FOOD-RELATED BEHAVIOR: A PREMISE AND AN EXAMPLE

by

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The truism, "everyone eats," may seem trite to repeat, but from that premise we can see how humans' manipulation of their surroundings to provide nutrition--the process by which individuals take in and assimilate food and drink--underlies a study of human behavior; for food touches us all, indeed, it may be considered central--physically and spiritually--to our lives. It has always amazed me how in my different researches of diverse folkloristic problems I was constantly led to an awareness of food-related behavior. In my investigation of country music in upstate New York the settings for performances were often "house dances" or "kitchen junkets," which included as an essential element the communal sharing of food.[1] In my research on a Mennonite painter in Indiana, the artist revealed that a significant number of her paintings depicted food processes, portrayals which indicated symbolic implications.[2] In a study of verbal play among adolescents I found out, significantly, that settings for and images in verbal play often involved eating.[3] Indeed, we can all give examples of how the symbolic and functional power of food pervades most human activities; hence, we can begin to understand the complexities of human conduct by making the ethnography of food-related behavior a more central concern.

In the shift from looking at food as an incidental element of researches to focusing sharply on food-related behavior (as part of the ethnography of foodways), there is a temptation for researchers to isolate the object, that is, the food, from its integral setting for documentary purposes, thus implying a static, ordered, and superorganic notion of

foodways in culture. Such a misleading and misconceived notion is reinforced by inventories of regional or ethnic foods, compilations of recipes, and contrivances of food histories imprecisely prepared by investigators. These presentations shed little light on our knowledge of food-related behavior; to illuminate the behavioral aspect, the study of foodways includes, by necessity, first-hand documentation of processes, events, beliefs, settings, customs, objects, aesthetics, and activities related to the cultivation (or breeding), gathering (or hunting), preparation, consumption, preservation, storage, and disposal of food and drink by individuals. In fact, the frequently used term, "foodways," is designed to encompass the whole gamut of food-related behavior. The what question in the ethnography of foodways must involve the how, when, who, and where of food-related activities and settings, not only the food itself, in order to answer the why of human conduct, and further, in order to expose the dynamics of food-related processes, events, and beliefs. Although these considerations may seem obvious to many field researchers, there are still difficulties possible in applying them because food-related behavior can often be private, temporary, or even illegal. Still, since food events, symbols, processes, beliefs, and settings--which the concept of behavior comprises--possess such important roles in the conduct of everyday life, a holistic conception of foodways (looking at the whole scope of food-related behavior together for analytical purposes), coupled with a singularistic approach to individual behavior (focusing on the individual as a unique complex of behavior which, however, may conform to certain social networks), is warranted.

Consider the instructive example of the turtle butchering tradition in Dubois County, Indiana, in the south-central part of the state. To limn this food-related behavior

I will outline the butchering process and sketch some inferences for the maintenance of such behavior in the area I researched.

On almost any weekend during the summer in Dubois County, a catholic church picnic takes place. Great numbers of people, a majority of German descent, attend these events which invariably feature quilt raffles, various games of chance, chicken dinners, and most conspicuously, turtle soup. Historically, the churches in the area have been focal points for the communities since many towns, including Jasper, St. Anthony, St. Henry, and Fulda were founded by Father Joseph Kundek and his associates. The picnics are supplied with turtles by specialists like Edwin Englert and John Lange who hunt and butcher in the local area. Formerly, butchering was a cooperative venture among members of the church congregation who would also contribute turtles, but in recent years, the specialists have been increasingly relied upon. Still, many men butcher a few turtles at home to produce soup and meat for frying.

