

# Food consumption and the Anthropologist

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## Historical aspects

Things have changed since Audrey Richards (1932) and Margaret Mead (Guthe and Mead 1945) took interest in studying food and nutrition from an anthropological viewpoint. A number of well-known anthropologists such as B. Malinowski (1935) or Raymond Firth (1934) showed an interest in food production. Then, members of the psychoanalytical school such as A. Kardiner, Ralph Linton, Cora Dubois and West (1945) focused, to a certain extent, on feeding behaviour.

More recently, since the "Man the Hunter" symposium (1968), human ecologists have shown interest in the food quest. Robert Lee (1969), Roy Rappaport (1968), Marshall Sahlins (1972) and many others (Hawkes, O'Connell, Hill and Chanov 1985; Hames and Vickers 1983), who scrutinised, in a Darwinian perspective, the predatory behaviour of traditional hunter/gatherers.

Today, nutritional anthropology has become a fashionable topic, an international commission has been created in the framework of IUAES and since Audrey Richard and Widdowson (1936), transdisciplinary studies (Bailey and Peacock 1988) have focused on food and behaviour, which is the case of our work on the Anthropology of Food of Cameroonian Populations (Garine and Harrison 1988; Bahuchet, Hladik & Garine ). It is recognised today that the holistic approach of the anthropologist is pretty well adapted to such a complex field as food and nutrition.

Theoretical aspects have been raised, for instance, by Helen Messer (1984), Gretel Pelto (1989). There is, however, a tendency to focus on urban industrialised societies and the western consumer and his specific problems, and to consider that he is a paragon for the human being.

## The western world as a focus?

In the framework of the western urban industrialised culture, there are, of course, a broad range of variations and differences according to location, time, social group to mobilise the anthropologist. For instance, a very abundant literature is available on the food behaviour of teenagers. However, most of these groups have a number of features in common, and the importance of media tends towards a homogenisation through economic pressure, advertising, western scientific knowledge about nutrition.

## Particularities of the western diet

The topic of this very meeting — Impact of changing food choices and habits on nutritional status in European countries — reflects some of the general preoccupations of the western world. The material conditions of western livelihood are characterised by a plethoric availability of foods, lack of energy expenditure and feeding patterns which are

left to the initiative of individuals in a psychologically aggressive environment.

Ecological ties have been severed and it is possible for anybody, anywhere, at any time to consume any type of food in any quantity provided he has enough cash at his disposal.

The availability and palatability of modern foods have given rise to a tendency to overeat and to adopt a type of diet in which fats, sugar and animal proteins dominate, while the fibre content of food is reduced. We are not observing the demonstration of an inner nutritional wisdom. In a plethoric food environment, the modern urbanite eats too much and exercises too little, features which, in evolutionary terms, do not contribute very much to his biological adaptation. The result is widespread overweight and the prevalence of a whole range of physical and psychopathological ailments such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, anorexia nervosa or bulimia. The intensification of work and the competitiveness and aggressivity of the urban environment create stresses which can be partially soothed through comforting ingestion — indulging in food, alcoholic drinks and drugs. Anxiety is raised by the conflict between the natural propensity to eat in order to fuel the body and, as Pollock (1995 : XIV) remarks, “an unnaturally imposed system of control to reach a slim target body image...” established in a particular cultural and social context. There is a sharp opposition between reality and nutritional ideals.

#### Anxiety or guilt

A number of authors have written about food anxiety, suggesting it is a biologically ingrained characteristic of the human being as an omnivorous animal, “...balancing security against adventure in food choices” (Rozin 1976). I wonder if we could not identify here the influence of historical factors, a feeling of culpability in accordance with the ethos of the countries who have presided the industrialisation of the western world, and are today the economic leaders and control the media. I am referring here to northern western countries and the USA, valuating the dominance of the intellect upon the flesh. The Makrobiotik (i.e. the art of prolonging life) was published in 1796 in Germany by Christoph Wilhelm Hufeland, a famous physician and friend of Goethe (Kühnau 1970 : 60). During the XIXth century, in response to the explosion of the urban industrial way of life and the rise of a proletariat, the doctrine of “moral eating” appeared as an inheritance of puritanism specifically to improve the virtue of the miserable working class (Mennel 1985 : 106) whose hunger was to be satisfied without waste or pleasure. Today, “eating for health” has become the battle cry and a profitable advertising argument in many affluent societies. Modern man is expected to become a rational dietetic consumer. He is supposed to attune his wants to his needs according to up-to-date standards of scientific westernised groups. The anthropologist is welcome to look into the attitudes and behaviour of the western consumer both to improve his health and for supporting the ambitions of food industries.

As the food pattern of industrialised urban civilisation has been spread world wide by its media monopoly, he is also expected to look at the influence of the western food style

upon traditional acculturating societies such as the Samoans (Baker et al 1986; Bindon 1995 : 227) and among Indian minorities in the United States like the Pima (Danforth et al 1981), or among traditional populations in Nauru (Pollock 1995 : 87) and elsewhere (Wilson 1995 : 213).

He can also profitably be hired as a consumer sciences consultant to look at the behaviour of westernised elites throughout the world. Does all this exhaust reality? Is it worthwhile believing that westernisation is not inevitable and that other valid food styles can flourish?

