

Cultural Factors in Dietary Choice

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FROM the very first, for the human being ingestion is culturally structured. Is the infant put to the breast, or given the bottle? Will his first suckling be that of colostrum, or of milk, or of some other fluid? Will he be held in a fetal position as he suckles, cradled in naked contact with a mother who curves herself around him, experiencing simultaneously comfort, social warmth, solace, emotional communication and nutrition? Or will he experience his first feeding held in meticulous sanitation against the starched bosom of someone to whom he is merely a case with a name, of someone who regards and expresses this situation as one of sheer nutrition? These questions are answered differently according to the culture of the society into which the infant is born.

The first experience of solid food will differ according to the culture. If he is a Tikopia,¹ he will get pre-masticated food, warmed with the mother's body-warmth, partly digested through her salivary juices; his mother will put it directly to his mouth with her lips. In our society he will get food with a hard metal spoon, introduced into a mouth which has never experienced anything so solid or hard, into which not even teeth have yet erupted. In all this, the culture enters into the food experience, shaping, emphasizing, even choosing the significant factors for defining that experience. In our own society, we define it—at least academically—as nutrition. Other societies may emphasize the aspect of social sharing to such an extent that nutrition and even the search for satiety may become secondary. Culture

may present food mainly as a means for the stilling of hunger, or of getting nutrition, or as the way to psychosomatic health; it may regard eating as a duty or a virtue, or as gustatory pleasure, or as a social or a religious communion. It is the difference in the cultural structuring of the food situation which has made it possible for the people in one urban society to bolt unpalatable food at a quick-lunch counter, while the men of another society, fully as urban, have been prepared to close shop for two hours at noon for the sake of having a leisurely meal at home with their families. The emphasis on the family meal may be so great as to overshadow other aspects. In Athens, during the last war, when the population was starving and cold, soup kitchens were set up by the Red Cross so as to give the people one hot meal a day in a heated room. However, many people asked to be given the food to take home, where they could eat it cold, in a cold room, as a family group. Some of us, in this country, go to great lengths of deprivation and discomfort so as to be able to eat Thanksgiving dinner with our families.

An instance of almost exclusive emphasis on the social aspect of the situation of food ingestion is found among the Arapesh of New Guinea, as described by Margaret Mead.²⁻⁶ Here food and feeding, in its entire process, from production or gathering to consumption, is regarded primarily as a medium for social warmth and intercourse; and this view of food affects the nutritional pattern, as it makes for gross inefficiency from our point of view in food production.

The Arapesh in question live in a mountainous area, so rugged that there is almost no level land, and the small garden plots may be separated by miles of difficult territory from the hamlet. The most economical way to cultivate them would be by one gardener working alone; yet up to six men may work on a small plot,

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with their wives and children, traveling over forbidding territory from plot to distant plot, enjoying each other's society and the sharing of work. "The ideal distribution of food," writes Margaret Mead, "is for each person to eat food grown by another, eat game killed by another, eat pork from pigs that have been fed by people at . . . a distance."⁴ So a man walks miles with his coconut saplings to plant them on the house sites of others, he gives his pigs to relatives in distant hamlets to feed and tend for him, he hunts only to give his kill away, since the lowest form of humanity is the man who eats his own kill, even one tiny bird. Thus it is ensured that every mouthful that the Arapesh consumes has been the medium of social participation.

Here the Arapesh makes a choice which affects his nutrition. His land is thin, his bush inhospitable, the work of getting food very arduous. Yet, instead of concentrating his energies upon procuring all the food possible, the Arapesh dissipate them (or perhaps concentrate them) on the business of including all the social warmth possible within the total food situation. Mead calculated that an Arapesh spends about a third of his time in highly energy-consuming travel, which, from a rationalistic point of view is entirely unnecessary. As a result of all this, the Arapesh are obviously undernourished. Their daily diet consists of less than half of what the government of New Guinea has specified as the minimum for plantation laborers whose life, we gather, is not more arduous than that of the mountain Arapesh at home. Yet, because of their cultural values, these people choose to spend a large proportion of their energy and time on aspects of food that have nothing to do with hunger or nutrition; in fact, if there is "dietary choice" here, it is the choice of malnutrition. The lives of these people, however, belie undernourishment. They live and work happily and reproduce themselves. Mead gives pictures of men walking many miles over very rugged territory to and from their gardens, and working hard when there; of women proudly carrying loads of seventy pounds up and down steep mountain-sides.

