Drinking Mate for the Soul: Socio-cultural Habit and (Trans)National Family Tradition

“Nos pasamos el alma de labio a labio como de mano a mano nos pasamos el mate”

“We share our souls from lips to lips as from hand to hand we pass the mate around” (Ernesto Morales)

This study of mate ['mate] drinking as a socio-cultural practice and a family tradition is based on my own experiences in Argentina and abroad. I base my research largely on my understanding as an Argentinean who grew up abroad in a family where mate was consumed daily. The presented conclusions draw on interviews with my nuclear and extended family, as well as personal experiences, and questionnaires filled out by over a dozen personal and family friends.

What is mate?

Mate is a South American beverage made by steeping dried leaves of yerba mate (Ilex paraguarensis) in hot water and drinking the infusion. It is extremely popular in Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, Paraguay, Southern Brazil, and certain areas of Bolivia. The vast majority of
Argentineans drink it daily (Cáffaro 2005), in a custom similar to drinking tea or coffee in other countries. In fact, in April 2009 it was officially declared the national drink of Argentina by the Argentinean Senate (Declaran 2009). However, unlike tea and, particularly, coffee, mate has not left the private sphere at home to join the public sphere in commercial shops where individuals can purchase drinks prepared by strangers. As you will learn in these pages, in Argentinean culture, mate is almost a sacred practice of the private and intimate realm. One piece of anonymous internet folklore, a popular chain email, labels mate as “the opposite of TV: it makes you think when you are alone, and chat when you’re with others” (El Mate 2005).

One of the things that makes mate distinctive is that it is markedly an intimate social phenomenon. Mate often consumed in small groups at home. It is usually shared with family or friends, by taking turns and passing around the cup. I find it important to point out that everybody drinks from the same straw. During my interview with my mother, she said: “I read somewhere that mate had become popular at some point in Russia, but each person had their own mate with their own straw!” (Sautu A., 2010). Whether the fact is true or not is irrelevant, her comment highlights Argentineans’ awareness of the importance of mate as an act of intimacy.

In my own experience, drinking from the same straw is never an issue in the minds of Argentineans. I have never heard, for example, someone refusing to drink from the same straw than everybody else because he or she is sick and afraid of being contagious to the others. As far as I can remember, I have never witnessed someone catching a cold from someone else from sharing mate, or assuming that mate was the means of contagion. It is definitely not something Argentineans consciously choose to do despite of health risks. Sharing the straw is simply not considered an issue at all in Argentinean’s minds. I cannot think of a similar socially accepted
situation in other Western countries in which a group of people share something mouth to mouth, except perhaps passing a cigar, a joint, or a bottle of wine in very informal situations.

Mate was originally drunk out of special hollowed gourds, also called mates, although they are commonly made out of metal today, as well as other materials, such as wood or ceramic. The straw, called bombilla, is commonly metallic nowadays, although also often made out of a hollowed cane. The bombilla has a strainer at the end. Mate is prepared by placing some of the commercially available mixture of dried and chopped leaves known as yerba mate into the mate gourd, filling it up a little more than half way. The bombilla straw is then placed into the yerba. Then, hot water is poured into the mate gourd over the yerba. Since the bombilla has a strainer piece at the end, one can suck the filtered water infusion from the tip of the bombilla without ingesting the dried leaves.

Historical context

Before the arrival of the Spanish to the Americas, the indigenous people of the area regularly consumed mate. It was called ka’aygua in the Guaraní language, which literally means something like “herb water”. The term mate is the Spanish adaptation of the Quechua term mati, which means gourd. Nowadays the Spanish word mate is used to refer to the drink as well as the cup it is drunk from. It was quickly adopted by the “criollos” (people of mixed indigenous and Spanish descent), and became a staple of the life of the gauchos (the Argentinean cowboys) – who drank it without ameliorating its bitter taste with sugar as a sign of macho-ness. The Jesuits helped popularize the consumption of mate by commercializing the yerba mate. It is still a staple of the Argentinean economy and one of its most important exportation products (Ricca Mussio 2009).
Drinking Mate as Social Tradition

Most Argentineans drink mate at home once or twice daily with the family. It is also the indispensable offering when someone comes to visit. There is a complex mate drinking etiquette at play when people prepare and share mate. For example, the water used must be heated almost to a boiling point, but never to an actual boil – since it is believed it would scald the yerba mate and ruin the taste. Before the hot water is poured over the yerba mate, it is customary to add some lukewarm water. One of the reasons for that custom is to protect the yerba mate from being scalded by the hot water.

