.

Life History

IñRes is an Iowa native specializing in the production of field corn and alfalfa as a matter of sustaining his herd of black angus cattle. While growing up on the farm, IñRes had been groomed to work the land by his father. His mother passed away when he was seventeen years old. He and his only sister didn't have what he deemed a happy childhood given the lack of "loving," and "caring."

Upon graduating from high school, IñRes decided to rent a couple hundred acres from his uncle and farmed this with his father's equipment. A couple years later, he established a partnership with a local pathologist. This arrangement was established in order to serve each individual's interests. The enterprise was comprised of 280 acres of land owned by the doctor and operated by IñRes. The two men split the annual shares. This arrangement has been in place for 40 years and continues.

IñRes, sitting in his chair in the living room, points to his family crest and says "my ancestors migrated here from Scotland because there was no opportunity for peace and land holdings while the Protestant/Catholic war persisted." In 1720, his ancestors migrated to

Milford, New Hampshire. The family was heavily involved in the revolution/civil wars. IñRes cites papers in his possession that document their signatures stating their willingness to pledge their life, liberty, property and sacred honor. He points once again at the crest and concludes, “I come from a fighting breed, my ancestors served the King of Scotland, and we are students of history.”

After a period of silence, I ask him to identify the major events of his life to date. Without hesitation, he pointed out his mother’s unexpected death. IñRes attributes her death to “the end of the table.” Pointing toward the dining room now, he says, “We didn’t have another family meal together until I met my wife. She brought my family and me back to the table. She kept it all wired together. Like your thesis, the table is hers!”

The Transition

IñCan was born and raised in the suburbs of New Jersey. As the daughter of Danish Lutheran parents, she attended Grand View College in Des Moines, Iowa. While studying liberal arts, IñCan met IñRes. In 1972 the two married and settled in a farmhouse across the road from the land that he had grown up on.

Over the next six years, IñCan developed a sincere interest in gardening. Having little knowledge relative to vegetable growth and processing, she sought out the company and wisdom of other women in the area. Through these relationships, she learned the various aspects of gardening such as earth preparation, planting, tending, harvesting and processing.

In 1975, IñCan gave birth to their first daughter. In 1978, while pregnant with their second daughter, the family farm operation was given over to her husband. Thus they moved onto the farmstead late in the summer of 1978. That winter they dismantled the house they had lived in across the road and stored its components in the supply shed on his childhood farmstead.

After the birth of their second daughter, IñCan began tending an area of earth on the north side of the house. Over the next couple of years this area became a lush garden measuring 30 by 50 feet. This garden would produce enough vegetables to last throughout the winter months. A variety of vegetables were grown in the bed including green beans, tomatoes, spinach, sweet corn, potatoes, onions, cucumbers, carrots and radishes.

IñCan has also developed a small herb garden just outside the door to the basement and kitchen. This very small garden is host to parsley, garlic, dill, and thyme. The yield from this parcel is harvested on an as-needed basis while preparing meals or during the food preservation process.

