

Exploring the Relationship between Rituals and Food at Oxford Colleges Formal Halls

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ABSTRACT: Rules, rituals, and food are three words often associated with the University of Oxford in its many centuries of existence. However, rarely together.

Historical evidence dictates that ritualised eating has always been a part of Oxford as an institution. Its format has changed through centuries and across colleges, but the purpose associated with ritualised eating in Oxford persists. Community. Jones (2005) writes how communal dining was so crucial to the student experience, that punishment for misbehaviour in thirteenth century Balliol College was eating separately after everyone had finished.

Most food rituals and rules in Oxford were created by its people and for its people. They were also followed, reproduced, and eventually rebelled against by its people and accordingly altered. While an individual eating alone may impose a myriad of rituals on themselves, such rituals become far more evident in a group framework, as in the context of formal hall in university colleges. Here is one of many quotes deliberating the community component and significance of formal hall dinner to Oxford:

Dinner, the fourth meal of the day, is taken by the college as a body, in a large dining hall, where in winter a flickering glow from the great fireplaces throws strange shadows over the dim pictures ...The highlights on old silver, good beef and mutton, and lively conversation make dinner a pleasing occasion.... (*Oxford of Today, A manual for Prospective Rhodes*, 1927)

Food rituals are relevant in numerous scenarios across historical and contemporary accounts of the University. *Oxford Food: An Anthology* (1995), which also mentions the Oxford Food Symposium, informs us of the many different dining experiences and practices. From entertaining royalty, town- gown dinners, to themed festive and religious meals, Oxford University is a rich microcosm of an assortment of food rituals in countless forms. Not just religious but also secular, not just opulent, and grandiose but humble and meagre, everything everywhere and sometimes all at once. The University's collegiate structure supports this diversity, like many other diversities, and thus the contradictions that accompany.

To attempt a piece of writing commenting on Oxford's centuries worth of food rituals, traditions, and rules, would thus be difficult based on the scope, limits, and requirements of this paper. Therefore, for an effective analysis, I limit myself to exploring the rules and rituals surrounding the formal table dinners or 'formal hall' at Oxford colleges. It is further limited by the college archives I was allowed access to and my own dining experiences.

Draft Version: Not for Citation or Attribution

I intend for this paper to make three arguments by reflecting on a collection of randomly chosen rituals from across the collegiate University. First, to reflect to the reader the myriad of food rituals across the University's colleges and what these food rituals indicate of their college and potentially the University as a whole. This paper is an argument for and an entryway into the promise of what Oxford offers as a site for food rules and rituals' study.

Second, how many of these rituals are often based on power. An argument this paper makes is how power is ritualised on the Oxford College dinner tables.

Third, a questioning of said power and perspective, with an offering of my own autoethnographic reflections of experiencing these rituals, as a member of the University. Oxford, for much of its history has been white and male. Race and religion were abolished as a criterion in 1871 with the University Tests Act. Women were finally allowed to graduate in 1920, despite their entry in the late nineteenth century. In contrast to the traditional Oxonian, my reflections are informed by my identity as a twenty-first century international woman and a student of colour in these spaces. I thus contribute and thereby destabilise the traditional history of Oxford dining, with the new rituals I have witnessed in my time here.

Oxford Colleges Formal Halls: Ritualised Power and Differences

I have had the pleasure and privilege of attending several University and college dinners. Some regular formal dinners across colleges but also University Council dinners, Vice Chancellor's Nomination lunches and dinners, Proctors Appointment luncheons, JCR Presidents Dinner, MCR presidents Dinner, Governing Body Dinner and more. Most important meals were consumed in the affiliated college of the scholar who hosted the meal. The Senior Proctor hailed from Queens College and thus their appointment luncheon celebrations happened there. Sometimes, meals are catered externally, like Council dinners in hotels, or Bodleian Exhibition canapes in the Weston Hall. My choice of Oxford college formal dinners is thus justified in that they are the most obvious ritualised eating activity quintessentially 'internal' to Oxford as a space.

