

Food and Memory in Literature: A Folkloric Approach

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Abstract

This paper analyzes food as a memory device in the novel *Doña Flor y sus dos maridos* by the Brazilian author Jorge Amado. Set in San Salvador du Bahia in northern Brazil, the novel follows Doña Flor after her husband Vadinho dies. Food and drink – considered here as folkloric forms – play a central role not only in her exploration of memories of her husband but also in the broader *bahiana* society with its mix of different ethnicities (African, indigenous, European). Drawing on Felix Coluccio's and Dan Ben-Amos notions of folklore and literature and Arjun Appadurai's exploration of the social aspects of food, this paper focuses on the intersections of food, memory and tradition. My analysis centers on the characters: how they are “made” through food, re-enacting their roles and constituting their social and personal identity (pleasure and leisure, sensual enjoyment, excess and taboo). The meals in the text are a fundamental way to portray Bahia and its customs. Food explores the *bahiano* spirit in depth; the everyday and the magical, religion and the supernatural. Vadinho's funeral happens during the ritual celebration of Carnival and this dual context offers an ideal frame to observe food (including coffee and cachaça) creating symbols and meaning as it circulates.

Keywords

Folklore; food studies; food systems; memory; Latin American literature; rituals; culinary.

Dona Flor e seus dos maridos is a novel published in 1966 by the Brazilian author Jorge Amado.¹ The story takes place in Salvador, the capital city of Bahia (Brazil) and tells the story of the recently widowed *dona* Flor. During the spectacular festivities of Carnival in Bahia, Vadinho, her bohemian husband, dies victim of excessive alcohol consumption, while celebrating around the city dressed as a woman. Shattered with pain, Flor follows a strict mourning process until she meets Teodoro, a serious pharmacist who falls deeply in love with her and turns into her second and dream husband. However, she never forgets Vadinho: the memories of his sensuality

¹ For this paper, I worked with the Spanish translation *Doña Flor y sus dos maridos*. The citations come from this edition. The first English translation of the work, *Dona Flor and her two husbands*, was done in 1969.

and his chaotic lifestyle are often evoked by Flor, until one night he reappears as a ghost that only she can see. Flor is torn between the passionate love she feels for her deceased husband and the respectful love she has for her new man. After profound consideration, and the aid of magical and religious forces, Flor decides to keep both men by her side: she will live together in peace with the ghost of Vadinho and the presence of Teodoro.

Salvador offers an emblematic representation of the Brazilian history, being the first capital of the country and the place where the first market of black slaves was established. Amado's narrative reflects the society and traditions of Bahia and Brazil; the characters are illustrative of the European immigrants, the Afro-Brazilians and the indigenous, of their behavior and traditions, of their relationship to religion, superstition, witchcraft, and of their ways of sensuality and charisma. The landscape of natural exuberance with the powerful sea is the scenario for the celebration of Carnival – among other festivities. These are the elements that operate in Amado's writing as folkloric bridges that integrate Bahia into the novel (Coluccio 1993, 69-71). The text is saturated with popular, local, and folkloric references to the everyday life and the nocturnal underground culture of Brazil. In this context, foodways are one of the most relevant aspects of this folkloric contextualization and construction of the characters. Furthermore, the power of the culinary can immediately be grasped in the structure of the novel. After the title and dedication, and before the first chapter, a letter from Flor, the protagonist of the novel, to author Jorge Amado, in which she provides some tips to make a good manioc tarte, introduces her to the reader.²

The novel is divided into five chapters, that follow the different stages of the grief of Flor and her progressive healing. Foodways keep operating structurally in the different chapters: two of them start with a detailed recipe of typical *bahiano* cuisine – crabs *cazuela*³ in chapter II and turtle stew in chapter III – written by Flor herself, with specific observations on the ingredients, how to prepare them, and even personal thoughts from her author. The first chapter, on the other hand, focuses on Flor's awareness of how to prepare a proper wake, showing the central importance of food and how to handle it within the ritual of departure of the deceased. The

² I will go back to the relevance of this letter in culinary terms and for the character, when I analyze the influence of food in the construction of the characters. For now, it suffices to say that the relevance of the gastronomic in the structure of the novel proves to be central with this introduction; see also Deodato 2023, 314-315.