The person who prepares and serves the mate is called the cebador. The cebador must always drink the first mate him or herself, to make sure it is not too hot and good enough to be shared, and because the first mate tends to be unpleasantly strong. Drinkers must never use the bombilla straw to stir the mate, in part because that could cause the yerba mate to slide through the strainer at the end of the bombilla straw and drinkers would end up swallowing it. After the sever has drank the first mate, he or she serves one for the person to his right. Once that person drinks all the water in the mate, he or she gives it back to the cebador, who refills the water and passes it on to the next person in the circle, and so on.

Drinkers in a mate circle are supposed to drink all the water in each serving before returning it to the cebador. Each person is supposed to drink each mate relatively quickly, so it is often customary for the person drinking to be silent instead of talking, so that she or he can finish the serving and pass it back to the cebador. Otherwise, the other drinkers might get anxious. In my family when someone is talking on and on while holding the mate instead of drinking it and
allowing the circle to continue, the others will likely respond with a joking scolding such as: “It’s not a microphone!”

Drinkers in the circle are not supposed to thank the cebador for each mate. In fact, when one says thank you to the cebador while returning the mate, it is taken to mean one does not want any more servings. After a number of servings the infusion is no longer as strong and the mate is said to be lavado (washed out). Depending on the preferences of the drinkers, some people change some or all of the yerba mate one or several times in the same sitting in order to keep a strong infusion. If visiting, one always abides by the customs of the house in reference to how strong they prefer the mate, or whether they add sugar or other additives to it or not.

The practice of sharing mate with people close to us, as well as all the customary behaviors that go into it, are considered by many to be expressions of kindness and sharing, friendship and intimacy, politeness and acceptance. In his article, *Passage to play: rituals of drinking time in American society*, Joseph R. Gusfield highlights coffee and alcohol as markers of “work time” and “play time” respectively. Following his premise, I would say that mate signals a time of sharing and intimacy. The afternoon mate in particular, when adults and children gather after a work or school day, is often a behavioral routine that marks the boundary between public to private life. Preparing and sharing the afternoon mate communicates a clear message: its “family time” (Gusfield 2003).

Sharing mates is considered to be an opportunity to bring people closer, to take some time for a pause and to chat with those we care about. It creates a moment of what Victor Turner termed communitas as hierarchies melt away and the people partaking in a mate circle become equals, taking turns to drink equal servings from the same straw (1969). Even though someone
has the practical role of cebador, this is not a hierarchical position that yields any particular powers. The cebador and the drinkers are all bound to the rules of social justice present in the mate circle system.

My father, Ernesto, called it an “integrating element” (De Leon 2010). My grandmother’s brother called it “a medium of communication and a symbol of friendship,” pointing out that in Argentina whenever you visit someone’s home, they will always ask “would you like some mates?” (Gutierrez E., 2010). Even my teenage cousin articulated it well, stating that it was an excuse “to get together and chat or play cards,” a “symbol of friendship and trust” with those to whom we are close; as well as a way to bring us closer to newer acquaintances: “if you don’t have anything to talk about, you offer them some mate and that breaks the ice” (Sautu L. 2010)

**Mate and Cultural Identity**

Because drinking mate is a practice unique to the most southern regions of South America, and in the case of Argentina, such an ingrained quotidian practice, it has come to be associated by many with our own identity as Argentineans. In my interviews and questionnaires I asked people if they considered that mate meant something to Argentineans as part of our cultural and national identity. All the answers were affirmative. Many of the answers stated, in one way or another, what my cousin worded rather concisely: “Well, of course! (In Argentina) Wherever you go there’s mate!” (Sautu, L 2010).