Dacin et al's 2010 qualitative study focuses on the role of formal hall dining rituals in institutional maintenance of class at the University of Cambridge. They write how Cambridge dining rituals are performances that legitimate concept of social stratification through the repeated enactment of roles and boundaries. I draw from their arguments but contribute my own perspective in that, these rituals are evolving though ever present. The most apparent gap in their research is that they do not address the diversity between collegiate rituals, which this paper will attempt to do. As a counter argument, here is a 1774 quote from James Woodforde's diary, sub-warden of New College and a pro-proctor:

I breakfasted and slept again in New College ...went to Exeter College about 2'o' clock ...we dined in the publick Hall at Exeter Coll: at the High Table. The Rector, Dr Bray dined with us. We had but an

indifferent dinner and served up slovingly. Nothing near so neat or genteel as at New College. (135)

It is impossible to ignore the differences between Oxford colleges and thus by extension, Oxford colleges' formal hall rituals. Each ritual is an indication of the college's beliefs and systems. As anthropologist Robin Fox argues, to feed someone is one of the most direct and intimate ways of conveying something about ourselves to them. He writes:

We are never just saying, 'see how we can satisfy your hunger.' We are saying more like 'see how lavish and hospitable and knowledgeable we are.' Of the most basic things in our behavioral repertoire, eating is the most accessible and effective for conveying our messages to others. We can, of course, offer sex and violence, and sometimes we do, but food, along with superior accommodations, is on the whole easier and safer. (5)

I combine this argument with Friedland and Alford (1991) conception of the crucial role rituals play in conception and transmission of meaning. Oxford colleges are aware and use rituals strategically to construct their image, as this paper will showcase. The question is, what meaning(s) do the rituals transmit?

The University itself has no centralised dinner table or rituals of its own, instead it has a close intertwined relationship with its affiliated colleges. University staff members and students, usually dine in their colleges and invite their colleagues to the colleges. It is a practice for many students to attempt to, if not dine at the formal table, then eat a meal, at all the colleges. Staff members, even those with college affiliation, also replicate the sentiment in many cases. For example, a meal at the exclusive All Souls College is a coveted experience, not available to many, regardless of their status undergraduate or even titular Professor – it is invite only. To use Meyer Fortes's argument here – food is not simply 'good to eat' but 'good to forbid'. The forbidding is what either binds communities together or helps differentiate them from others, in whether they were allowed access or forbidden.

If rituals are routines imbued with meaning, which define the order of the world and actors' position within it (250, Friedland and Alford) then I argue that in the world of Oxford there are many areas with different institutional and individual actors exercising a diversity of such routines. One cannot help but articulate the formal dining experience as a set of many concentric circles; sanctity of which is upheld through the many meaning-bearing routines, i.e., rituals. Every time an individual believes they have access to a particular space – college/dinner table/high table they realise there is another inner circle, more exclusive than the last, that needs to be perforated. Like in the case of All Souls College formals. Freshers dinner to weekly formals to society/group membership-based formals to formals in other colleges to high table to high table in other colleges to exclusive occasion dinners – the circles keep going. What keeps these circles in order are rituals. The ritual of high table being distinct from other tables in most college formal halls, in some colleges it is even physically a step above the rest. There is

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The document above clearly shows the distinct exclusive separation of circles that one needs to pave their way into - evident in the physical dining hall set up for most colleges at Oxford and Cambridge, not just Balliol, pictured above. Upon entry to the dining hall, you immediately notice the presence of high table at the end of the long hall. Then there are the reserved tables for academic staff and in certain colleges, student leaders, activities group and representatives, see above (Figure 1). Standing to the side are the hall staff, who will not be sitting during the three-course meal (the minimum number of courses in the formal dining tradition). If Foucault's panopticon could be ritualised in relation to food, Oxbridge's formal dinner perhaps comes closest. You are constantly under the impression of being watched while watching others and this is a routine gathering of different communities within Oxford in a decidedly rule and ritual bound space. One is conscious of their cutlery, food, bite size, wine request and conversation etiquette, most of the time – moulding themselves into the ideal formal hall attendee. There is also a difference in treatment, based on your academic stature:

