

# The Trouble with Meat: an Ambiguous Food

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## ABSTRACT

*In human society, meat is highly prized nutritionally, but possesses a high symbolic value, involving cost and sacrifice. Humans' attitude towards meat eating is ambiguous, as witnessed by cultures that do not condone killing, cannibalism, the sacrificial rituals of slaughter and patterns of abstention, including modern vegetarianism. The "dietary murder" that precedes carnivorousness can either be festive or provoke shame.*

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## THE HUMAN BEING: A MODERATE MEAT EATER

Like all animals, humans need to include nitrogenous substances in their diet. Being an omnivorous animal, man can utilise vegetable proteins as well as animal ones to fulfil his needs of all amino acids necessary to

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reach an adequate nutritional status (Dupin, 1974: 87, 89). There is a broad range of human diets. Their caloric content of protein origin commonly represents 11 to 13 percent of the total energetic value of the diet (FAO/OMS, 1973: 10-22). Proteins from plant origin have a narrower and less satisfactory range of amino acids than animal proteins.

Ellen (1994:203) comments that among scientists “the general consensus favours views about an omnivorous diet, progressively shifting towards a higher proportion of non-vegetable matter as technology improved”. Perlès (1979: 5) suggests that this drift may go back three million years. It is considered to be a determining factor in the hominisation process (for example Schaller and Lowther, 1969; Rose and Marshall, 1996; Cachel, 1997; Stanford, 1998: 96).

What about non-human primates? Caution is needed when comparing the behaviour of non-human primates to that of past hominids and present-day humans (Garine, 1978: 415). However, it should be acknowledged that primatologists’ studies, especially those on apes, have pointed out many features (including ambiguous ones) that are relevant to contemporary human beings. Among non-human primates, meat consumption is occasional and adventurous. It demonstrates the domination of the meat provider (Harding, 1975: 250; Suzuki, 1975: 265). It sometimes involves sharing and cannibalism (Teleki, 1981: 313). It also seems to have a hedonic dimension. It can imply the simultaneous consumption of cellulose (leaves) and animal protein, “wadging” (Tuttle, 1975: 303), reminiscent of traditional human meals which combine a carbohydrate staple and a protein relish (Hladik, 1973: 389; Harding, 1975: 256).

There are all sorts of food derived from animals. Each society has its own range, encompassing insects as well as reptiles, fish and warm-blooded animals. From the total range available, each culture selects those it considers edible, from rats to beef ... or from snails to horses!

#### HUNTER-GATHERERS

It should, however, be pointed out that in no contemporary society, except the Inuit in the Arctic, does meat constitute the staple food.

In French, etymologically the word “viande” comes from medieval Latin, *vivenda*, meaning “that which sustains life” (Le Petit Larousse, 2003: 1064). In ancient French, it is “food for humans” (Robert, 1969: 1987). This definition reflects the viewpoint of a prosperous civilisation (in which, however, not all individuals have access to meat).

Eaton *et al* (1998: 79) suggest that during the Palaeolithic period the daily energy value of the diet was 3000 Kilocalories, 35% from meat, 65% from plant food and animal proteins, 190 grams of animal protein, and 30 grams of fat. Contemporary figures are similar.

TABLE 1  
Meat consumption (grams per day) of populations mentioned in this article

	Meat (g)	Energy in the diet (%)	Animal fat (g)
Prehistory			
Late Paleolithic (EATON and KENNER, 1985)	190	3.5	30
Arctic Inuit (GREENLAND)			
Ammassalik (HOYGARD, 1941)	299	93	169
West Greenlanders (HOYGARD, 1941)	319	?	154
Semi Desertic Africa (BOTSWANA)			
!Kung San (LEE, 1979)	280	30	?
Kade San (TANAKA, 1978)	147	18.7	?
Rain Forest (CAMEROON)			
Kola Pygmies (KOPPERT, 1991)	216	19.6	?
Forest Mvae (KOPPERT, 1991)	185	15.8	?
Yasa* (KOPPERT, 1991)		24	2.2
Tropical Savanna (CAMEROON)			
Masa* (GARINE and KOPPERT, 1988)	11	0.8	?
Middle Hills (NEPAL)			
Tamang (KOPPERT, 1988)	0.8	?	?
Europe			
France 1990 (COLLET RIBBING et DECLOITRE, 1996)	249	?	?
* Main animal protein food is obtained from fish			