The Arapesh represent, in their approach to the entire food process, a large number of societies in the Pacific area; societies where, as with the Trobrianders,⁶ the main part of the yam harvest was given to the brother-in-law, ideally to function only as gifts and to eventually rot uneaten. These are societies where the exchange of food does not mean the introduction of variety but rather of social intercourse. We have societies where the custom of sharing special or excess food influenced diet in other ways; for example, it meant that no methods of meat preservation were necessary, as with the Ifugao of Luzon;^{7,8} here animals were slaughtered only for sacrifice, and the flesh of a large animal would be distributed to all—thus assuring periodic feasts of meat to rich and poor alike.

In considering an individual's reaction to the food he eats, the factor of culture has again to be taken into account. What will whet the appetite, what will bring a feeling of satiety, what is tasty, depends on the particular culture of the individual in question. The Ifugao of Luzon eat sweet potatoes without pleasure; what arouses their appetites is rice. People in the Middle East cannot achieve satiety unless they have eaten bread—with or without accompanying food.

Even what is recognized as food depends on the culture. We do not regard dragon-flies as human food; the Ifugao do.^{7,8} They eat three species of dragon-fly, as well as locusts which are boiled, then dried, then powdered and stored for food. They eat crickets and flying ants which they fry in lard. They eat red ants and water bugs and a variety of beetles. I doubt that I would recognize these insects as food, however hungry I might be. On the other hand, I regard milk as food, a fluid which some cultural groups regard with disgust and as akin to a mucous discharge. My culture decides, furthermore, in what form I shall consume my food. As a child in a Greek community, I either drank my milk hot after boiling, or, more frequently, I ate it in the form of cheese or yogurt, but never in the form of cream sauce or an ingredient of bread, as I do in this country. I ate my oranges complete with all the inner skin; I never drank them, nor



ate the segments divorced of their covering. I ate my fruit raw almost always, whether fresh or dried. The food I ate might be regarded as greasy by people of this country, but my bread was not covered by grease, as it is here; except for a few occasions, it was not "bread and butter."

Attempts to introduce the boiling of water in the interest of public health in a Peruvian village⁹ met insuperable resistance, because this changed the classification of water from "cold" food to "hot" food; and "hot" food was appropriate only to specific situations. In this area, to understand dietary choice or the preparation of food and the planning of specific menus, it is essential to understand the culturally determined function of "hot" and "cold" foods.

My culture tells me *when to have an appetite for what*. When I get up in the morning, I have no appetite for roast pork, or cold cuts of sausage; but I do have one for ham and fried sausage. For me, this is an appetite acquired gradually over a period of 30 years; before that, according to my Greek urban culture, I would have found ham or eggs or sausages for breakfast revoltingly heavy, whereas I had an appetite for bread and cheese at this time of day. Whether I shall satisfy my appetite or not depends—beyond the economic factor—on culture. Millions of women in this country who have an appetite for rich desserts, for cream in their coffee, for butter on their toast, forego these items in the interest of a slender appearance; we have societies where young marriageable women stuff themselves with equivalent items because their culture sets a value on plumpness.

According to our culture, also, we decide which part of the plant or animal to eat: leaves or flower, or stalk or root; muscle and liver, or the entire animal, including spleen and lungs and intestines, eye-balls and cheeks. Or, according to the culture again, we may have no choice. For example, among the Zulu of South Africa,¹⁰ when a sacrificial ox is killed, a year after the death of the head of the family, the entire kin group assembles, and each individual is given a prescribed part of the ox, according to age, sex, and relationship to the

family; need or personal preference are not taken into account.

The cultural influence on food selection may be indirect, representing a value which pervades all areas of living. For instance, in this country monotony of diet has been found to work against appetite. This I believe, is related to the general American value of the new, of change, of variety. We have societies, however, where what is valued is sameness; where monotony is good and sought. And we have societies where the appearance of the staple is necessary and welcome at every meal. A Greek regards bread as appetizing at all meals as well as at snacks; and in this country, where meals often end in sweet desserts, many Greeks take a bite of bread at the very end. Bread has been eaten with every mouthful of food up to dessert; the dessert has been an interruption, a variation of the "monotony," which the eater now proceeds to eliminate, thus leaving the table with the taste of bread in his mouth. In addition, no variety is sought in the kind of bread eaten.