³ A *cazuela* is a typical dish from different countries in Latin America and receives its name from the recipient where it is cooked and consumed: a pot made of clay or a similar material. There is a wide variety of kinds of *cazuelas* depending on the ingredients, which often include different kind of meats and vegetables. The ingredients are fried separately and finally cooked together with a basic stock or sauce. In the case of the crabs *cazuela*, Vadinho's favourite, the recipe of Flor includes tomato, onions, garlic, and coconut milk.

reader is brought to an appropriate *bahiano* ceremony by attending to the one being held in honor of none other than Vadinho, Flor's husband. This first episode portrays food functioning in a social environment and operating as a device in motion while memories and grief are developing. In other words, this introductory chapter constitutes an emotional tour through the community that knew Vadinho, showing us how to mourn in the *bahiano* way. The final chapter opens with a reference to the favorite meals of the *orixas* and *exús*, Afro-Brazilian deities that are central to the plot and to the context. Amado portrays here the religious and symbolic aspects of foodways, where food shows its agency beyond its nutritive role; its capacity to cross the boundaries of the natural and supernatural realms.

To analyze the density of the folkloric-culinary in this text, I make use of some concepts from folkloric theory. To approach the discipline of folklore, Ben-Amos talks about folkloric forms and the double aspect of stability and flexibility intrinsic to them. Once created, a folkloric form is free from its context and creator, to travel and cross geographical and language barriers. But any folkloric form is linked to its context of origin, and any modifications to the context influence the way the folkloric form manifests.⁴ Ben Amos considers that folklore falls into at least one of these three categories: "...a body of knowledge, a mode of thought or a kind of art" (1971, 5). Context is fundamental to folklore, not only because it is where a folkloric form develops, but also because it must be the community that ultimately decides what integrates their lore. Additionally, it is important to bear in mind that a folkloric form expands beyond genres and types of cultural artifacts. In other words, a folkloric theme might be found as a myth, a story or a ritual across different times and communities (Ben-Amos, 1971, 3-6). Literature is considered in this paper as an integrative space for folkloric forms, and to be representative of a particular cultural group. Aspects like religious traditions, eating habits and the interaction of the different social origins of a particular society, are integrated in the weave of fiction thanks to folkloric representation. That is possible because folklore acts as a bridging point between the reality and the fiction, drawing upon the immediate context of the audience (readers in this case) as well as its imaginary and knowledge as a ground to place a story or any other cultural artifact (Coluccio, 1993, 9-11). Hence the relevance of the gastronomic within the folkloric for our analysis.

Food and meals are part of *cuisines*, which are systems within the culture of a particular society and have also contact points with folklore. In general terms, food can be considered as a material that is nutritional for the body. But this definition falls short, and it becomes evident that food is a complex notion that goes beyond its material dimensions and nutritional functions. Appadurai works with the concept of food as an intersection of the material and the symbolic. What is edible

⁴ Ben-Amos talks about the superorganic and organic aspects of the folkloric form to explain the essential interaction that cultural artifacts have with the environment where they exist (1971, 9-10).

and considered food is “...a plastic kind of collective representation” (1981, 494). In its social and symbolic aspects, food conveys a large set of meanings. Food can be a vector for solidarity, rivalry, celebration, and other forms of individual and group interactions. For Appadurai this semiotic power of food lies partially in the fact that it moves strong and primal emotions, connected to the memory of primal nurturing and to experiences of dislike and even danger. In a way, eating is the primary form of socialization for human beings.⁵

Since this paper analyses food as a memory device in a specific context – that is the funerary ceremonies of Vadinho during Carnival celebrations, as depicted in the first chapter of the novel – it is relevant to briefly consider the basic traits and structural relevance of the funeral ritual and of Carnival. A funeral is a ritual that deals with the departure of a member of the community and the mourning of those left behind. It also allows space for the construction of the memory of the deceased through the words of those who remember him. Van Gennep writes extensively about the function of rites in society. In his view, the social life of a community is marked by different stages, and the transition between them affects both the individuals and the society. Change, as inevitable and constant as it is, causes disruption in the social fabric. Ceremonies mitigate the impact of those changes and allow a harmonious transition to the new phase. As a part of life, death also finds containment within a funeral (1960, 1-3). The costumes and traditions of funerals depend on the community and context where they take place, as well as on the community’s conceptions of the afterworld or the parts that compose an individual (body, soul, spirits, etc.). The funeral rites mandate a certain treatment of the body of the deceased. Mourning is a transitional phase for the survivor that is coincidental with the interim phase that the deceased goes through right after death (1960, 146-149). Funerals are of utmost importance for the mourning and processing of the social loss that death implies but are also important for the proper rest of the dead.