My mother and sister, who have also experienced being mate drinkers in a foreign country, think that mate as an identity marker came about because, being something strange and attention-catching for outsiders, others have come to associate Argentineans with mate. When I asked my grandmother’s brother about mate as a marker of Argentinean identity, he said: “Of
course, Che Guevara drank mate! That’s how people knew he was Argentinean!” (Gutierrez, H. 2010) My mother said, “proof of it is that people who have never seen mate or know anything about it, remember the scenes in the (Argentinean) soap operas where people are drinking mate, and recognize it from there” (Sautu A. 2010). She also pointed out that it is commonly a practice best recognized for its connection with the lower and middle class. It is associated with the humble homes and the family time. Going back to the soap operas, she pointed out that in them it was never the rich people who were shown drinking mate but the people in the working class neighborhoods. So it is, she says, that mate has come to represent Argentinean popular culture.

Many Argentineans also associated the consumption of mate with native-ness and national pride. When asked about mate and Argentinean identity my aunt pointed out that it was our very own tradition, that it came “from aboriginal culture, the Spanish didn’t bring it here, the Guaraní people drank it” (Ruiz 2010). The indigenous origin of mate drinking, as well as the fact that they also consider it a drink of friendship and peace, is a fundamental piece of vernacular lore in Argentina. The legends indigenous peoples tell about the origins of mate are widely documented and circulated in Argentina.

It is also important to point out that many Argentineans also associate mate with nationalism because of the importance of the mate industry, given that the economies of some provinces rely largely on the production of yerba mate. Finally, many people I asked about mate and national identity pointed out that it is a custom people take with them when they leave Argentina, thus making it into a visible sign of Argentinean identity for foreigners who come in contact with them.
Drinking Mate as Personal Habit

Many drinkers of mate find it either relaxing or stimulating. Drinking mate by oneself is considered by many to be a form of meditation. Personally, I have the habit of drinking mate while I study. Through the inquiry process I conducted for the purpose of writing this paper, I learned I am definitely not alone in that practice. Many find mate to be the quintessential drink of the Argentinean student.

Both my mother and father, as well as my uncle and aunt, agreed that it was during their college years that they drank the most mate. In fact, my mother distinctively remembered getting together with her friends to study at the house of a classmate who lived with her family. She said that when they studied through the afternoon her friend’s mother would bring them all a tray with snacks and mate all ready to be consumed. She found the bringing of the mate a clear expression of support.

My father, who is not Argentinean by birth, stated he drank mate practically every day during his college years. He moved to Argentina precisely to study, and although he had never been exposed to mate before, picked it up quickly from his classmates. After that period in his life the frequency of his consumption of mate dropped dramatically. Nowadays, he no longer lives in Argentina or drinks mate regularly, yet, as he pointed out, mate is never missing when he visits with Argentinean friends abroad.
My mother, who has continued to drink mate daily in the mornings and/or afternoons, also drinks mate when she sits at the computer to work, a custom my aunt also follows. It was pointed out that mate, which contains high levels of caffeine (or mateine, as it is commonly referred to), does have some stimulating effects. It was interesting to find out that even though most people I gathered information from pointed out mate’s stimulating effects, the vast majority admitted not experiencing that effect themselves, which they explained as caused by the continuous consumption of mate. The general agreement was, nonetheless, that the repeating cycle of pouring water, picking up the mate and sucking on the bombilla to drink it, also had a positive effect in their alertness level when concentrating on work or study. As the chain email I mentioned earlier states: “All Argentinean keyboards are full of yerba mate” (*El Mate* 2005).

**Drinking Mate as Family Practice**

There are many ways to drink mate: with or without sugar, with lemon or orange peel, with other herbs (such as mint), with hot water or milk, cold with ice and citrus juice (this version is known as tereré), and more. Some of these variations depend on...
geographical region, season of the year, or particular circumstances. However, I have found that most people tend to like drinking mate the way they grew up drinking it, that is following the preferences of their parents.