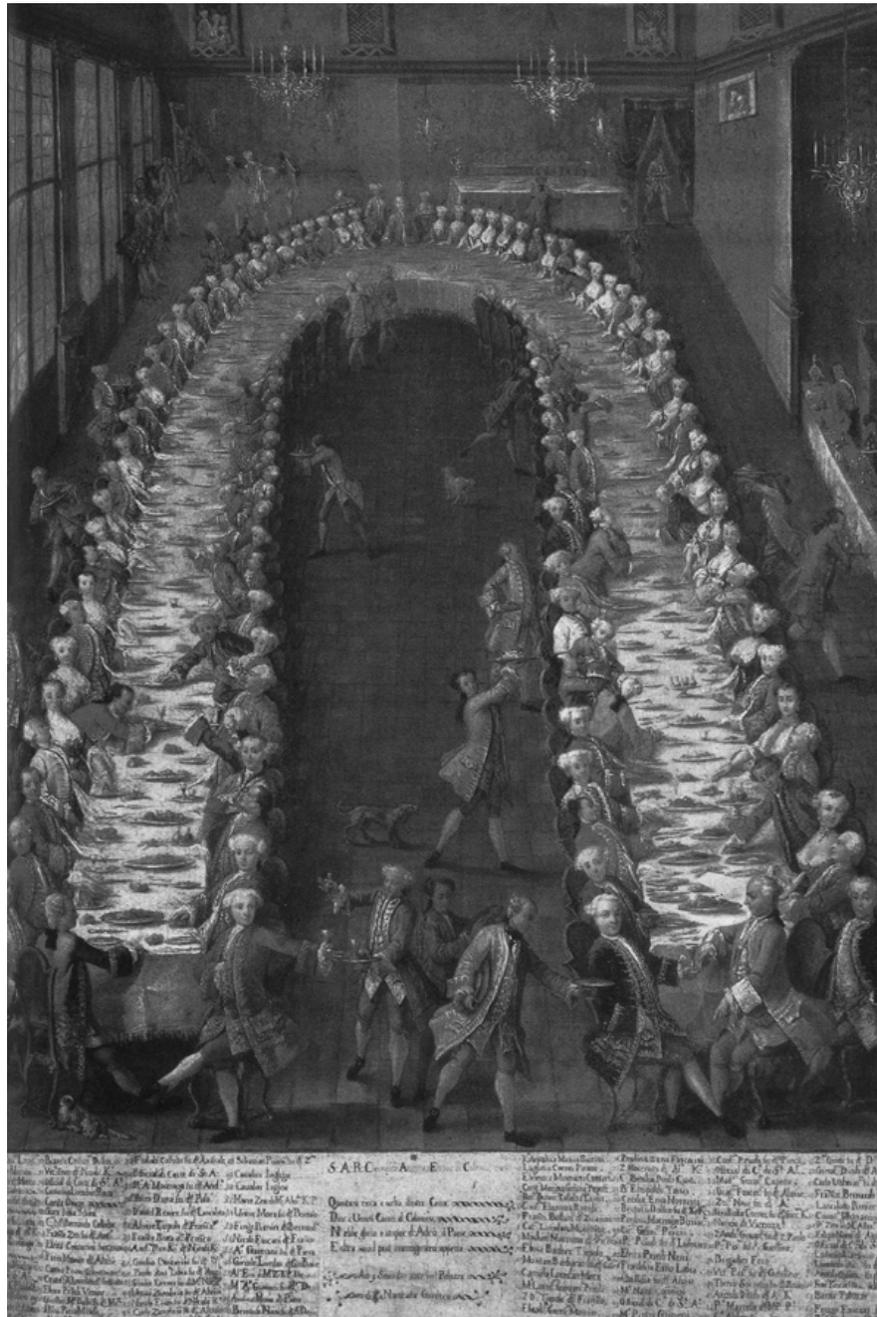


Figure 2. *The Banquet at Casa Nani*. Pietro Longhi. Portrays the scene of a banquet for Clemente Augusto, Elector Archbishop of Cologne in 1755.

At the table

Supper is typically served around 7:00 PM. It generally lasts anywhere from 30-45 minutes. This affair is held in the dining room of the house, just off the kitchen. The room measures 12 by 16 feet and houses a table, side board and china hutch. The china hutch sits against the north wall. The side board is centered on the east wall between the door to the kitchen and the door to the upstairs attic. The south wall is composed of a window that looks out onto the front yard and the front door which opens out onto the porch. At the center of this room is a 60 inch diameter table that has a 14 inch leaf inserted at its center running east/west. The table is surrounded by four matching wood chairs with woven wicker seats. Above, centered over the table, is a keyless socket and standard 60 watt A-lamp.

The table is made of dark stained oak and is supported by four hand carved legs. The top of the table is covered by two separate textiles. The bottom cloth is made of densely woven cotton with frayed edges. This cloth is rectangular and serves simply as padding. The top cloth is tailored cotton and has a floral texture embedded within its gold thread work. It is round and is made of various pieces of textile. There are two other top cloths that belong to this household which are stored for special occasions. These are both used equally in lieu of the other. One was given to IñCan for her birthday by one of her daughters. The other was handed down from IñCan's mother along with matching napkins. It is embroidered white on white linen. Typical cleaning methods employed for each of these cloths is to hand wash them in the sink and line dry them out back by the garden.