### *The Inuit*

The Inuit residing in the Arctic, where few plant resources are available, have the most carnivorous diet. According to Hoygaard (1941: 55), the

figures are the following: fresh mammals (mostly seal) 54%, stored food of animal origin (mostly seal) 22%, fresh fish (mostly cod) 16%, imported vegetable foods 5%, native vegetable foods 2%, birds 1%. In a diet of 2800 Kilocalories, the Ammassalimiut Eskimo consumes 299 grams of animal protein, 169 grams of fat, and 22 grams of carbohydrates per day. The West Greenlanders utilise 319 grams of animal proteins, 154 grams of fat, and 35 grams of carbohydrates. The author stresses the importance of fat providing calories in a cold climate; and adds that an Eskimo, contrary to the accepted idea, cannot ingest daily more than 2.5 kg of boiled lean meat, even during a strenuous journey (ibid: 57). This figure is quite high. Today, although carbohydrate consumption is favoured by sedentarisation and the assistance policy of the Danish government, the diet still consists of 90% animal food and 10% vegetable foods. The consumption of lipids is still high, and Robbe (1994: 169) suggests that it is necessary for an adequate metabolic use of the protein diet, eliminating the nitrogenous residues. Looking into dietary sources of metabolic fuel, Draper (1977: 311) mentions the following figures for adult Inuit: (i) pre-modern Arctic Eskimo, protein 32%, fat 66%; (ii) contemporary villages – Wainwright: protein 25%, fat 43%; Point Hope: protein 22%, fat 35%. In comparison, the modern US diet consists of: protein 12%, fat 42%. After a detailed analysis of the nutrient content of the diet, mainly consisting of animal protein, he concluded that “the native diet is capable of furnishing all the essential nutritional elements when prepared and consumed according to traditional custom”. In a more recent study, Borre (1991: 57) agrees with this, but points out the low content of calcium, vitamin C and carbohydrates.

However, contrary to the officially held opinion of Western nutritionists, it is possible to conclude that whole populations can adapt themselves to diets with much more animal content than 13% of the total energetic value (Eaton *et al.*, 1988: 79). Even Caucasian individuals, such as the explorer Steffanson and his team, were able to do so for one year. These observations underline a certain physiological capacity to adapt to a carnivorous diet (Saffirio, 1975: 86). This should be taken into account when discussing the possible vegetarian or carnivorous origin of man. It conforms to the consensus to which Ellen (1994) referred above.

*Other contemporary hunter-gatherers*

Recent observations in Indonesia shed light on a new area where high consumption of game meat (mostly of the bearded wild boar, *Sus barbatus barbatus*) is recorded (Caldecott, 1988; Puri, 1997; Bennett and Gumal, 2001). According to Dounias (2003), among the Tubu Punan of Eastern Kalimantan, meat consumption varied between December 2001 and June 2003, according to the availability of forest fruits, from 113 to 392 grams per capita per day.

According to Lee, the !Kung San of Botswana consumed 230 grams of meat per day and 510 grams of vegetable products, meat only representing 30% of the total weight value of the diet (Lee, 1979: 270). Tanaka (1976: 112) mentions 220 grams of meat, of which 147 grams are edible portions, and this represents only 18.7% of the total weight of food consumed daily.

Among the farmer-trappers of the Cameroonian rainforest, the figures obtained for the Mvae forest dwellers are 185 grams of meat; and for their neighbours, the Kola Pygmies, 216 grams (Koppert, 1991; Koppert *et al.*, 1996). Among both groups, game meat also brings in most of the family income. It is a favourite food, which is offered to visitors and demonstrates wealth and generosity. Smoked meat is a valued festive food. The meat of domestic animals, chicken and sheep, is used during most social events, at family and community level. Beef, mutton and pork are usually purchased from outside. Sheep are slaughtered for wedding feasts.

