

# One man's meat is another man's... taboo

by Alfred Métraux



No civilization makes the best possible use of the food resources at its disposal. Before any kind of fruit, vegetable or meat is pronounced as fit to eat by a particular people, it must first be approved for the purpose by that people's cultural traditions. These tastes and distastes, which differ so widely among the various civilizations, have always been a source of indignation, contempt or sneering, and were almost certainly a prime subject of conversation in the caves of Palaeolithic man.

Even in prehistoric times, peoples were undoubtedly graded according to their eating habits. Poetically, the best known instance of this is the *Odyssey*, where the "bread-eaters" (the Greeks) were ranged against the barbarians, who were "lotus-eaters," or even eaters of human flesh.

Exotic peoples provide us with a wealth of examples to illustrate the infinite diversity of human taste. To eat a caterpillar, even if roasted, appears to us as the height of perversion; but in sub-tropical America the native populations, and even visiting ethnographers, do not turn up their noses at the grubs which they extract from the trunks of palm trees. A village of Indians is overjoyed at the arrival of a flight of ants which can be cooked in the pot. And those who are nauseated by this human consumption of insects would do well to remember that these same Indians would be literally ill if they were forced to eat a hen's egg, or even chicken. Rats, of course, are "siege food"; yet they were a delicacy for certain Polynesians, though the latter, it is true, had no rabbits to feed on. And we should not forget how fond the Aztecs were of small dogs, which they fattened for banquets.

Even peoples who are neighbours and belong to the same civilization can so differ, in their feeding habits, as to cause mutual incomprehension and even disgust. The appellation "frog-eaters," which the English have for so long applied to the French, is an eloquent indication of the former's opinion of batracians as a source of food. When Kamehameha I, King of Hawaii, broke with his ancestors' feeding taboos in the presence of his Court, he was only equalling, in courage and stark determination, the present-day American who, in Paris, resolves to eat his first plate of Burgundy snails.

Certain feeding taboos of a religious origin take the form of an aversion which has all the strength and spontaneity of an instinct. I have known anthropologists who, though quite unprejudiced and aware of the historical background involved, have never been able to over-

come the feeling of disgust created in them by some food or other that was forbidden to their ancestors.

The classic example of the influence of cultural tradition on feeding is the divergence in the attitudes of the stock raising populations of Asia and Europe with regard to the use of milk products. Whereas the peoples of Central and South Asia, as well as the Indo-European and Semitic groups, have always consumed the milk produced by their flocks and herds, often as a basic source of food, the Chinese, the Japanese and the peoples of South East Asia—who were formerly, likewise, stock raisers—have always had the most violent aversion to milk and its by-products.

This aversion cannot have stemmed from ignorance, since the Chinese were long in contact with Mongol and Turkish tribes for whom milk and milk foods were basic forms of nourishment. The Tibetans even go so far as to put rancid butter in their tea.

Various books published in recent years have revealed to us the hunger that still "stalks the world." We know that vast areas lack adequate food, and that the general health of their populations suffers in consequence. International bodies, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization, are trying to increase the food resources of regions whose inhabitants have not enough to eat.

Unfortunately, the introduction of new types of crops does not always suffice to solve these problems. The important thing is that the people should accept the new dishes which are set before them, and rid themselves of the emotional prejudices making for their rejection. Most human beings "like what they eat" rather than "eat what they like." But how is one to break down this resistance which, rooted in cultural tradition and developed in early childhood, ends by acquiring the apparent strength of an instinctive reaction?

This was exactly the problem which the United States Government had to face during the last war. It had to plan feeding, not only for an immense army, but for millions of workers, as well as for the liberated peoples. Farmers might produce a surplus, but it was important to avoid waste and to persuade a population, that had always lived well, to change some of its habits.

The United States Government was wise enough to consult social scientists before embarking on a propaganda campaign designed to win public opinion over to the various measures which were required. It set up a



#### ★ THE SUPERMARKET.

Food is piled high in the great supermarkets of America where customers serve themselves and pay (far left) on the way out. The 18,000 fully-fledged supermarkets in the U.S.A. and the 70,000 smaller stores known as "superettes" now sell half the country's groceries. Shopping in the supermarket has become a weekly ritual of American family life. Many supermarkets buy meats, vegetables, eggs and other products directly from farmers. Left, chickens being prepared in supermarket warehouse. In most parts of the world, however, people still shop in open-air markets like the one at Bogota, capital of Colombia, (below).

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committee of ethnographers, psychologists and sociologists, to study Americans' attitudes towards food and to suggest methods whereby those attitudes could be modified or even completely transformed. It was as part of this Committee's activities that the American psychologist Curt Lewin was able to carry out certain experiments in influencing opinion, experiments which have often been cited as a brilliant demonstration of the effectiveness of these disciplines when applied in the practical field.

Curt Lewin proceeded from the principle that a "food attitude" as simple as the American's aversion to certain parts of meat—the heart, the kidneys, the lungs, the entrails—could be quickly changed, once every implication of the situation had been analysed accurately and in detail, provided that every factor directly or indirectly determining people's behaviour towards food was considered.

Having established beyond any doubt that in the matter of food it was the housewives whose influence was paramount and who had the last word, he selected two groups of housewives as the voluntary "guinea-pigs" of the experiment. One group was indoctrinated by expert dieticians who gave lectures in order to explain the nutritive qualities of offal, its high vitamin content, and its good effect on health. This was followed up by explanations regarding the refined nature of the dishes that could be prepared with such pieces of meat; and recipes for cooking and dressing offal were distributed to the housewives.

The method adopted with the other group was quite different. A meeting was organized, at which one member of the group explained to the others the difficulties of the country's food situation, impressed upon them that by serving offal to their husbands they would be performing a patriotic service, and finally invited them to engage in a free discussion of the problem of "taboo" meats and their use. Care was taken to ensure that the discussion was general and that each housewife was able to express her doubts and ask questions. At the end of the debate, the meeting took a collective decision: each housewife undertook to try out the recipes suggested.

A few weeks later, an investigation revealed that only 10% of those present at the lectures had "crossed this cooking Rubicon." Of those, however, who had taken part in the discussions and undertaken to prepare offal, 51% had duly fulfilled their undertaking. The same experiment was repeated several times, with regard to other types of food "rejects." And the results, too, were the

same. Lectures and exhortations had therefore been of little effect as compared with decisions freely taken by a group, even a group as artificial as that constituted by subjects in a psychological experiment.

This shows us that in our "food attitudes," as indeed in all our attitudes, reason combines with other emotional factors to which the greatest regard must be paid if an attitude is to be modified. The housewives who decided to break with the "feeding taboos" agreed to do so purely because they were influenced by considerations having but a tenuous and indirect connexion with food itself.

For an attitude to be transformed, the values and institutions that give it its stability must be kept in mind. As was shown in the above example, it is by collective decision that attitudes can most easily be changed.

FAO - Pat Morin