#### Non-western food systems

Non-western food systems still exist in half the population of the world. They can be studied for their intrinsic interest :

- Cynically, to find out how they can be destroyed most rapidly to leave the way to westernisation in terms of public health and modern commercial interests;
- to find out how qualitative and quantitative difficulties in the food and nutrition system can be overcome and what should be the target groups.

For a long time the input of the social sciences has been limited to going by stereotypes reflecting generalisations drawn from data hastily obtained from the most easily reached part of the third world populations and reflecting our western concepts about food more than local motivations difficult to unveil at short term. It is today more accepted that food systems need a refined pluridisciplinary approach of sufficient duration to be understood., taking into account both etic and emic aspects of culture.

For instance, seasonal food shortage cannot be seen as a straightforward concept. It varies according to the ecology, the culture and unpredictable historical factors. Nutritionally vulnerable groups are not limited to pregnant women, nursing mothers and weanlings. A very constraining bridewealth system may bear more heavily on food availability than the local ecology and cash-making opportunities.

The concepts underlying attitudes and behaviour in western societies do not necessarily operate elsewhere. If food anxiety is present in the third world, it does not stem from a feeling of guilt or concern about overweight. Fear of hunger is basic, eating is good for you, stuffing oneself with food in order to become reasonably fat a legitimate pursuit. As a matter of fact, in traditional societies where food availability may vary sharply due to material nutritional stress, food anxiety seems to play a part comparable to sexual anxiety in western civilisations as displayed by people's overt behaviour, attitudes towards food consumption, body image and mythology (Kardiner 1939 : 219).

#### Benefiting from traditional food systems

If material technical solutions from the industrialised societies can improve food production, traditional cultures may in turn contribute to the general knowledge about human nutrition and the maintenance of sufficient world biodiversity. A flow of valuable information on the material as well as the non-material field may be established from

traditional cultures towards our overfed and rather insecure western world.

We are constantly focusing on the negative aspects of diets in developing countries but many of them account for a more rational intake in terms of animal proteins, fat, sugar and are free from alcoholic drinks and exaggerated concern about slimness. A certain number of populations have stimulated the interest of the media, such as the Hunza, for example (Classic 1991).

On a wider scale, the mediterranean food style appears easy on cholesterol, characterised by a lower intake of animal protein, a high consumption of fruits, vegetables and, of course, olive oil. One may wonder if the emerging of this sudden fame brought about by Americans was totally innocent (Keys and Keys 1975).

#### Material and symbolic characteristics

One could also consider the effect of muslim food systems in a rather more precise way than the recent fads concerning oriental food attuned to western civilisation philosophical uneasiness.

The field of potential foods is immense and there is no reason why new, nutritionally efficient foodstuffs as well as dishes should not make an input to the nutritionally valid behaviour of mankind, and that developing countries should not draw full benefit from their local productions notwithstanding the drastic limits imposed by the Codex Alimentarius.

In practice, dealing with anthropological data is a problem of time and scale : it is not possible to scan through the food system of every Banga Banga tribe. In terms of biodiversity and innovation, I would be inclined to say "Yes, there are nowadays sufficient qualitative data on most human group diets to detect in some of them aspects which it would be worthwhile deepening for the general benefit of human nutrition".

In terms of development of a balanced diet, it is possible to detect, at world level, in each nation a number of effective diets pertaining to trendsetting groups which could be extended to neighbouring homogeneous ecological and cultural areas. A concrete example will suffice : in Senegal, the rather balanced food pattern of the Wolof, dominant cultural group, could be extended to most of the savanna area of the country, with nuances concerning the christian part of the population keen on pork. Specific systems could also be developed for the sahelian herding area (possibly using the Fulani model). Lastly, for the equatorial forest areas of Casamance, the Diola system may be used as a reference. In Cameroon, at least four systems can be sorted out. In the rain forest bordering the ocean, a maritime system based on cassava and fish, using the Beti system; an inland system, such as the Ewondos', based on various tubers and meat; the nuances existing among the Bamileke, a dominant tribal group of the west, would justify a specific model; in the savanna area, a Fulani muslim style (which is a trend setter for most non-muslim groups), focusing on millet, milk and meat might operate.

At a lesser level, it would be possible to extend to neighbouring tribes the most

efficient pattern of food production and consumption in a given ecosystem. Among the four groups of Northern Cameroon in which I work, it should be possible to accelerate, among the Massa and Mussey, who benefit only from rain sorghum, the use of the dry season pricked sorghum utilised by the Tupuri and Kera; this would enable them to double their cereal crop. In all cases, solutions imply looking carefully at the material and non-material culture of traditional groups, the emic and etic aspects of the data, adopting the holistic approach of the anthropologist. Today a number of them are focusing on food and producing excellent work such as, for instance, Obrist (1992). They should be taken advantage of.

These are, Mr Chairman, some of the reasons why I believe that our IUNS committee 11/2 (Nutrition and Food Choice) should not focus only on industrialising societies and their problems and consider the western consumer as a paradigm for the human diet. Looking carefully at cultures outside the modern urban world might bring some insight about food and nutrition both from the basic and the applied research viewpoints and be of benefit to all, fulfilling our terms of reference in a non-sociocentric fashion.

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