My mother and I both drink it “bitter” (that is with no sugar added) nowadays. Talking to my sister I remembered that, in fact, my mother used to drink it with sugar when we were younger. I asked her about the reason for that change and she said: “I have always liked it bitter, I just started adding a little bit of sugar to the first serving of mate when you two starting drinking it, because that’s what you do for children, so it’s more palatable. But you insisted you liked it bitter since you were very little and we all went eventually back to drinking it bitter” (Sautu A. 2010).

As I would later find out, my generation was not the first to go through that process in my family. When I interviewed my grandmother, she also stated she always drank it bitter with no sugar – which has, in fact, always been my experience when drinking mate with her. However, when I asked my uncle (my mother’s brother) how he drank it, he said: “with a little bit of sugar, on the first serving only.” When I asked, “Well, where did you learn that from if grandma only drinks it bitter?” He answered, “she may say that now, but I assure you when your mother and I were little she gave it to us with a little bit of sugar on the first serving” (Sautu S. 2010)

Besides the particular variations in the preparation of mate, families tend to have particular customary traditions and tacit rules in regards to how mate is consumed. For example, some families would not find a problem with the cebador drinking more than once per round, while others would find it inadmissible. In some families, the cebador is expected to change the yerba mate every ten served mates or so to maintain the strength of the infusions, while others do
not mind drinking mate lavado as much. There are also particular practices as to the cup used to
drink mate from, such as where it is stored, how it is supposed to be cleaned (for example, no
soap, as it may affect the taste of mate), or the particular way of curing wooden and gourd mates
before their first use.

According to the results of my inquiries, I would venture to say that many if not most
Argentineans consider mate drinking a family affair, as something that brings a family together
and gives them something to share. To go back to the chain email cited above: “It’s the only
thing parents and children share without arguing or blaming” (El Mate 2005). Many of my
informants recalled mate drinking as a common family moment in their childhood, and referred
to the afternoon mate as a valuable opportunity to catch up on how the family members’ days
went and chat. My grandmother claimed she only drinks mate with company, and that it is a
pillar of communication within a family. My aunt, for example, remembers from her youth that
mate was always present when there was a family crisis. “When we were up all night because
dad was sick,” she said, “it was mate after mate after mate. It’s a way of support” (Ruiz 2010).

Mate and Transnational Identity in My Nuclear Family

My sister and I were born in Argentina to an Argentinean mother and a Panamanian
father. Early in our childhood the family relocated to Panama. Later on my parents divorced and
my mother remarried another Panamanian, thus adding a step brother to the family. As would be
easily expected, the core of mate drinkers in my home is formed by my sister, my mother and I –
who happen to be all the females – while my father, my mother’s ex-husband, and my step-
brother, drink it only occasionally. As it is also easy to suspect, mate is a strong family bond
between my mother, my sister, and I, as well as marker of Argentinean national identity for the three of us.

Perhaps because I am the oldest, and thus lived in Argentina longer before our family relocated, I have maintained stronger identity ties with my nation of birth, and a stronger mate drinking practice than my sister. Or perhaps, I am simply a sentimental sucker for traditions (no wonder I ended up being a folklorist!). The fact is that, when I interviewed my mother, Adriana, on the role of mate in our nuclear family she said to me that it was “that little thing that you and I share that ties you to your roots from my side (of the family)” (El Mate 2005). She pointed out that although mate has many social and personal functions in someone’s life, in this particular case and situation, mate is something I alone know how to share with her in that special way. She told me: “Therefore, it should be considered as a form of cultural transcendence through you” (Sautu, A. 2010). This brings me back to the popular chain email I have been citing, which also talks about parent’s pride in cultural transcendence through the consumption of mate. It states: “When you have a child, you start giving him mate when he asks for some. You give it to him just warm, with lots of sugar, and they feel like grown-ups. You feel so proud when your baby starts drinking mate, your heart beats so hard” (El Mate 2005).