In relation to this, one should mention the craze for game meat that exists in most urban areas of equatorial Africa. It has been seriously studied in Cameroon (Bahuchet and Loveva, 1999) and represents a very severe threat to the fauna of the rainforest. Game meat is so highly appreciated that it is possible to find antelope, monkey, buffalo and elephant meat smuggled into France to supply African immigrants in Château Rouge market, right in the centre of Paris (Bouly de Lesdain, 1999).

With the exception of the Inuit and a few hunter populations, meat is a rather rare commodity in contrast to vegetable foods, and this probably contributes to the prestige attached to it in most societies, including our own (“venison” in medieval times) (Jelliffe, 1967: 280).

## MEAT HUNGER

Meat appears to be an important element in the diet of many African populations. Lack of it, even temporarily, may be strongly felt. This feeling of “something lacking” has given birth to the ill-defined concept of “meat hunger” in African traditional populations. Pagezy (1989: 38, 42) suggests an explanation for specific groups. Among the Oto, and the Twa Pygmies of Zaire, she observed that the temporary disappearance of this highly appreciated food (fresh meat) from the diet creates severe psychological stress, even though the nutritional value of the diet remains the same, since fresh meat is replaced by an equivalent amount of dried fish. According to this author, this stress may influence the lactating performance of mothers and can result in slowing the growth curve of children. These observations are hardly valid statistically, but they shed light on the possible effect of emotional stress on physiological state. This is an example of psychological factors linked to meat consumption.

### *Fish and meat in the Marquesan Islands*

In the island of Tahuata in the Marquesan archipelago in the Pacific, most of the animal proteins in the diet come from fish (80%), but meat is the favourite food. Animal proteins are of fish origin, which is considered the preferred food in only 44% of cases, while meat (representing only 20% of the proteins) is favoured in 56% of cases. Pork is the meat usually eaten on festive family occasions.

Hunting the cattle, goats and sheep which have returned to the wilderness on neighbouring islands (Motane, Atuona, Hiva Hoa) is a prestigious activity. Besides their scarcity, the danger incurred in hunting these animals in steep mountainous land enhances the prestige of the hunter and the gastronomic value of the game. Killing it and bringing it back home with one's body covered in blood ranks higher than catching large fish (tuna or swordfish) with hand lines. It is one of the few violent activities that confers male prestige in a period when *Pax Gallica* forbids tribal wars. Mention should be made here of the permanent wars and feuds between tribes and valleys, which led to cannibalism until 1867 (Delmas, 1927: 174).

### *Definitions*

The first-hand data we have obtained from the various populations that we studied, mostly in Africa, suggests that the general term “meat” includes in first degree “the flesh of warm-blooded animals, their fat, their blood and their offal” (Robert, 1969: 1857). The definition given by the Littré dictionary in 1959 was: “The flesh of animals we feed on, the red part of the muscle which is the most nutritious part of all animal tissue” (Beaujean, 1959: 2394). This definition reflects our Western values, for many populations may prefer the meat which adheres to the bones rather than the fillet, as is the case in Africa as well as in Mongolia (Hamayon, 1975: 105). It is interesting to note the slightly more cautious entry in the current edition of *Le Petit Larousse*: “Food obtained from the muscles of animals, mainly mammals and birds (*Le Petit Larousse*, 2003: 1064), and even more so in the present edition of the *Larousse Gastronomique*: “Flesh of mammals and birds considered to be food . . . All the parts of butchered animals liable to be presented to the public for consumption” (*Larousse Gastronomique*, 2000: 1094-5), reflecting present-day attitudes.

The general consensus is to consider that the noble protein is the flesh of warm-blooded animals. It is either enjoyed or rejected. If culture forbids it, this does not diminish our longing for the pleasure of eating it.