Egg arrives, not as old as chaffinch, but nearly; didn't say I wanted chicken. Scout apologises: must have brought me an undergraduate's egg by mistake. Never mind; plain living and high thinking.... (*Aspects of Modern Oxford*, 47, 1894)

Fox also comments on the discrepancy of meals between cost of Dons (or high table) and undergraduates. He writes:

Here the difference is used as an inducement or initiation procedure. The novitiates are deprived, but are reminded of the alimentary rewards of superior performance.' The meaning of the Formal Hall set up, in Balliol and arguably other Oxford colleges with comparable arrangement, is plainly meant to convey ones status in a ranked system. (20)

As a part of my research for the symposium, I wrote to several college librarians and archivists asking about their college dinning rituals and traditions. Though a rather broad question, librarians and archivists came back with an array of sources! From records of purchase orders easily dating back to the 16-century, wine discussions in college magazines, obituaries for college chefs to detailed High Table dinning registers, Buttery books and even a Junior Common Room Food Committee Suggestions Book. I have quoted from some sources above and will quote more below.

It is noteworthy how each librarian's response depended on considerations such as age of their college, religious inclination, culture, and significantly socio-economic background of the college. For instance, an interesting response came from Champion Hall archivist who gave me a helpful detailed history of the college as a permanent private hall founded by the Society of Jesus as Clarke's Hall, in 1896. They wrote how Champion Hall is unlike most Oxford colleges in its dinning rituals as they follow closely the Society of Jesus customs, with many flamboyant elements of Oxford College dinning thus absent. Along similar lines, Green Templeton College archivist wrote back with an apology, founded in 2008, they

did not yet have any archives related to their food or ritual practices, perhaps because routines had not yet been imbued with centuries worth of meaning?

In sharp contrast we have the response of Balliol College librarians and archivist who informed me of a whole exhibition the college had just run on food and dining in the historic collections of Balliol College titled *A Taste of Balliol*. They kindly invited me to a viewing of the exhibition, after its closing and here are a few choice observations relevant to my study of food rituals.

A respondent in Dacin et al's study remarks 'You might go to a dinner where a future controller of the BBC turns up, or a future ambassador' (1410). While outsiders may believe this is true for all Oxbridge colleges, it is not. As Campion College example indicates, the wealth, network, and age of your college, does indeed influence your opportunities within Oxford. They might not be the sole influencer, but they are a major one. If one were to look at the colleges of the prime ministers of UK, the college wealth, age, and circles, are evident. Balliol boasts of four prime ministers while Christ Church has had the majority with thirteen. Their alumni base is evident in the size of their endowment. Oddly, this translates into their meal subsidies and the rituals that govern their college halls.

Despite the perpetuated belief that all colleges are equal, they are not, student experience thus differ. In the next section, I compare my experience at St Antony's with my observations from dinners in Balliol.

Tea from the New World Versus Stir Fry Noodles for Lunch

Nozomu Hayashi, in his 1991 autobiography *England is Delicious*, documents and comments on his experience of attending a formal hall dinner at my college, St Antony's. Here he writes about the formal hall: 'The scene seemed to tell me about something we simply do not find on campus in Japan, something about the enigmatic power of tradition' (157). He also describes Oxford and Cambridge Universities:

Protected by various privileges, by the structure of ancient organizations, by long tradition, and by powerful bonds of fellowship, they have existed -and continue to exist -as a world unto themselves, isolated from general society. (152)

Hayashi's detailed dinner account contrasts and compliments my own, quite well. It is interesting that he is writing in 1991 and I, in 2023, and yet, connections persist – routine similarities that are rituals perhaps because of their persistence.