Edwin, Melvin, and Gene Englert, for example, have butchered for picnics, but mostly now butcher for personal use. The men hunt their own hard-shell snapping turtles, and bring them back alive from the local swampy rivers. Edwin, the father of the two boys, keeps his turtles in the basement until he is ready to butcher them--usually a period of two weeks. If he has an excess of turtles, in other words if his basement is two and three deep with turtles, he will keep some turtles in wooden barrels and feed them table scraps for up to six months. "Just like fattening a hog," Edwin told me; "I only butcher turtles and hogs. I don't have the stomach for cattle." A similar association is made by another local turtle butcher, Harvey Eckert, who keeps his turtles in iron barrels. "I slp 'em like a hog," he explained; "The more rotten it is the better they like it." Just before butchering, however,

the turtles are no longer fed, and the water is changed several times to cleanse the turtles.

To begin the butchering process Edwin holds the tail of the turtle while Gene or Melvin pokes at the turtle's head with a pair of pliers. As a result of this action, the turtle's head emerges. When that occurs, Gene grabs the head with the pliers and hatchets off the turtle's head. The Englerts and others convey the belief that even after turtles are killed they continue to live until sundown. Several narratives exist in the Englert family about particular turtles that were especially stubborn or lively. Moreover, one of the appealing aspects for Edwin of frying turtles is watching his wife "squeal," as he calls it, when the turtle's feet "scratch and squirm" as if it was alive in the pan.

Edwin and Gene scald the turtle with hot water after removing its head. They cut the shell from the body with a kitchen or pocket knife and then remove the meat from the inside of the shell by scraping it with the knife. Two buckets are placed beside the table; one is for usable parts of the turtle, and the other is for intestines and discards. Edwin uses the turtle shell for flavoring the soup, much as bones would be used for other meat soups. Another turtle butcher, John Lange, decorates the shells and displays them in his home, but that appears to be a rare use of the shells.

The next step is to remove the intestines followed by cutting the turtle into quarters and slicing off the neck--the prime choice of the turtle according to the Englerts--and the legs. The whole butchering process lasts approximately one hour for each 10-20 pound turtle. It was a sunny, warm August day in 1978, for instance, when Edwin and Gene sat outside at a table in front of their house, and with a pocket-knife and a kitchen-knife, butchered two 15 pound snappers in an hour-and-a-half.

After butchering, family members or neighbors may begin the preparation of the soup. Each person contributes garden vegetables, home-made wine, beef, chicken, and pork. "Everything in the garden is thrown in," Edwin said; "The meats are there to kill the turtle taste. You can't taste the turtle taste when you fry it thou; it tastes just like chicken." Not only butchers, but other informants familiar with turtle soup claimed that a turtle contains seven different types of meat tastes (although few could name the seven, they were still sure of the number). Edwin even told me that all seven are found in the turtle's neck. Yet a written source from Kentucky stated that the turtle had "nine different shades of meat, each with its own distinctive flavor," although the types are again unnamed.[4]

Two turtles supply about 25 to 30 gallons of soup. About half the turtle is actually used for the soup. "It takes a lot of work," Gene complained, "and it's not really worth it." Similarly, when I asked soup preparers at a Mariah Hill picnic why they no longer butcher their own turtles, but rather rely on specialists, they replied unaminously, "too much work." A paradox in behavior emerges: residents of a small area within Dubois County carry on a vital tradition of turtle butchering, although few informants reported liking the taste of turtle meat, and even fewer enjoyed the work involved in hunting, butchering, or preparation.

That paradox is paralleled by one of research: although each individual is unique, researchers constantly search for continuities and consistencies in aggregates of human behaviors. But , the reconciling by the researcner of seemingly conflicting behaviors such as those that pivot around turtle butchering and consumption is concomitant with preserving the initial paradox of disorder in the minds of informants.

In other words, while I can posit several "explanations" that will indicate actual harmony, one should not be misled into believing that discord does not exist. Why? Because as Michael Owen Jones points out, "While often a social activity, eating is always a singular act."[5] Thus I have attempted to come up with inferences based on observable behavioral data and available sociohistorical information which will reflect the biformity of food-related behavior.

Consider, for instance, the following five categories of inference: (1) historical precedent, (2) regionality, (3) social maintenance, (4) ecological function, and (5) personal motivation.