### *Non-violence and meat*

Societies that advocate non-violence demonstrate examples of this meat nostalgia. In the middle hills of Nepal, the Tamang and the Ghale, who practise Buddhism and Hinduism, consume very little meat, about once a year only (Koppert, 1988: 64, 84), during the Dasai ritual when buffaloes, goats and sheep are slaughtered in honour of Durga (Kali), the Hindu goddess of death. The kindness and fondness with which animals are treated in daily life contrast sharply with the violence of the slaughtering, the skill of the carving, the subtlety of the sharing and finally the evident gastronomic pleasure derived from eating the meat. On the other hand, ingestion of meat in day-to-day life, even when accidental, may provoke disgust and even result in nausea (Rozin *et al.*, 1997: 74). Here we face one of the major paradoxes of Hindu thinking, which recommends non-violence, but

accepts bloody ritual slaughtering (Zimmerman, 1982: 206). Within the framework of the Buddhist prohibition of meat consumption, the Chinese have developed a refined cuisine termed “su” which attempts to imitate the succulence of meat while using only vegetable products (Mote, 1977: 224). Sabban (1993: 79) describes in this civilisation “the imitation meats, manufactured from soy beans, gluten or other plant foods [that] have in principle the appearance, the consistency of real meat”. As the Chinese philosopher Mengzi wrote: “A taste for meat is at world level the most commonly shared penchant” (*ibid*: 81). It is also possible to refer, in the general framework of the Catholic religion, to “fish ham for the lean days in which minced lean fish represented meat, the eel and the tench, both very fatty, representing the lard” (*idem*: 86). In China, at the onset of our era, while sobriety was advocated, poems summoned the soul, asking it to return home to the good life, a life in which such rich dishes satisfy the palate. We read “Oh Soul, come back! All kinds of good food are ready ... [mostly meat dishes] ...ribs of the fattened ox cooked tender and succulent ... stewed turtle and roast kid, served up with yam sauce, geese cooked in sour sauce, casserole duck, fried flesh of the great crane” (Chang, 1977: 32).

However, we cannot allow ourselves to dwell any longer on such amicable gastronomy, but must poke our noses into the darker aspects of carnivore behaviour.

### *Cannibalism*

Man is a thoroughly omnivorous mammal, in the sense that he can even eat his fellow members. Cannibalism is not only symbolic, it is a material fact. A number of societies have indulged in it and some psychopathological cases have been encountered in our contemporary world. Monestier (2000) has produced a typology on the subject. However, Arens (1979: 165) attempts to show the weakness of many of the witness accounts brought back by European missionaries and soldiers when confronted, from the XVIth to the XVIIth centuries, with the populations of the New Continent, especially the Caribs and the Tupinaba (Metraux, 1967: 45-78). Nevertheless, anthropophagy is not merely the product of the traveller’s fevered imagination. The story of Hans Staden, published in 1557, is a first-hand testimony from a spared



prisoner; it may have been embellished, but a good part of it is probably true (Stegnano Piccio, 1988: 122-123).

Enough data is available on prehistoric man to support the cannibalism hypothesis for Neanderthals, for instance, in Krapina, Croatia, (Delluc *et al.*, 1995) or in Moula Guercy, France, (Defleur *et al.*, 1991: 131). It is recorded among Neolithic populations, for instance, in Fontbregoua, France, (Villa *et al.*, 1987) where bones show signs that suggest that human beings have been butchered.

In contemporary times, work carried out on the kuru sickness resulted in a Nobel Prize (Gadjuzek, 1977) and showed that humans were consumed in New Guinea only a few decades ago (Lindenbaum, 1979: 21-24). Reeves Sanday (1986: 4) reports that, among 109 societies where there is serious data on anthropophagy available, this can be attested to in 34% of the cases. Cannibalism appears mostly in the Pacific and in Latin America.

It seems that the nutritional factor is not dominant. Interpreting the human sacrifice of the Aztecs as a means of obtaining enough animal proteins in a demographically exploding population is a thesis that can be challenged (Harner, 1977; Harris, 1978: 188). Closer to our civilisation, the rugby team stranded in the Andean Cordillera after their plane crashed on 13th October 1972, illustrates a case of emergency cannibalism, widely discussed in the media (Mosnier, 1994: 27).

Anthropophagy was practised in Ancient China during the numerous famines that occurred, for instance, under the Han dynasty (Yates, 1995: 161), and in the Middle Ages when Arab visitors and Marco Polo (XIVth century) reported on it (*ibid*: 150). During the Middle Ages, chroniclers mentioned episodes of cannibalism that accompanied periods of starvation (Bonassié, 1989; 1995: 10). Bernheim and Stanides (1992) report that, during the Novgorod famine in the winter of 1230-31, "...some of the common people killed the living and ate them, others cutting up dead flesh and corpses and ate them". Nearer to our times, during the Russian famine of 1919-20, five million people died and it is likely that cannibalism occurred (Dando, 1979: 229). Such horrible episodes may have happened also during the Second World War.