⁵ Appadurai talks about two reasons why food is so significant. The first one lays on the fact that food is a cultural product that needs to be reinvented and reproduced. Food is needed every day and perishes when eaten, which means that needs to be provided again and again (1981, 494). It is not the goal of this paper to expand on the well-analyzed matter of food and cuisine, and the symbolic implications that it has, specifically in its social aspect. Another notion that’s quite close to the aspects we pointed out together with Appadurai can be found in the idea of the “total social fact” from Mauss as seen by Deodato. This has two main implications: first, food is a space for intersections of different disciplines. It is necessary to bear in mind that to speak about food means to talk about many areas like economy, anthropology, sociology or religion, to name just a few. Secondly, analyzing a food event or food itself opens an entrance to several aspects of a society; it can be considered as a kaleidoscope of aspects that take place simultaneously in order to allow that food or meal to be what it is (2023, 309-312).

A dead person without a proper funeral can be a danger for the social group, since its spirit might want to return and end up trapped between the worlds (1960, 160).⁶

The Carnival, as represented in the novel of Amado, is approached in this analysis at two levels. On the one hand, Carnival in Bahia has both immense local popularity and importance and undoubted folkloric value. On the other hand, the structure of Carnival is based on inversion and transgression of the establishment. One inversion that has particular relevance in the novel is that of the material and desire of the flesh – represented in the text mostly by erotic and culinary associations – transcending rationality, discretion and devotion. Carnival as a macro-context for Vadinho's wake allows the possibility of renovation and rebirth (Pellegrini, 2013, 72-73).

The goal of this paper is to analyze food and meals as a memory device in the Brazilian novel, more specifically in the funerary ceremonies of Vadinho during the Carnival celebration of Bahia. To that end food, drink and meals are considered folkloric forms and the exploration concentrates in the intersections between foodways, memory and tradition.

Food as memory and identity

In order to analyze the intersections of foodways, memory and tradition, I will apply two lenses to the text. The first lens deals with food and meals as folkloric forms in the context of Vadinho's wake during the celebration of Carnival in Bahia. The second lens observes food as a fundamental element that constructs both the characters of Flor and Vadinho and the bond between the two of them.

First lens: a carnivalistic funerary banquet

The news of Vadinho's death reaches his wife and Flor goes out into the middle of the day and the Carnival to find the dead body of her beloved Vadinho. This encounter between Flor and Vadinho's corpse changes everything: Flor is suddenly a widow. Time is also not the same: "Everything so fast and confusing, she didn't find the time to think, to perceive his death as something real" (Amado, 1966, 17).⁷ Memory and time start showing their complexity around the death, the wake and carnival. These three events act as bubbles where time will either stop, slow down or become circular. The story and character of Vadinho will be constructed/reconstructed by the memories of the participants at the wake and, above all, the sensorial and sensual memories of his wife Flor.

⁶ Van Gennep's analysis and examples are filled with gastronomic examples, where food plays a role for different stages in the funeral rites.

⁷ Translation is mine.

Death belongs to life and as such is object of organization and structure. Dona Flor has expertise in social gatherings since she has been called out to cater for all kinds of celebrations. Therefore, it is not surprising that she knows exactly what to do for wakes. This particular wake takes place before her husband's burial, at the house where the couple lived. His body is brought to the main chamber, where he is guarded by Flor and prepared for the burial. Looked at through this lens, the wake is at the center of the funerary ceremonies for Vadinho because foodways operate here powerfully. The participants at his wake interweave the memory of Vadinho with their own stories and remembrances, while food and drinks circulate in a convivial atmosphere. According to the comments of Flor in the novel, the importance of a well-organized wake relies on two main aspects. Firstly, is a night of solidarity for the diseased on the first night of his departure from the living world (Pellegrini, 2013, 76-77; Coluccio, 1993, 82), "...allowing that first and confusing night of his death to be more bearable" (Amado, 1966, 9).⁸ Secondly, the living must be taken care of so they can play their role. Food and drinks are meant to feed the body and energy of the participants (Pellegrini, 2013, 76). The quality of a wake can be determined by the variety and amount of the food items, and neighbors contribute by bringing dishes or drinks. Chocolate and chicken stock are served at high society wakes, for example. Nevertheless, some food items and beverages are mandatory. Coffee, a central item in this social gathering, is served in the morning together with some small savoury dishes. This beverage has cultural relevance for Brazil. Its production is closely linked to the history of slavery of Brazil, and it became relevant for the economy of the country during the eighteenth century, when the consumption of coffee grown in the Brazilian territory increased (Da Camara Cascudo, 1967, 304). Coffee is also a very popular convivial drink in Latin America, fostering conversation and focus, traits of utmost importance in an event like this. Other beverages served are wine or beer. But the one beverage that any decent wake must have, is the *cachaça*. Manioc balls are also very popular mostly because of the gastronomical importance of this root in Brazilian cuisine. Manioc is a bush that grows in tropical climates, with starchy and edible roots. In the Brazilian diet it has royal status. This root, a contribution of Indigenous origin, is a basic ingredient of the Brazilian cuisine. The flour made from manioc has a similar value to that of wheat, and therefore the status of bread for the Europeans. This product works as a side dish for meat and even for fruit (Da Camara Cascudo, 1967, 93-105).