In this country, the emphasis on speed and efficiency throughout the culture has affected dietary choice, for example, transforming oranges into orange-juice, introducing the sandwich lunch; the sandwich form itself is a factor in the selection of foods.

The kind of food appropriate to different occasions during the year, to different days of the week, to different hours of the day, is culturally patterned also. The food of Lent among Orthodox and Catholic Christians, limited to fish and dairy products and vegetable foods, or only to vegetable products; the lamb on Easter or the ham; the Christmas goose; the Thanksgiving turkey; the Sunday dinner; the special Friday evening meal of the Orthodox Jews; the Bairam lamb preceded by the day-long fasts of the Ramadan; duty-days of the Buddhist Burmese which provide festive fare every eight days, and the slim period of the Buddhist Lent which covers one-fourth of the year—all of these dietary "choices" are made for the individual by his culture.

The force of the dietary patterning varies



in the list I have given above. No lamb at Easter may mean only a lack of joy and satisfaction, but lamb accidentally ingested during Lent may mean acute dysphoria to the devout, a sense of sin and perhaps illness. It would be infringement of a religious food taboo, and these taboos are a potent selective factor, whether they cover the year or a season, whether they cover a lifetime or a stage of life as with the Murngin of Australia¹¹ where only men who are fathers can eat porcupine, emu eggs, snake eggs, crayfish and a number of other items. Informants from other societies have reported that they chose starvation rather than infringement of a food taboo, though they obviously lived to tell the tale. Schweitzer¹² presents cases where individuals unwittingly broke a food taboo and died within a day. Such interdictions sometimes deprive individuals of the very food they require. Among the Zulu¹⁰ milk can never be eaten by pregnant or lactating or menstruating women, and preferably never at all past pubescence, as the reproductive function of woman is inimical to the welfare of cattle, and might somehow reach and harm the cattle through the medium of their milk. Besides, people can consume only the milk of the cattle belonging to their own family line, and since women spend their adult lives in the kraal of a different family line, that of the husband, they cannot have milk even when they are not engaged in the reproductive function.

A cultural factor of great importance is expressed in the symbolic aspect of food: in its value to the individual over and above satiation or nutrition. During the last war, after the invasion of the continent, the newspapers announced that whole turkeys had been sent to France, for the Thanksgiving celebration. This, at a time when all conveyance was needed for the final phase of the war effort, gives some clue to the symbolic significance of turkey at Thanksgiving to Americans—not turkey meat, but a whole turkey, to be seen and carved. If the turkeys did arrive, I am sure they contributed strongly to Allied victory. The same turkeys, however, would have been nothing but so much poultry flesh

to Greeks or Yugoslavs or Turks at this time, much inferior to mutton.

To people throughout the Middle East, bread is truly the staff of life, having a significance which verges on the religious. In the Egyptian village described by Ammar¹³ it is profane to put bread on the ground, all fallen crumbs must be picked up lest they be stepped upon, and any bread that falls on the ground must be kissed before it is removed from harm's way. Here a man heard with horror the tentative suggestion that one could have a meal without bread; and Ammar tells of two women who were divorced by their husbands, mainly for seldom providing them with fresh bread. Here, as in many areas of the Middle East, without bread a meal is impossible, because bread itself is the meal and all "food" is only an accompaniment, something to dip the bread in, or a relish; and satiety, as I mentioned above, cannot be found without bread.

The place which bread holds in the Middle East is held by corn among the Indians of the Southwestern United States and of Mexico; and attempts to enrich the diet in Mexican villages have had to deal with the unshakable place which corn holds in the life of the peasants. In this country, the Hopi say: "Corn is life and piki the perfect food"¹⁴; and certainly true Hopi life cannot go on without corn. Corn functions as food, but this is only one of its functions. No child can be born with security, nor live through the first hazardous twenty days of life, without corn.¹⁵ The entire process of growing and harvesting corn, in fact, is vital for a meaningful life, since the entire religious cycle of ceremonials is bound with the growing cycle of the corn.¹⁶ In the face of this, "free" rational dietary choice, based on nutritional requirements biochemically determined, has little chance.

Any attempt to affect diet must deal with the cultural factors in dietary choice. It may come to grief against the symbolic value of the food involved. More than this, it must take into account what it is that the food mediates, so as not to destroy values which cannot be replaced with sheer nutrition.



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