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**Topic: Are you pointing your chopsticks at me?**

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Posted by: futari

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It's that time of year again when family meals become alarmingly frequent and our table manners get dusted down and put on display. For the Japanese, this brings the realization that the things we do unconsciously in the privacy of our apartments can cause mortal offense and/or internal hemorrhage to grandparents and other elders on the premises.

My own relatives are real sticklers when it comes to the proper deployment of o-hashì (chopsticks). 'O-sato ga shireru (You know where a person comes from)' is what my grandmother says whenever she witnesses an o-hashì taboo happening between fingers of anyone within 1 meter radius. It is useless to argue that, genetically, you come from her, because she'll stare you down and say: 'Jodan ja naiyo (Don't kid me)'. Then she'll take her chopsticks and demonstrate exactly the right way to do things. By the time she's finished, your appetite has gone and your cousins have drunk all the sake.

O-hashì reached the Japanese some 1,800 years ago. In the beginning only gods and the emperor could eat with o-hashì; the rest of the populace - mere mortals - ate with their hands. Perhaps because of this o-hashì retained their hallowed reputation and came with all sorts of subtexts that later morphed into a list of do's and don'ts.

Here are just a few:

MAYOBASHI (wandering chopsticks) is to allow one's chopsticks to hover over the food. This isn't just an indication of finickiness and indecision; it's an insult to the cook.

NIGIRIBASHI (chopsticks in the fist) is a sign of aggression and hostility toward one's fellow diners.

SAGURIBASHI (poking chopsticks) is to use the chopsticks to ferret out the choicest morsels in your bowl and is considered the height of gross acts.

UJEBASHI (to ask for seconds while still holding the chopsticks) is inadvisable unless you're one of the leads in 'The Seven Samurai.'

SASHIBASHI (piercing chopsticks) is a sign of barbarism.

NAMIDABASHI (weeping chopsticks) is to allow one's chopsticks to drip with sauce or other liquids. Yuck!

NAMEBASHI (licking chopsticks) is something you don't do once you get past age of 9.

YOKOBASHI (sideways chopsticks) is an act often sighted at izakaya pub parties. You know how

people put their chopsticks together to scrape food off the plate! A big no-no.

Even simple o-hashhi acts that have practically become second nature are often permissible:-

KOMEBASHI (to push food into one's mouth with the ends of the chopstick) is something that we all do, especially with things like potatoes and takoyaki(octopus balls), but which can be very unpopular with our elders.

Then there are the more obvious gaucheries like YOSEBASHI (to pull plates of food closer with one's chopsticks) and SASHIBASHI (to point at other people with one's chopsticks).

The absolute taboos, drummed into us from childhood, have religious connotations:-

TATEBASHI (to stick chopsticks upright into a bowl of rice) done only when putting the bowl on the Buddhist home altar for the dead. These meals for the spirits are called MAKURAMESHI (pillow food) and will spell an early end for anyone who dare at them.

And HASHIWATASHI (to pass or receive items from someone else's chopsticks) is an act permitted only inside crematoriums, where bones of loved ones are passed from one family member to the other using o-hashhi.

It is said that the Japanese are the only Asian people to value chopsticks so highly that they have designated, personal sets at home. Maybe so, but when I was in high school, my friend and I forgot our o-bento (lunchbox) chopsticks and had to resort to two Hello Kitty pencils turned upside down.