I found the perspective of Diego, my step brother particularly interesting, as an insider/outsider who observed and later joined our mate drinking practice. He pointed out that he ends up drinking mate about two out of every five times he visits our house, particularly if he is there in the afternoon, or if I am home on vacations. I have to point out from my personal experience that I knew without the shadow of a doubt that he was a part of the family that would remain so regardless of the subsequent divorce of his father and my mother, not just when he
continued to join us for Sunday lunch or Christmas, but particularly from the moment he joined the mate circle.

Diego stated that since he was exposed to mate through us while he was still a rather young child, he never saw it as something weird. However, he had no desire to share in the practice, until he came to an understanding of the social practice of sitting down and sharing it with someone. “That’s when I felt I wanted to try it, it came natural”, he said; although he also clearly remembered the shock of the bitter taste the first time he tried. “It’s an acquired taste, like beer”, he told me. He sees it as something that unites our family and that allows my mother, my sister, and I “to have a bit of Argentina wherever you go”. I tested his mate lore by asking him if he knew how mate should be prepared, even though he has never prepared it himself or taken the role of cebador. “The water should be hot but not boiling, and you should never stir the bombilla,” he said (Vergara 2010).

The interview with my sister, Samantha, also turned up poignant memories and statements. She pointed out that when she talks about mate and Argentinean identity, she thinks about going to the “club” (the neighborhood place for families and children to gather) and seeing every family or group of friends with a thermos carrying hot water and mate. She also reminded me of a scene of our childhood in which I was teaching her to prepare mate. After pouring the yerba mate in the mate gourd and adding a teaspoon of sugar, I placed my palm on the gourd’s opening, tilted it around and shook it, just as mom had taught us, in order to get the yerba mate and the sugar to mix up. After carefully completing that procedure, I pointed out the green circular stain left on my palm and told her I very much liked that stain. I said that I thought it was a mark of Argentinean identity because people who don’t drink mate would never have it on their hands.
I would like to highlight one more connection between the interview with my sister and the role of mate in our lives as a sign of Argentinean national identity that transcends the borders we left behind decades ago. This last point was not brought about by anything she said, but by how she said it. To understand this point I have to explain that although both Argentina and Panama are Spanish speaking countries, the accents are markedly different. They not only display a different intonation, but unique sounds and a different conjugation of verbs in the second singular person. My mother and I have a clearly mixed accent, while my sister’s way of speaking is clearly Panamanian. However, all of us unconsciously change our accents back to the Argentinean way of speaking when we visit Argentina, or even when we talk to our family members in Argentina over the phone. As the interview with my sister went on and we continued to talk about mate, her accent slowly transformed. In the beginning of the conversation I was amazed, like I often am considering I no longer live in Panama, at her thick Panamanian accent. As we brought the conversation to a pause, I couldn’t help but notice Argentinean accent was definitely coming through in her voice – talking about mate had clearly elicited what Blom and Gumperz call metaphorical code switching.

In their article, “Social Meaning in Linguistic Structure”, Blom and Gumperz delve into the meaning of linguistic choice. That is how particular ways of speaking, or codes, vary according to context, indicating social relationships and/or symbolizing particular social identities a person may assume. Code switching can be conscious or unconscious and take place due to a number of reasons. Blom and Gumperz clearly identify two kinds of code switching: situational and metaphorical. Situation code switching depends on the particular social situation, which includes the place or setting and the participants. On the other hand metaphorical code switching depends on speech event, which includes not only a social situation, but also includes
a recognizable beginning and end, and a particular topic. Metaphorical code switching emerges unconsciously in spontaneous speech. The language switch in metaphorical code switching “relates to particular kinds of topics or subject matters rather than to change in social situation” (1972, 425).

When I interviewed my sister, we were not in Argentina (a setting that induces code switching to Argentinean speech in my sister). My sister does not usually switch to Argentinean speech when talking to me like she does when talking to one of our relatives who live in Argentina. Therefore, her accent did not change according to the participants in the conversations. I can only infer then, that she did not switch codes during our interview due to any of those two situational reasons. Instead, it must have been caused by the topic. Clearly, talking about mate, and therefore touching on subjects such as Argentinean identity and memories of Argentina, elicited an unconscious and spontaneous metaphorical code switching.