The use of table coverings (Fig. 2) called damask' has survived high-table format emblematic of the Middle Ages in Western Europe. In Paris, the top table was laid with several fine linen clothes carefully folded to produce neat creases. Layers of runners placed over the damask' could be removed as they became soiled. Linen cloths were valuable items and only the top table would have so many layers.⁴

IñCan prepares the table for supper by setting the salt and pepper shakers at the center along with a bowl of butter and loaf of bread on a cutting board. The bread is cut into one inch slices. On special occasions, these items are accompanied by a vase and flower.

In the medieval period, the first object to be set on the table after grace and the hand-washing was the salt cellar; these were often splendid examples of silversmithing and objects of great prestige. Families of this period would prize their inherited cellar. “Standing salts,” stout cylinders of silver with a shallow at the top for containing and presenting the precious salt, were the custom at formal British Banquets. Noble households on the Continent of Europe might possess a *nef* (Fig. 3); a silver table-top ship which contained a small amount of salt.⁵

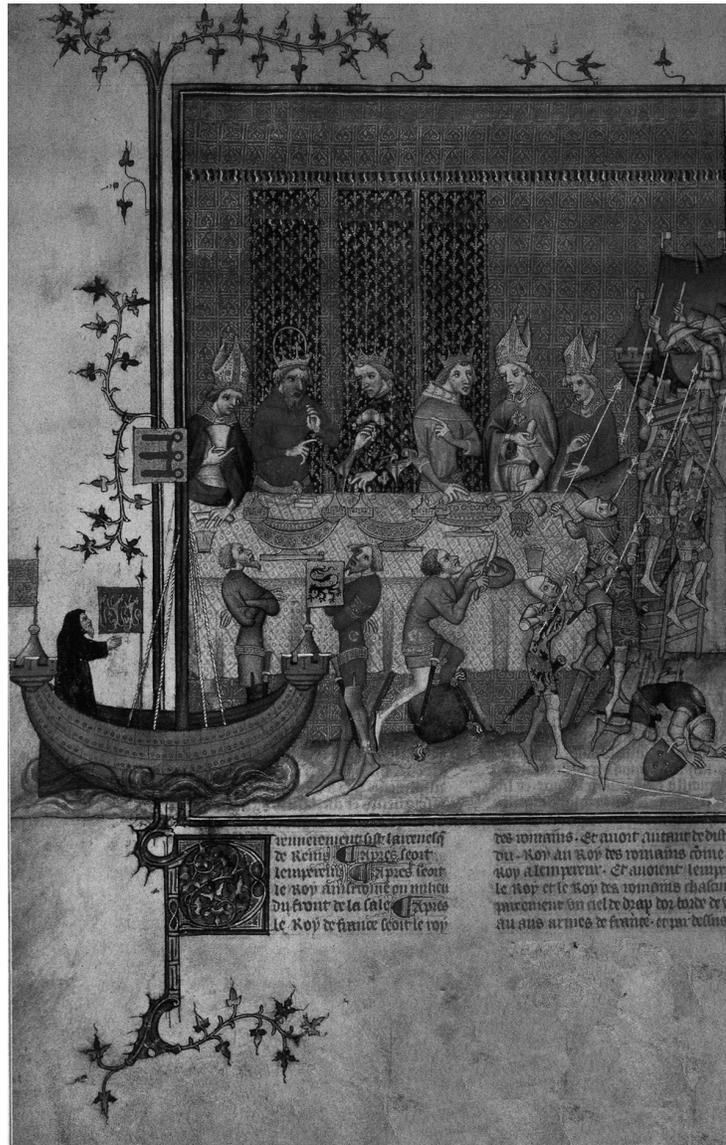


Figure 3. Charles V of France entertains Emperor Charles IV of Bohemia, *Twelfth Night*, 1378.