The motivation underlying anthropophagy is complex and not solely nutritional. Someone eats somebody else in order to incorporate his properties.

This, for example, was the case in the cannibalism which sometimes followed headhunting in New Guinea (Zegwaard, 1971: 262). According to Lemonnier (1990: 106) cannibalism might be believed to boost a community's vitality. Sometimes the motives given may be unexpected. In the case of the Guayaki Indians of Paraguay, Clastres (1972: 335) mentions that a human being may be eaten in order to secure a permanent grave for one's soul.

Even gastronomy can be mentioned as a motive. Around 1930, Leenhardt (1937:89) wrote of the Kanaks in New Caledonia: "Among these people condemned to monotonous farinaceous foods, there is a concupiscence for meat... they do not give other reasons for cannibalism and one should hear in the mouths of the elderly their spontaneous memories of past man-hunting: when the yellow flowers of the gaiac tree (*Acacia spiroidis*) bloom, it is now that men are fat".

In Polynesia and in the Fijian Islands, revenge and derision were powerful motives. Anthropophagy was often performed on enemies, who had been cruelly tortured before being killed and eaten (Delmas, 1927: 157).

What are we to think about the hungry European crusader who consumed the flesh of Muslims (stewing the adults, cooking the children on the spit) when besieging the town of Maarat Al Numan in 1098 (Bonassié, 1995: 11; Maalouf, 1983 quoting Ibn al Athir and Raoul de Caen: 55)? Today, one may also wonder about the reasons which led the Japanese student, Iseki Sagawa, to savour the flesh of his Dutch girlfriend in Paris a few years ago. And dare we mention the success of a recent novel: "Hannibal"? (Harris, 2000). Anthropophagy is not restricted to remote tribal cultures; it also appears in the cultural patrimony of Western civilisations.

The monstrous nature of cannibalism has been depicted in Greek Antiquity. In a Greek myth, Chronos devours all his children for fear of seeing one of them dethrone him, according to the omens (Hamilton, 1997: 80). This is also the curse cast on the house of Atreus and the characters of the Orestes trilogy. Tantalus, in order to inflict on the gods of Olympus the horror of anthropophagy, killed his own son, Pelops, and served him up to them to eat. He was revived, but the curse pursued the two sons of Pelops. Thyestes committed adultery with the wife of his brother Atreus; and she in turn killed Thyestes' children and offered their flesh to their own father. This tragic malediction underlines the fate of Orestes as described in

Aeschylus' tragedy. Plato and Freud suggested that cannibalism and incest were concrete instances of the surge of a natural, infrahuman, Dionysian stage of life, prior to the establishment of a civilised society (Bousset, 1993: 41; see also Mechin, 1992: 9). They represent deeply-ingrained, compelling tendencies which have to be repressed. According to present day psychoanalysts, the fear of cannibalistic "devoration" is present in contemporary collective imagination. In Euripides' play, "The Bacchae", one of the protagonists, entranced by Dionysian drunkenness, devours her own son (Bousset, 1993: 41). The same author refers to the "...contradictory double dimensions of love and destruction in the same action" (*ibid*: 40), and evokes the Eucharist in relation to it (*ibid*: 47; see also Green 1972: 34). We quote the Gospel according to Saint John, VI, 53-58: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whosoever eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood dwelleth in me, and I in him".

The fact that, materially and symbolically, man is an edible food for man may result in a secret uneasiness in relation to meat consumption and an ambiguous attitude towards it.

In spite of his slightly adventurous anthropological views about the primal murder of the father – a tyrant hoarding the females of the primitive horde, Freud (1924: 193) touches on an important point. In most traditional societies meat consumption is a collective venture: it is eaten on ritual or social occasions, communally. The term "communion feast" is well-founded here.