The college dinner is still announced with the ringing of a bell. The grace 'Benedictus benedicat' meaning 'Bless us, Blessed One' is still tradition as one might argue is the practice of mumbling it because '...most of the scholars at this college condescend to Christianity. He tries to mumble as much as possible so as not to be heard' (Hayashi, 162). Christianity is not condescended upon at St Antony's, but it is also evident that it is not put on a pedestal for the Antonian community by virtue of the college being one of the most international at Oxford. With more nations and diversities, emanate more deities and gods, thereby making it difficult for a college to align with one community's faith. Antony's, from the

start and because of its international routes and purpose, intentionally plays a detached role.

Founded in 1950 and becoming a full member of the University in 1963, the college has a more recent history as opposed to Balliol which has existed since 1263, a 700-year gap. Noteworthy, both Balliol and St Antony's boast of a distinct tradition of diversity. St Antony's is evident in its founding mission which is to provide an international centre for graduate students from across the world to live and work together.

Balliol's increase in diversity is largely owed to its Master Benjamin Jowett, who post the 1871 act, went out of his way to recruit Jewish and Indian students. The college was also training ground for the British, specifically Indian Civil Services. As Christopher Kissane notes in his foreword to the exhibition catalogue:

By the late 1800s, when Balliol was educating hundreds of imperial officials, the origins of the college stores sound like a tour of the British Empire's greatest reach: Egyptian cigarettes, East India Solera sherry, Congou and Songchou tea from China.... (2)

What I am alluding to here is how rituals change with the times, to maintain hierarchies and 'order'. In the 'New World', advent of colonialism, it is considered more powerful to have an international taste – one open to new flavours and practices. The ritual of establishing one's superiority by being open to international tastes has persisted, even if the routines that prove it, have changed. Snuff and cigars might be outdated (if not banned) but having mango curry with naan or spring rolls and stir fry noodles for lunch, is a recent phenomenon. Hayashi writes of the post-dinner snuff ritual in the Antony's senior common room. In contrast, I offer you the lunch items above that I personally, have consumed during my time at the college.

International cuisines from India, China, Japan, and more are a part of both Antony's and Balliol's regular lunch menus. Here are two menus from their current rotation, from the college website. In the Balliol menu, note the Chicken Tikka masala, basmati rice or even Mexican kidney bean salad. In the Antony's menu, we have Spanakopta, Moussaka, Stir fry and sesame noodles. Both adequately diverse and international in their routine consumptions. However, here I emphasise, routine is not necessarily ritual.

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SAMPLE MENU

LUNCH
 Carrot and orange soup (VEGAN) and bread roll

Pulled oats and chestnut mushroom stroganoff (VEGETARIAN)
 Pulled oats and chestnut mushrooms in tomato basil sauce (VEGAN)
 Thai pork
 Chicken tikka masala

New potatoes with olive oil and spring onions.
 Basmati rice
 Diced carrots with dill

Backed jacket potatoes with a choice of fillings from the salad bar/baked beans/
 Cheddar cheese

Salad Bar - Choice of tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, Green leaf salad,
 Mexican kidney bean salad

Sticky Toffee pudding with butterscotch sauce (VEGAN)
 Selection of cold sweets - Fruit salads, vegan chocolate mousse, cheesecake

DINNER
 Mushroom soup (VEGAN) and bread roll (usually the soup is same for lunch and dinner)

Baked pasta with spinach, vegetarian parmesan, mushrooms and pine nuts (VEGETARIAN)
 Tempeh and vegetables in Mongolian sauce (bean sprouts, mushrooms, mange tout, baby
 corn, pakchoy and Chinese cabbage) (VEGAN)
 Roast jerk chicken with banana chips and lime

Piri-piri and oregano roasted new potatoes
 Jamaican rice and peas
 Broad beans with olive oil and parsley