The women are in charge of circulating the food and beverages. The men, on the other hand, talk and recall stories about the now-deceased Vadinho. The living room and corridor are the spaces of the house reserved for the closest friends and the most distinguished guests. The least relevant participants stand by the casket or closer to the door. This is how a proper *bahiano* wake is managed.

⁸ Translation is mine.

While inside Flor's house melancholy, grief and sweet memories build the wake atmosphere, outside the Carnival plays a loud theatre of life. Vadinho has died in the arms of Carnival, drinking whisky and *cachaça*, dancing and singing, dressed as a *bahiana* – this is wearing the typical clothes of Afro-Brazilian women of that region – and running around playfully with a manioc root as a penis. In Latin America, and more specifically in the *bahiano* culture, Carnival is an opportunity to live and unfold the syncretism of the African, Portuguese and Indigenous heritage that runs in the veins of Brazil. The mixtures of these origins and influences are visible in religion – a central topic in the novel – and Carnival, with its inverted and transgressional structure (D'Angelo, 2006, 154-158). Vadinho is a spirit of Carnival who trespasses rules and inverts the ways of the world and of identity. He is also a “Carnival diseased” (Amado, 1966,13), a dead person who refuses to die and exists in the world as a perennial memory (Pellegrini, 2013, 73-77). This memory is fragmentary and often contradictory, constructed by a swinging dynamic, an oscillation between the love-hate that Vadinho aroused in people (Deodato, 2023, 313). Vadinho is a collage of stories, memories, sensations colliding during the wake, while food, drinks and *cachaça* circulate. His is the essence of a carnival man: “The legend was being born right there, next to his body, almost at the same time of his death” (Amado, 1966, 23).⁹ All these sensations are mixed with the finality of death, as the ultimate act that takes the life and changes the community for good. Carnival amplifies the celebration of Vadinho's life, containing the anguish and pain provoked by his death.

Second lens: Flor and Vadinho, two delicious characters

Foodways are also integral to the construction of these two characters and the bond between them, as an embodiment of *bahiano* social types. The culinary aspects are observed here on a broader scope, penetrating different levels and aspects of Flor and Vadinho. The connection between foodways and Flor is quite evident from the start of the novel (Pellegrini, 2013; Deodato, 2023; Coluccio, 1993). Flor is a cook and a teacher. In her school “Cooking School: Flavour and Art” she gives classes on general and *bahiano* cuisine. The culinary is what builds Flor in many structural aspects of her social and individual persona; foodways are her talent, her trade, and her way of being in the world. More than a passion, Flor has developed her personality through food since a very young age: “She was born with the knowledge of precision, with the gift of spices. Since she was a little girl, she made tarts and delicacies, always around the kitchen, learning the mysteries of the supreme art together with Auntie Lita, who was so demanding” (Amado, 1966, 55).¹⁰ Her role as a teacher also positions her handling memory through traditional knowledge from the *bahiano* culture and its meals.

⁹ Translation is mine.

¹⁰ Translation is mine.

As stated in the introduction, food operates on a structural level in the novel, and this affects the character of Flor. Before the story starts, after the title, the short letter from Flor to Jorge Amado, the author, discusses the manioc tart, a traditional dish of the cuisine at the North of Brazil. The instructions on this basic recipe are filled with knowledge, delicacy, and flirtatious femininity (Pellegrini, 2013, 75). The text starts *in media res* as a response from Flor to Jorge Amado, on how to prepare the tart. In very few words the young *bahiana* manages to give useful guidance on the meal, while paying tribute to the tips and recommendations passed on to her by other women. In this introductory note, Flor depicts cuisine as a social construct, as a trade that is taught and improved by doing, by trial and error, and most importantly, as a cooperative feminine activity. Another aspect of gastronomy becomes relevant in Flor's note: cooking and loving are activities that are closely related and oscillate between the passion of the body and the composure of the soul. This note is her self-introduction; speaking in her own voice directly to the author, talking about what she knows most about and what essentially constructs her: love and food. Flor goes beyond the fictional level into metafiction, addressing the author directly, using foodways as a bridge. Manioc develops its relevance and symbolism in the novel, acting as an introduction of Flor, even before the novel begins. The manioc tarte is ancestral, and the love for manioc in different shapes and forms is still part of the Brazilian cuisine of the second part of the twentieth-century (Da Camara Cascudo, 1967, 93-105). During Vadinho's wake, the manioc shows up again in the manioc balls, a must in this kind of event. Finally, this food item is so powerful, that it does not even need to be edible: Vadinho was playfully using the root as a penis while dressed as a woman, during the Carnival celebrations right before dying. Manioc represents an important piece of *bahiano* culture.