As we saw among African societies, the animals to be consumed are dedicated to a supernatural entity. To eat meat just for pleasure is uncommon and, in most cases, looked down upon. Only wealthy societies, most especially our own Western ones, gorge on it simply for gastronomic delectation. Meat still remains the central point during festive meals at home or in a restaurant.

### SOLEMNITY AND BRUTALITY OF THE NUTRITIONAL MURDER

The evolution of Western societies has contributed to transforming meat into daily, profane and hygienic nourishment, entailing little emotion. It has erased many aspects which are important in less prosperous and less anomic societies. Consecrating meat is an essential step in its consumption in traditional societies. It may be justified by a religious alibi, which may minimise the silent fear of guilt and the secret remorse aroused by the slaughter, ritualising the action and setting it apart from daily affairs. Indian thought is clear on this aspect. According to the religious formulae quoted by Zimmerman (1982: 206): "He does not commit sin who eats meat after it has been consecrated. On the contrary, aside from situations of urgency or distress, there is no worse sinner than he who wishes to father his own flesh by eating the flesh of another without honouring manes or deities" (*ibid*: 207).

Here we come across an important new point. In itself, eating flesh is unavoidably linked to violence (*ibid*: 207). As remarked by Vialles (1987: 4) in relation to contemporary Southern France, "Meat can only be obtained by putting animals to death ... Therefore the animals obviously have to be killed, but we demand an ellipse [a break] between the live animal and its flesh". This hypocritical attitude already existed in Ancient China. Sabban (1993: 86) states that "only the philosopher Mengzi showed sorrow for the animals brought to the slaughterhouse, which did, however, not lead him to deprive himself of meat, but rather to remain far from the kitchen".

Slaughtering an animal implies shedding its blood, an action and a matter which are considered "hot", dangerous and polluting. Blood is never a harmless matter. In European cultures, the more species of venison a hunter killed, the darker his blood became, and the greater was his attraction towards savagery (Hell, 1994: 341-351). Among the Inuit, it appears that the consumption of seal meat gives their blood its thickness and its colour, and allows the seal to survive through the human being, thus drawing the whole process towards humanity (Borre, 1991: 53). Views about blood differ broadly. Consuming fresh blood among the Masai contrasts with the horror it provokes among the Jews. Generalisation would be hazardous. However, most of the time specific individuals (the butchers) are in charge of slaughtering and carving up the dead animals, both

polluting performances that affect them. This is the case of the endogamic “griot” caste in Senegal among the Wolof and Serer. They are musicians and heralds; and they butcher domestic animals and receive pieces for their services, thus having access to more meat than the rest of the population. In the societies of Northern Cameroon, most traditional religious chiefs are assisted by sacrificers, often of slave origin, as they are prohibited from slaughtering animals themselves and handling their meat. In ordinary households, it is the role of the compound chief’s sister’s son. The identity of the slaughterer is important. His action dedicates the sacrificed animal to a supernatural power, making it a religious ritual performance.

His action also circumscribes the group entitled to partake of the meat. Today still, the kosher meat, out of which all blood has been carefully drawn, is destined for the chosen people, the Jews. The slaughtering and butchering has to be carried out by a sacrificer, the *choret*, who must have high moral standards. Similarly, the *halal* meat of the Muslims implies turning the animal towards Mecca before cutting its throat and shedding its blood. This has to be done by a believer. Blood is a privileged nourishment for the gods, “a precious water” (Soustelle, 1967: 240), a fuel permitting the cyclical maintenance of the universe, as fiercely illustrated by the Aztec human sacrifices (*ibid*: 233). Shedding blood is a serious and symbolically dangerous matter. Smearing it on individuals, altars or idols brings a certain jubilation that accompanies the Aztec or Northern Cameroonian sacrifices as well as domestic pig slaughtering in Southern Europe. Though this excitement is seldom referred to in our hypocritical societies, it is an essential part of what Vialles (1987: 5) calls the “dietary murder” implied by meat consumption.