Salad Bar - Choice of tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, Green leaf salad,
 Algerian chickpea bean salad

Rhubarb crumble with custard (VEGAN)
 Selection of cold sweets-Fruit salad, Orange crème brûlée, Vegan coconut and mango pot

Figure 2. Balliol Menu dated 23 May 2022 (Source: Balliol College)

LUNCH & DINNER MENU	LUNCH	DINNER
MONDAY	Spanakopta Savoury Rice with Chipotle Spice & Plant Food Macaroni Florentine bake Roasted Red Onion, Carrots & French Beans Fusilli Pasta with Garlic & Herb Butter	Salmon, Ricotta & Spinach Lasagne Chicken cordon bleu Summer Sausage Ragout with Hassle Back Sweet Potato (V) Croquette Potatoes Savoy Cabbage with Double Onions
TUESDAY	Shredded Turkey with green Pesto & Linguini Pork Brochette with Cannellini Bean Cassoulet & Fried Basil Enchiladas with Vegetable Chilli & Guacamole (V) Sauté Potatoes Cauliflower, Courgette, Cherry Tomatoes	Lamb Crespelle Sesame Battered Chicken Sweet n Sour with Spring Onion Mushroom Wellington with Parsley Sauce (V) Braised Rice with Spinach Garlic Roasted Vegetables & Summer Greens HALAL
WEDNESDAY	CHEFS CHOICE	CHEFS VEGAN WEDNESDAY
THURSDAY	Skewered Lamb, Picadillo & Mint Yogurt with flat Bread Chicken One Pot with Leeks, New Potatoes & Tarragon Quorn Moussaka (V) Citrus Couscous Green Beans Provençale Pasta Arrabiatta	CHEFS FAST FOOD THURSDAY
FRIDAY	Salmon Tikka, Tomato, Onion & Coriander Salad Cajun Beef Enchiladas, Soured Cream & Avocado Puree Leek & Bean Filo Pie with Red Pesto(V) Wild Rice Sweet corn, Leeks & Courgette	Lamb Stir Fry with Spring Onion & Mushrooms Quorn Chilli in Yorkshire Pudding bowls with Garlic Bread(V) Sesame Noodles, French Fries Salad Bar HALAL

Figure 3. St Antony's menu dated for week of 22 May 2023 (Source: St Antony's)

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I have discussed the theme of exclusivity in the section above. Fox also writes that anyone wanting to integrate themselves adhere to the etiquette the table dictates:

Dipping with hands into a communal dish is *de rigeur* in some cultures, abhorrent in others. Shovelling food into the mouth with a fork would be seen as the height of indelicacy by some; the absence of forks as the height of barbarity by others.

As the University and consequently colleges, grow more international and diverse in their population, they are not simply tolerant but more welcoming of different cultures and individuals. Recently, a Rhodes Scholar, Serene Singh shared on their Instagram, how they started a formal hall with a Sikh prayer instead of regular college Latin grace. However, this grace is marked as ‘special’. It is a break in the routine and tradition – not the tradition.

It matters which communities’ ritual becomes the norm at the Oxford dinner table. When we think ‘formal hall’ - immediately we are reminded of multiple spoons, knives, and forks – graces – wine pairings. However, never of breaking a roti or fufu, placing your chopsticks the right way. It is interesting to note which culture’s rituals gets valued, it might indicate the diversity politic, population and influence on a college. Singh was the Sikh student, who took the initiative for the prayer at St Peters College. When dining there myself, I was told by students that the college welcomes ‘graces’ from other communities and religion. Change is evident.

Diwali meals have become particularly frequent in the last few years. Antony’s distributes Diwali sweets and last year also celebrated the Parsi festival of *Navroz*. Christ Church does its annual Diwali dinner, hosted by the India society, which is the place to be during the festival in Oxford. However, these are special occasions – not the ritualised norm. They are annual traditions. It will still not be considered standard to break bread and dip it in your curry and then wash said curry laden hands in the plate you ate from – which is not to say that it should be the norm, but indication of the undeniable fact that historical cultural privilege is built and showcased through food rules and rituals. As argued before, power is ritualised and becomes the norm in how certain food culture’s norms are valued above others and practiced often in place of others. The message continues to be that diversity is an occasion, not necessarily the rule.