Historical precedent: Historically, the Dubois County area has always been predominantly a German-Catholic settlement. The restriction by the Catholic church on eating meat on Fridays did not prohibit eating turtle meat. Even today in the county, fried turtle sandwiches are especially popular on Friday nights. Yet turtle butchering or consumption is not restricted to Catholics. Further, no informants explained the paradox by citing a historical precedent.

Regionality: I once asked Edwin Englert if he had seen turtle butchering outside his "area." "Oh yeah!" he replied, "even as far out as St. Anthony." His statement surprised me because St. Anthony lies only eight miles away. From my observations in Dubois County, turtle soup preparation is evident in a small area 15 miles south of Jasper to Mariah Hill and 10 miles east of Holland to Kyana. Such estimates will undoubtedly be revised with further investigation, but the significant point here is that informants identified this area as a "turtle soup area." "Mariah Hill and St. Henry both thought they made the best soup," George Blume told me, "even though the turtles came from the same people, and often, the same folks prepared it." For the people who buy one-

and five-gallon jugs of the soup, their purchases promote the claim of the church to the best soup in the area, thus indicating sub-regional identifications as well. At the same time, the unusual nature of preparing turtle soup gives residents a distinction to their varying regions of identification--a combination of geographic, ethnic, religious, and cultural determinants. Yet informants also expressed a sense of personal taste, a denial of conformity to a region, or a defens of turtle soup consumption by saying, "hell, I just like it."

Social maintenance: Church picnics in Dubois County play a special role in the social life of the communities there. Turtle soup preparation at these picnics offers a labor-intensive endeavor that requires the cooperative effort of many individuals. Workers begin cooking the soup the midnight before the picnic, and preparations begin as much as two weeks before. As such, turtle soup becomes a ceremonial food that defines the community, maintains social relationships, expresses loyalty to the church, and provides a framework for social interaction.

One aspect of the turtle preparation that is particularly pronounced is the sexual division of labor. The men are the hunters and butchers; women are the preparers and preservers. In addition, men assume Sunday cooking and supervisory duties. This male behavior fits into the pattern of cooking by American men on Sundays identified by folklorist Thomas A. Adler.[6] The men I spoke to at the Mariah Hill picnic did not think of their cooking duties as a usually feminine role, but rather thought of it as an assumption of a ceremonial function. "Guys always cooked the turtle for special occasions," one informant explained; another said, "keeps you coming back to the church." I am not suggesting that such functions are causal; they are more properly effects of the tradition, but one can safely claim that turtle soup preparation is found in social contexts that promote continuance

of turtle butchering. One must add, however, that turtle soup preparation can also be an expression of individual or family volition, as indicated by the Englerts' selection of turtle soup apart from church picnics.

Ecological function: To the Englerts, one of turtle soup's appealing features is its ability to absorb a great variety of food substances common to the area. The "everything in the garden" sentiment expressed by the Englerts is also echoed by other informants. In addition, elimination of food discards by feeding turtles before butchering offers a convenient disposal system. In this way, turtle butchers, like hog butchers, take advantage of the natural ecologic system by manipulating the life-food cycle. Many aspects of foodways operate in natural, systemic, cyclical complexes, and turtle consumption is an excellent example of a hunting-gathering relationship which is self-contained, that is, relies on few inputs from commercial or outside inputs. The turtle soup tradition supports the butchering of turtles in Dubois County, and conversely, the turtle butchering tradition encourages turtle soup preparation.

Personal motivation: Attainment of personal status through turtle specialization is a motivation that could be achieved by individuals who excel at hunting and butchering turtles. Informants expressed great respect for successful hunters and butchers, because of the central role they play in the church picnics; but informants also recognize that these figures are often peripheral to the community. The Englerts, for example, live on the extreme northern edge of their town on a road officially known as Cour de Lane but commonly, and symbolically, known as Pig Turd Alley. Thus, while personal status achievement is one element in reconciling the paradox of turtle butchering, such achievement also reinforces the conflict by highlighting the singularity of the behavior.