In traditional societies, the slaughtering is not hidden: it is a key moment in family life; children take part in it. This is the case of slaughtering the pig (“le pêle porc” or “tue cochon”) still practised in farms in the French countryside. It specifically implies blood consumption, on this occasion – black pudding (“boudin” in French). Handling meat is not considered disgusting in rural societies. Elias (1939: 99) mentions that, during the Middle Ages, when meat was brought to the banquet table, it was appropriate for a prosperous participant to know how to carve it. Compassion and pity are excluded from these episodes. African societies, such as the Masa and the Muzey, go one

step further. The suffering of the animal is considered a tribute made to the authority of the most powerful deities. It also marks the offering as exclusively theirs. This is why the chickens offered to Mother Earth in the Masa Guisey clan are killed slowly, and plucked and singed while still alive.

### AN AMBIGUOUS FOOD

In a less ambitious fashion we may point to the ambiguous character of meat eating. Today Baron Justus von Liebig could no longer celebrate meat and stress the efficacy of muscle meat to restore muscular strength (Fiddes, 1992: 176), on the principle of sympathetic magic. However, since the Pythagorean movement in Greek Antiquity, there has been in Western civilisation a reaction against the barbarity of meat eating (*ibid*: 10; Pouillon, 1972: 18).

Reference could be made here to Christian religions that prohibit the consumption of meat during Lent and on Fridays (Montagné, 1967: 285, 646), seeking purity and mortification through the avoidance of both impure and enjoyable foods. It should be added that the severity of the initial prohibition mellowed progressively into tolerating the flesh of cold-blooded animals (fish) and later of animals pertaining to the aquatic realm: duck, teal, snipe, curlew and even otter, all quite palatable game providing succulent dishes.

Our contemporary period is marked by a revival of vegetarianism, especially among North European and Protestant Anglo-Saxon countries. In the UK, in 1990, there were 3.7% true vegetarians and 6.3% consumers that preferred to avoid meat, a total of 10%. In 1993 the total was 12% (Lepetit de la Bigne, 1993: 33). This trend is in marked contrast with the reputation of beef eating attributed to the British in the XIXth century (Fiddes, 1992: 26). Fashionable ecology and a greater interest in protecting nature, concern about the disappearance of many animal species, emotional reactions to the suffering of animals have all tended to override the gastronomic pleasure of eating meat, spreading views not unlike those of non-violence (such as the Ahinsa of Indian philosophy).

## CONCLUSION

What do the various societies we have mentioned have in common with regard to meat eating?

In none of them, except the Arctic ones, does meat represent the highest proportion of calories in the diet. Its consumption is therefore relatively rare compared to that of plant foods.

Consuming meat is an emotionally loaded action: its symbolic value tends to be high. It sets in motion many aspects of material and non-material life. We could be tempted to refer here to the Maussian concept of “total social phenomenon” (Mauss, 1950: 147).

In most societies meat appears to be a palatable and prestigious element. It displays wealth and generosity. Offering it is a central feature of hospitality, and contributes to establishing and sealing communication between individuals and groups. It is a social link and an emblematic marker for all kinds of human groups. Its consumption is often collective and appears as a counterpoint to the social and religious events of individuals, families and communities.

Meat is also a ritual item to be offered and sacrificed: it permits communication with the hereafter. In traditional societies, the use of meat is seldom individual and profane. Most of the time it is ritual and collective, we would be tempted to write “communal”.

Its nature is somewhat ambiguous as it arouses some suspicion about how it is obtained. It is the result of a violent action that causes death. In the Northern Cameroonian societies we have studied, there is a symbolic similarity between the human being offering the sacrifice and the slaughtered animal. It incites a certain uneasiness. This appears in the fear of symbolic cannibalism – the abduction of the human soul. The origin of this may raise questions in our minds, but we cannot eliminate the fact that man is an omnivorous animal, capable of consuming the meat of his fellow creatures. Eating flesh seems to be a more serious act than consuming vegetables.

The “dietary murder” that precedes the consumption of meat in traditional societies is a public, festive action that induces jubilation. In our modern society, it is accompanied by a certain feeling of guilt and shame, which increasingly reflects long-standing attitudes that promote restraint, vegetarianism and non-violence.



In addition to concerns about preserving the natural environment and respecting animals' rights, considerations related to good health and longevity appear. Recently, fear of contracting bovine spongiform encephalitis (BSE) has reinforced negative attitudes towards a food that can yield simultaneous pleasure and prestige, but also provoke illness and death.

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