Food in this novel is strongly linked to sensuality, especially in the case of Flor's body and character. Her appearance, representing the ethnic mixture of the Brazilian society (Pellegrini, 2013, 78) is often referred to in culinary terms – Vadinho describes her body as tasteful, aromatic, and delicious, sensual and homey as well: “Flor, my basil flower”; “My coconut sweet ... your little thing is my honeycomb” (Amado, 1966, 144); “my green corncob, my aromatic *acarajé*, my chubby chick” (Amado, 1966, 13).¹¹ These vivid images portray the associations between eroticism and appetite.

Unlike Flor, Vadinho is not bonded with food in such a visible way. He embodies another aspect of the *bahiano* folklore: the bohemian lifestyle of the night, the game, the women, the music and of course, the *cachaça*. Vadinho does enjoy food, as he does everything that brings pleasure to the body, but as a nocturnal animal, he can go on for days only on *cachaça*, music and bets. And most of what constructs Vadinho comes from the memories of others. In truth, Vadinho has no voice of his

¹¹ Translation is mine.

own. He enters the novel as a dead man, with a convulsing body trying to grasp for a last time to life. The *cachaça* is the strong link that Vadinho has with the Brazilian cuisine. This is the celebratory drink *par excellence*, so much so that it is mandatory at any wake, because it encourages the living to celebrate the life of the deceased. This fermented beverage made from the juice of the sugar cane is part of the identity and tradition of Brazil since the arrival of the Portuguese to the territory. In the novel, Vadinho has consumed it excessively all through his life, and his body is affected by it to a point of no return. As Flor is bonded with the manioc, Vadinho is with the *cachaça*: both necessary parts of the nourishment and constitution of the individuals, and at the extremes of nutrition and toxicity as the representations of the human nature that each one must dominate yet hold in equilibrium. Vadinho embodies excess, as he devours with pleasure. His sexual drive is the main parallel to that of ingestion of food. The association of food and eroticism is constant in the text. Vadinho eats up life in different ways, and mostly devours the body of his beloved Flor in pleasure and delight. Lust and food are at the center of the relationship between Flor and Vadinho: intoxicating, invigorating, delicious and necessary.

Vadinho embodies a construct of tradition, memories, and sensations. The first notes on his legend appear during his wake, while delicious traditional dishes circulate, washed down by the invigorating powers of coffee and *cachaça*. But Vadinho is a force of nature and will return to the streets of Bahia, regardless of the wake and exequies held in his honour. Just as smells and flavour endure in tradition for generations, defying space and time, never forgotten but adapted and reconstructed and wandering through the sensorial memories hungry for identity, so Vadinho evokes a profoundly sensual and passionate life. Flor allows herself the pleasure and a sensory connection with the folklore of Brazil guided by the hand of her husband's ghost.

Conclusion

The goal of this paper was to analyze how food, considered as a folkloric form, functions as a memory device in the Brazilian novel. As stated, the symbolism of food can extend beyond its nutritional properties to a cultural function. In this case, the analysis takes place within a literary text that operates as a folkloric context where food plays a significant role in relation to memory. The culinary assumes structural properties in the chapters and introduction of the novel, in the composition of the main character of Flor, and in the characterization – during the wake – of Vadinho, the other central character. Food thus establishes a bond with the Brazilian-*bahiano* culture. Carnival functions as the macro-context within the section of the plot analyzed here: because Vadinho dies during Carnival, and the celebrations are still happening while his wake is held, so that his death will be affected by transgression and ambiguity. Sympathy and reproof, grief and passion,

sadness and celebration converge in the collective memory of Vadinho, who brings a bitter-sweet aftertaste to everyone left alive. Like any traditional dish, like Flor herself, he is unforgettable.

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