Following the salt, in medieval custom, would have been stacks of bread cut into square ‘trenchers’ placed at each setting. These trenchers served as disposable plates. Bread trenchers were used in Britain until the fifteenth century, when they were replaced, first by wood and pewter and then by china. Fine bread was cut for eating: the top table received rolls or the ‘upper crust.’⁶

IñCan’s place settings consisted of a gold colored ceramic plate, a fork, a butter knife, a cloth napkin and a glass. The customary placement of each item, as established by IñCan’s mother, is to have the fork setting to the left of the plate with the knife to the fork’s left. As well, the napkin is placed beside the knife. The glass is placed directly above the plate. If a spoon is to be used, it is placed on the right side of the plate.

Although the reasoning behind this arrangement is unknown, there is some correlation between IñCan’s place settings and that typically prescribed by various etiquette manuals, both North American and European. The cutlery was to be placed in a particular way with regard to the service plate (Fig. 4). In her 1987 publication on etiquette, Emily Post holds that the salad fork should be placed directly to the left, the meat fork is to be positioned to the left of the salad fork, the salad knife should be just to the right of the plate with the meat knife place right of it, along with the soup spoon or dessert spoon being located outside the knives.⁷ This is consistent with Wynkyn de Worde’s *Boke of Kervynge* written in 1513.



Figure 4. Formal Place Setting, Emily Post

The food is then typically brought to the table and set toward the center of the table in various ceramic vessels. Water, milk and coffee are then placed at the table. Everyone is expected to serve their own libation prior to grace. IñRes will always sit on the east side of the table facing west while IñCan typically sits on the south side facing north. When the children were still at home, IñCan sat directly across IñRes while the two daughters sat between them on the north and south sides of the table.

With everyone present at the table, IñCan says grace. All others bow their heads and reflect. The prayer goes as follows:

Thank you Lord for this food, for life, and health and every good. Amen.

Once grace is complete, the food is distributed by passing it around to each other to take a portion. All dishes are passed to the right. As the eating began on this occasion, the sound of metal clanging and scraping ceramic was heard along with the music of Van Morrison, which had been playing during the preparation of the meal, and was left to play throughout the course of supper. Mealtime started with the lyric, *'here comes the night.'*

Summary

The continuity of cultural conditions specific to this particular group of people is dependant on ritual. These rituals have been handed down through ancestry and neighbor. They are based in and furthered by necessity and adversity. Their repetition can be easily misread as simply routine. As pointed out in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Mircea Eliade writes:

This conscious repetition of given paradigmatic gestures reveals an original ontology. The gesture acquires meaning, reality, solely to the extent to which it repeats a primordial act.⁸

The diurnal chore of place setting and eating are essential ingredients to sustaining the lives of those involved. As such, they are ritualistic affairs of labor perpetuated by a longing for authentic occasions perpetuated by European tradition.



Figure 4. *Gioco della Signora Gola* (The Game of Mistress Greedy), Italian satirical cartoon, 1699. This unruly affair sums up the word ‘feast’ for many people.

The customs and stories associated with this occasion are brought to the table; to the culminating ritual referred to, by these people, as “supper.” As caretakers of the land, IñCan and IñRes view themselves equally as guardians of the table. Their aspiration is to maintain the sacred mealtime and consequently continue the family and traditions from which they’ve come as well as that which they’ve born.

¹ Samuel R. Aldrich and Earl R. Lang, *Modern Corn Production*, (Cincinnati: F&W Publishing Corp., 1965) p. 106.

² Margaret Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities, and Meaning of Table Manners*, (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991) p. 19.

³ Dana Cuff, *Architecture: The Story of Practice*, (see Clifford Geertz in *Interpretation of Cultures*, 1973) p. 5.

⁴ Nichola Fletcher, *Charlemagne’s Tablecloth: A Piquant History of Feasting*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2004) p. 26.

⁵ Margaret Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities, and Meaning of Table Manners*, (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991) p. 158.

⁶ Nichola Fletcher, *Charlemagne’s Tablecloth: A Piquant History of Feasting*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2004) p. 27.

⁷ Elizabeth L. Post, *Emily Post on Entertaining*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1987) p. 49.

⁸ Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1959) p. 5.