On the question of personal motivation, there is also consideration of personal, as opposed to socially-derived, tastes, preferences, aesthetics, and standards. Let me illustrate this point by relating a field work experience. One evening during my first summer of research in Dubois County I discussed my findings with several colleagues at dinner. Suddenly, someone who was not participating in the discussion rose and said, "If you're going to talk about something so disgusting, I'm leaving." Her statement suggests an important point: the idea of eating turtles is abhorrent to many people, but in Dubois County, it is accepted. Not only is there an accepted food standard working in the county that encourages turtle consumption, but indeed, informants like George Blume think of the long time and hard work involved in turtle butchering as contributing to its nutritional and aesthetic value: "That must be good meat for all the trouble it takes to get it." Thus, while every individual has different food aesthetics and preferences, a socially-shared standard of food selection--in this instance turtle soup and turtle sandwiches--supports the continuance of turtle hunting.

Associated with acceptance of socially-dervied standards is acceptance of socially-derived cognitive categories for butchering options. In Dubois County turtle butchering is apparently placed within a cognitive category of meats which includes hogs, and may or many not include cattle (that seems to depend more on personal preference and competence). Outside the Dubois County area the consumption of turtle, like consumption of possum, muskrat, or squirrel inside the county, is switched to a taboo category. Turtle butchering is, however, accepted in other areas; previously mentioned was a Kentucky example. In addition, folklorist Jens Lund reported to me turtle hunting which still goes on in southern Illinois, and folklorist Ron Baker uncovered an account of turtle butchering in Vermont around the turn of this century.

Besides these regional pockets where socially-derived standards of turtle consumption operate, there also exist individuals who defy area standards by proclaiming their preference (or non-preference) for turtle butchering, for instance, to establish their individuality or cultural identity.

These five categories of inference do not exhaust the possibilities of answering the whys of behavior by any means, but they may indicate the types of problems faced and they may serve to generate hypotheses for further research. Moreover, my prelimary investigation serves to reveal the multifaceted nature of the food process from hunting to butchering to preparation to consumption to storage to preservation to disposal. Butchering is one aspect of that process, but that link cannot be adequately discussed without consideration in subsequent discussion of the whole chain of food-related behavior, and discussion of both the forces that connect them and those that drive them apart. A foundation of foodways scholarship has already been established[7]; it, together with new perspectives generated from folkloristic research of food-related behavior, will help us meet the challenge of understanding the complexities of human conduct.[8]

[1]"I Kicked Three Slats Out of My Cradle First Time I Heard That: Ken Kane, Country Music, and American Folklife," New York Folklore 3 (1977): 53-82.

[2]"We Live What I Paint and I Paint What I See: A Mennonite Artist in Northern Indiana," Indiana Folklore 12 (1979): 5-17.

[3]"'Who Says': A Further Investigation of Ritual Insults Among White American Adolescents," Midwestern Journal of Language and Folklore 4 (1978): 53-69.

[4]Food for Thought: An Ethnic Cookbook (Lexington-Fayette: Human Rights Commission, 1976), pp. 72-73.

[5]"Perspectives in the Study of Eating Behavior," paper read at the International Centenary Conference of the Folklore Society, London, 1978.

[6]"Dad Makes Pancakes on Sunday: The Male Cook in Family Tradition," paper read at the American Folklore Society meeting, Los Angeles, 1979.

[7]For general surveys of American foodways cholarship see the following review essays: Don Yoder, "Folk Cookery," in Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction, ed. Richard M. Dorson (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1972), pp. 325-50; Jay Anderson, "The Study of Contemporary Foodways in American Folklife Scholarship," Keystone Folklore Quarterly 16 (1971): 155-63; Charles Camp, "Food in American Culture: A Bibliographic Essay," Journal of American Culture 2 (1979): 559-70.

[8]The information in this paper was collected in 1978-1979. My thanks to Warren Roberts of Indiana University who first introduced me to the area, and to the Rockefeller Foundation for financial assitance.