

“Eating by Culture: Javanese Hands and Japanese Chopsticks”

Mealtime has become an essential part of food culture, inspiring me to conduct research for a deeper understanding of the culture of eating. Although “eating” has a lot of aspects associated with it in terms of cultural identity (e.g., historical and geographical background, religion, external influences, and economic, social, and lifestyle development), my research focuses on associated activities (i.e., preparing, cooking, and consuming). Specifically, my research analyzes the traditional eating culture in local cities in Japan and Java.

Both Japanese and Javanese cultures are known for their long history, rich heritage, material cultures (e.g., art, crafts, traditional music, folktales, and cuisines), and immaterial cultures (e.g., mannerisms, non-verbal communications, and language structure). In addition to a literature review, my research combines several approaches from Anthropology and Design, such as ethnography by interviews and observations, with design thinking methods that begin by gaining insight through sketches and drawings. Because I believe that well designed eating utensils merge tradition with modern design and highlight the importance of craftsmanship, my research focuses on the design of eating utensils as society changes.

I conducted field research in cities that embrace traditional values in daily life in Ishikawa, Japan (March – July 2014) and Indonesia (July – September 2014). The ethnography research was performed by observing and interviewing 5 Japanese

households and 12 Javanese households. During my stay in Indonesia, I visited Javanese people at their residence in several local cities in different provinces/prefectures (East Java, Yogyakarta, West Java, Lombok Island, and East Borneo). In addition, I observed traditional Javanese restaurants.

If we look closer to the activity revolves around eating culture, it will be started from the cooking or preparing the food. In Japanese culture, it is widely known that the mother cooks for the family, and the food preparation takes place in a single cabinet or kitchen counter in a relatively small kitchen. Meanwhile, in Javanese culture, it is common to see several people cooking together in a wide kitchen, whereas each activities (preparing, cooking) takes place in several spots of the area.



Left Image: Sachiko Fukui cooks in her residence in Komatsu, Ishikawa (20 July 2014).

Right Image: Mbah Marto's family cooks in her residence in Yogyakarta, Java (19 August 2014).

Source: Documentations by Maharani Dian Permanasari

The efficiency of space is one important thing for Japanese people, in contrast with Javanese people that are still having privilege of wide house area, mainly the kitchen. The cooking and eating activities are also affected by the surrounding space, for example: Japanese people prepare and cook within a limited access, whereas Javanese do the activities with a maximum space thus not uncommon to cook while wandering around the kitchen. From all the households of each culture, both of the space-usage is as explained briefly by figure below:

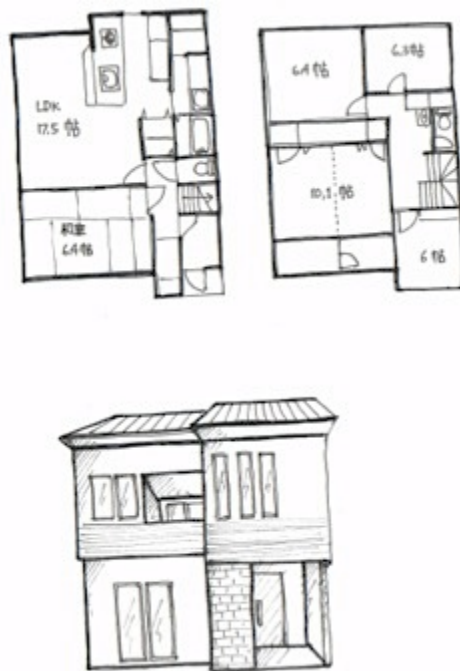


Figure 1. Common Japanese house

Source: Drawing by Maharani Dian Permanasari

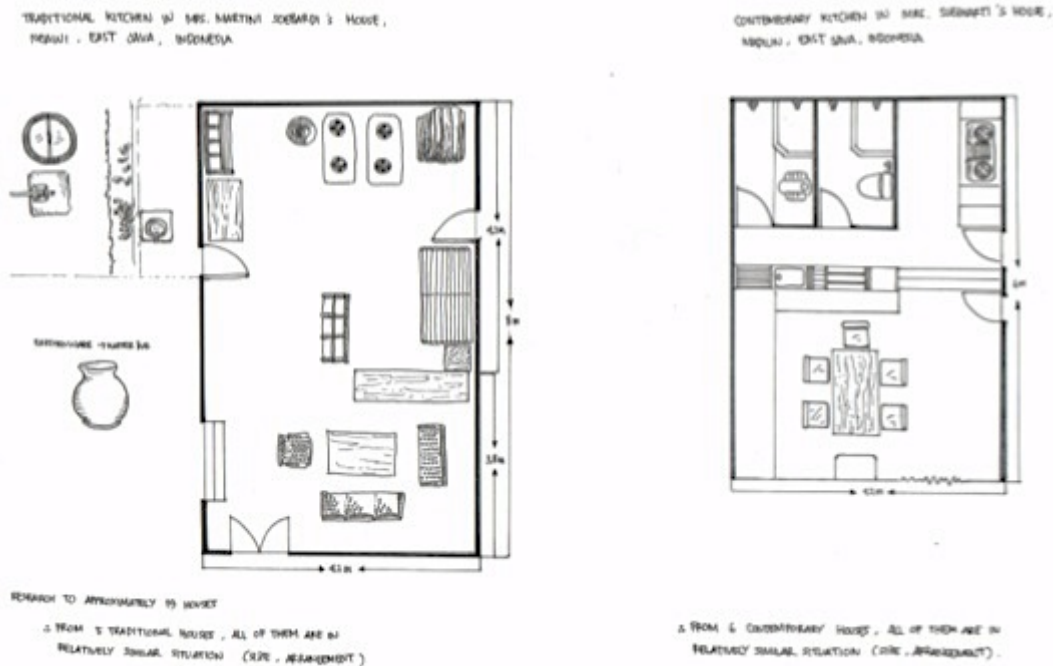


Figure 2. Common Javanese house. Left: Traditional type. Right: Modern type.

Source: Drawing by Maharani Dian Permanasari

I noticed interesting behaviour patterns in cooking and eating activities. Although Japanese and Javanese people initially ate using their hands, each culture developed its own utensils to assist in eating activities. The Japanese culture, which was influenced by the Chinese, commonly uses chopsticks for daily meals. Meanwhile, the Javanese culture, which was influenced by the Dutch, developed the using of spoons and forks.

Besides food, the figure below demonstrates other differences while eating.

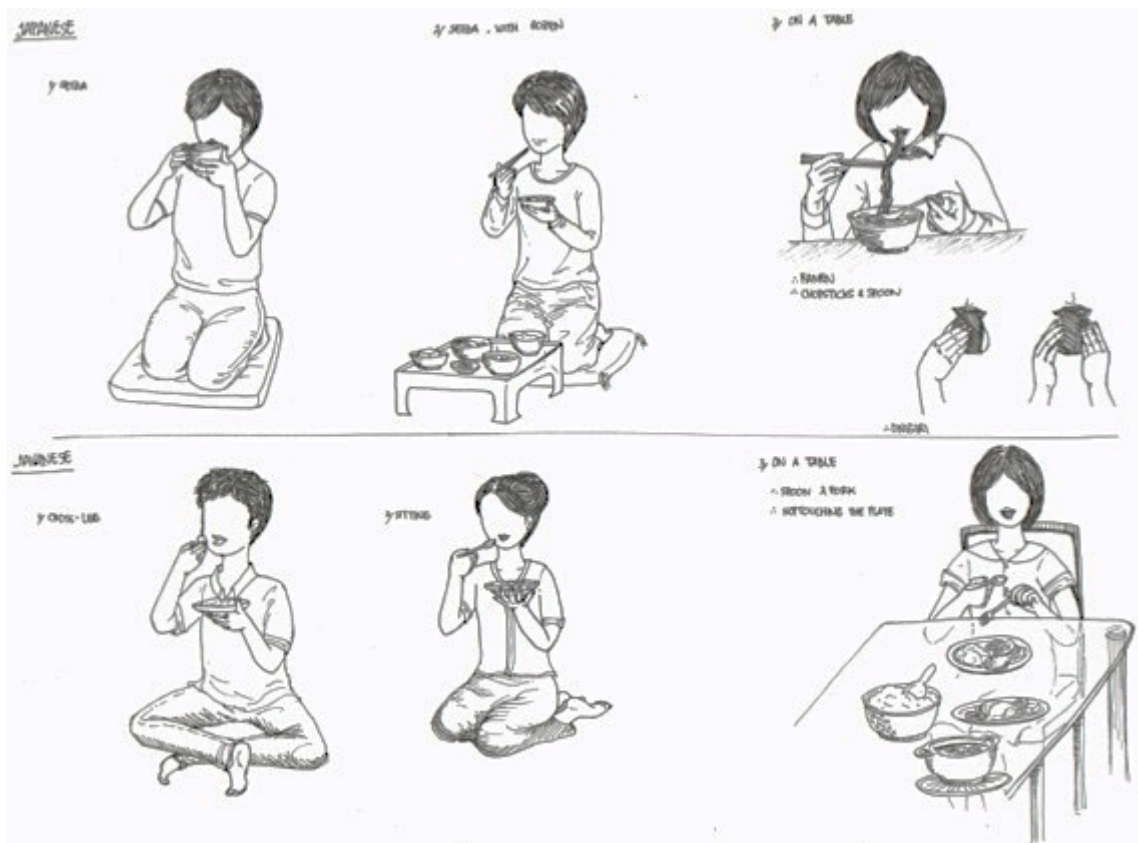


Figure 3. Eating behaviour of Japanese (upper) and Javanese (below)

Source: Drawing by Maharani Dian Permanasari

The similarities and differences of both eating culture may affect the development of eating utensils and the behaviour patterns that revolve around it. An in-depth analysis should help further improve eating utensils and deepen the understanding of food and culture, especially the role of culture on eating.

(M. P.)