To return to the daily meal menu of Balliol and Antony’s. There is yet to be a regular formal dinner with food from non-French or non-English cultures completely, when a festival of the community is not being celebrated. Even though one might often see curry, Thai noodles, spring rolls as part of weekly meal rota in the college dining hall. While norm is the dominant culture’s rules and food. The ‘outsider’ food will never mark an important occasion though due to globalisation; it might become a part of regular consumption.

However, with the increase in individuals consuming plant-based diets, formal hall meals with these dietary requirements, can sometimes be more international. Intriguingly the meat option, remains traditionally European if not

French or British. I dined at St Peters recently and opted for the vegan meal where I was served Aubergine with couscous and a miso glaze (not formal food in my or any vegan individual's opinion on the table). Yet the individual dining across from me received a venison steak with parsnip chips and garlic potato mash. Perhaps the French college chefs of Oxford, are seeking international cuisines, to satiate the hunger of the many vegans and vegetarians who flock their tables. St Antony's has also recently made vegetarian food as the default formal option, so one must intentionally opt for the meat. This is owed to their sustainability efforts. *A Taste of Balliol* reports a similar drift towards vegetarian diets and the ritual of more environmentally friendly food in Balliol College. Your college's menu thus now communicates just how inclusive, sustainable, cosmopolitan and international it might be.

I address the use of autoethnography as one of my primary research methods, before progressing. Knight and Shipman (2021) in their autoethnographic research on food-based migration experiences between Australia and Britain emphasise the importance of autoethnography in food research. They argue that autoethnography is an appropriate method to 'probe emotional, sensory, and embodied aspects of food experience' (25) and further how it is an 'acute act of critical social analysis' (29). It is building on these notions of novelty and the importance of autoethnography to food research, I assert the importance of it as a method and further, my own identity to this paper's research.

This paper serves as a tribute to the numerous privileged meals I have been fortunate enough to consume. It is an exercise in introspection and consumption, prompting me to reflect on the rituals I have upheld, when and why, and those I have broken. My biases and privilege stare down at me – as an upper caste cisgendered Indian individual who is technically an insider to the University space by virtue of being a student, unlike Hayashi. However, my race, gender, class, and nationality often make me feel like a stranger, even in the smallest of instances. Consequently, I find myself straddling the line between outsider and insider, and this intricate intersection is most evident in the food rituals.

During my time as a student and later as an elected representative, I had the privilege of attending exclusive events and meals that were typically inaccessible to the student body. These occasions included frequent high tables, Chancellor's receptions, and University council dinners. Nevertheless, as a woman of colour from India, there are moments, particularly when participating in the rituals of consuming chocolate mousse with the correct spoon after a challenging stuffed pigeon, where I question my presence, position, and choices at the table. It is from this dual perspective and lens that I have written this paper. This research has led me to ponder how food rituals within the University construct the ideal Oxford student/scholar and whether I conform to or resist this ideal.

Coriander and Cake: Diversity at the Formals

My first meal at Oxford was the Fresher's welcome dinner at St Antony's. It is odd how vividly I recall certain elements of the evening. I remember the Warden's

welcome speech. I remember being uncomfortable in my very Indian outfit of a *kurta*, *duppatta*, *bindi* and *jhumka* – we were encouraged to wear ‘ethnic’ and yet standing in a sea of black tuxedos, dresses and gowns, one cannot help but feel a little out of place.