**Mate Lore**

Along with the customary practices surrounding the consumption of mate, there are copious amounts of popular lore regarding mate. For instance, there are many beliefs surrounding the benefits of drinking it. My sister, for example, believes it helps people maintain digestive regularity, even though she never experienced laxative effects from drinking mate, because my mother and other family members swear by it. It is also believed to have powerful detoxifying qualities, be it due to particular properties of the plant or to the large amounts of water consumed with it, or both. Finally, it is considered to be very nutritious, because of the presence of numerous vitamins and minerals, particularly iron and potassium. More recently, with the rise of cancer awareness, the word has spread about mate’s powerful antioxidants. On
the other hand, for many people, mate, like other alkaloids, is acidic. In my family, and others, some people add certain herbs to the mate in order to counteract its acidity.

There are also many sayings involving mate. In my nuclear family, particularly, we are all familiar with two of them, which my mother says often: The proverb “Don’t heat up the water if you are not making mate” and the wellerism “To each his own, said an old lady and drank mate from a plate.” There are also countless folk songs and poems related to mate, of which the book *Cancionero del Mate* (del Campo 1950) makes a valuable collection. Nowadays there is also a critical amount of internet lore related to mate, from how-to websites and YouTube videos with detailed instructions on how to prepare and consume mate, to chain emails, such as the one repeatedly cited throughout this paper.

**Conclusion**

There is no doubt that drinking mate is a complex social phenomenon deeply entangled with Argentinean’s cultural and national identity and family traditions. In the case of my nuclear family, it has served the role of an anchor between my mother and her daughters, as well as between the three of us and our homeland.

To continue the trend of many paragraphs above, I would like to close off this paper by citing, one more time, the chain email referred to in the introduction, which I received from my mother for the first time over five years ago. I have since received different versions of it from different people, and, while doing my investigation for this paper, found version of its text in hundreds of webpage hits from Google. I believe it has become so popular, because it is beautifully written and masterful at conveying the meaning of mate for Argentineans, and for my
transplanted (as my mother, who is a biologist often says) family. As conclusion, I will offer you my translation of its last paragraph:

The simple mate is nothing else and nothing more than a demonstration of values. It’s the solidarity of putting up with those mates “lavados” because the conversation is good … the conversation, not the mate. It’s the respect for taking turns to listen and to speak: you speak while the other drinks, and vice versa. It’s the honesty to say: enough! Change the yerba! It’s companionship turned into a moment… It’s the sensitivity to boiling water. It’s caring enough to mention, smiling, “It’s hot, isn’t it?” It’s the modesty of the one who serves the best mate. It’s the generosity of giving ‘till the end. It’s the hospitality of the invitation. It’s the justice of the one for each. It’s the obligation to say “thanks,” at least once a day. It’s the honest, loyal and ethic attitude of gathering, without bigger goals than sharing.

Now you know, a mate is not just a mate. Will you heat up some water? (El Mate 2005).
References


De León, Ernesto. 2010. Interview by Nadia De León. Translation by Nadia De León.

De León, Samantha. 2010. Interview by Nadia De León.


El Mate. 2005. Chain email received from Adriana Sautu. Largely available on hundreds of websites online and forwarded through email, although not always with this or any title. Translation by Nadia De León.


Gutierrez, Elena. 2010. Interview by Nadia De León. Translation by Nadia De León.


Sample internet lore:

http://www.mymateworld.com/step1.htm

9 steps on how to prepare a mate, with pictures. Also an instructional video on the right temperature for mate, and instructions on how to use the bombilla (mate straw).

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PYYHmskxpa8&feature=player_embedded

Youtube video on how to prepare mate

http://argentinoenusa.com/read-154.html

Text version of the anonymous chain email cited.

http://www.slideshare.net/wsantin/tomemos-mate-en-espaol

Slideshow version of the same text I received as a chain email.