However, I also remember easing into the night as I spoke to fellow students, had my first conversations with individuals who are some of my closest friends to this day. I remember laughing during the dinner and for days after at the chef’s use of coriander as a garnish for the chocolate cake, the dessert course. For someone of South Asian origin, this included me and some of my fellow diners, coriander is unfathomable in a dessert – it is used as garnish in curries or a base for *chutneys*. I have forgotten the jokes that were cracked on the dinner table that night but to this day I remember the roaring laughter which soothed my anxiety of using the right silverware and helped me ease in.

To compare this joy-filled incident to Hayashi’s observation: ‘...Later, I learned that in an academic setting like this, it is considered good manners to feign ignorance of the food in front of your eyes’ (163). The observation is precise in that many dinners are meant more as a social opportunity than simply eating. To see and be seen. As Dacin et al (2010) also argue, it is a performance of adhering to a legacy of rituals while building connections that will last you beyond the dinner table, establishing social capital in life beyond Oxford. It is therefore a ritual, in certain dinners, to ignore your food. I would even conjecture, that the more important the company, the less important the food because one does not want to be caught with their mouth full of bread at the exact moment when the Proctor has chosen to speak to you about your research. It is always surprising to me how quickly senior members of the University consume their food, I can only hypothesise that it is years of Oxford formal dining training and hope that their bodies can cope with the speed.

Another interesting notion here is how certain rules and rituals are learned and not written. To place emphasis on Hayashi’s use of the word ‘learn’ – if rituals establish boundaries, convey values, and imply hierarchies, to not know them is to admit one’s unfamiliarity with the space and lack of information. In the Oxbridge context, knowledge is quite literally power on the dinner table - as one gazes reverently across the dinner table to the colleague who gestures towards the right silverware for the snails.

However, counter argument would be that often an individual in power can slow the rest of the table down to their pace, depending on the respect they command or by virtue of their position. As an extremely slow eater, I blame my Indian parents who instilled in me the value of well masticated food, I always thank my stars when a senior professor on the table takes their time with their meal. It has happened with me, and fellow students, especially when at a high table, if the head of the table is finished, your food will be removed, regardless of what is left on your plate.

Luckily, in the context of younger colleges, like Antony’s, they are not as strict, unless it is a special dinner. Knowing the stewards personally, also helps, not

just in finishing your food comfortably but also bagging second desserts. Incidentally, it is the stewards in most colleges, including Antony's who guard the rituals and decorum of the space. I have been told off about my clumsy robe. I have also seen the MCR President being handed the gavel by the deputy steward, who keeps the student dinners punctual. It is interesting how rituals and traditions are protected by those, who are not even participating in them directly.

Before I conclude this pastiche, that attempted to piece together the relationship between power, food and ritual, a note on the changing rituals at formal hall. I have written about the diversity as ritualised norm versus occasion, vegetarian diets and international cuisines, what remains is new rituals.

During last year's St Antonys Christmas formal, a Japanese student's unexpected outburst captured everyone's attention. He excitedly proclaimed that Japan had defeated Germany in the football match, a historical moment. Clearly, he had been following the game on his phone during the meal. The entire Hilda Besse (Antony's dining hall) erupted in cheers, and many even stood up to applaud. The almost surreal event showcased how technology had become an integral part of formal hall gatherings, with certain new unwritten rules emerging.

While it is considered impolite to be glued to one's phone during the meal, taking selfies or photos of the food and companions is perfectly acceptable. The idea of the panopticon, is oddly, extended to not just your immediate college formal hall, but the world.

Nevertheless, amidst these modern interventions, the essence of community spirit endures. However, despite modern intervention, I cannot help but acknowledge that the spirit of community remains. Albeit the spirit of community is for those who are allowed access to it, as members or those who can simply follow the rituals seamlessly. However, in that football victory, as I laughed with the rest of the hall and clapped for Japan's victory in an Oxford college formal hall hundreds of miles away from the match and the country – sitting next to German friends who also congratulated Japan, I could not help but accept the principal ritual behind these formal dinners – to come together and celebrate with your community and revel in your time at this institution.

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