

10. THE PREPARATION OF FOOD: Ideals and Actual Behaviors

In this chapter and the following, we will discuss the preparation and the distribution of food in village households. But earlier information presented on the impact of increasing food scarcity should make it clear that an observer in Kinanbwa is not witnessing a traditional food preparation or food distribution system, but rather an evolving system whose current state is a compromise between what people would like to do and what actual circumstances permit them to do.

Stated differently, food related behaviors are either linked to, or are emergency deviations from, local beliefs, ideals, and standards. Both for the ethnographer and the nutrition educator, it is useful to have at least an overview of this cognitive dimension, of the beliefs and folk-categorization principles from which food related behaviors flow and/or deviate. Our discussion of general village food beliefs will here focus, not on the special perinatal and pre-weaning spheres that have been discussed earlier in the report, but on the general categorization principles that influence the preparation of meals for adults and for children who have already been weaned.

10.1. The Major "Food Groups" of the Traditional System

Our familiarity with the literature had led us to believe that the major classificatory principle which peasants would invoke in distinguishing between different types of foods would be the well known "hot/cold" distinction. But we quickly learned that the peasants of Kinanbwa, from as far back as the oldest village informants could remember, have employed a substantially different food classification system, one which in terms of its general categories bears an absolutely astonishing similarity to the principles which many modern nutritionists employ.

The villagers of Kinanbwa place most of their important, locally consumed staples into one of three traditional food groups. The labels which they apply to these groups are Viv, Vyann, and Legim. It will be useful to examine each of these groups separately.

10.1.1. The Viv Group

From the point of view of the ordinary village meal, the backbone of the local food system is the viv. All three major locally consumed cereals--corn, rice, and millet--are classified as members of the viv group, as are the three major root crops (sweet potato, manioc, and yam). The locally popular plantain ("cooking banana") is also a viv, as are most varieties of beans. Malanga and mazonbel are somewhat less important but are also classed by peasants as members of this group.

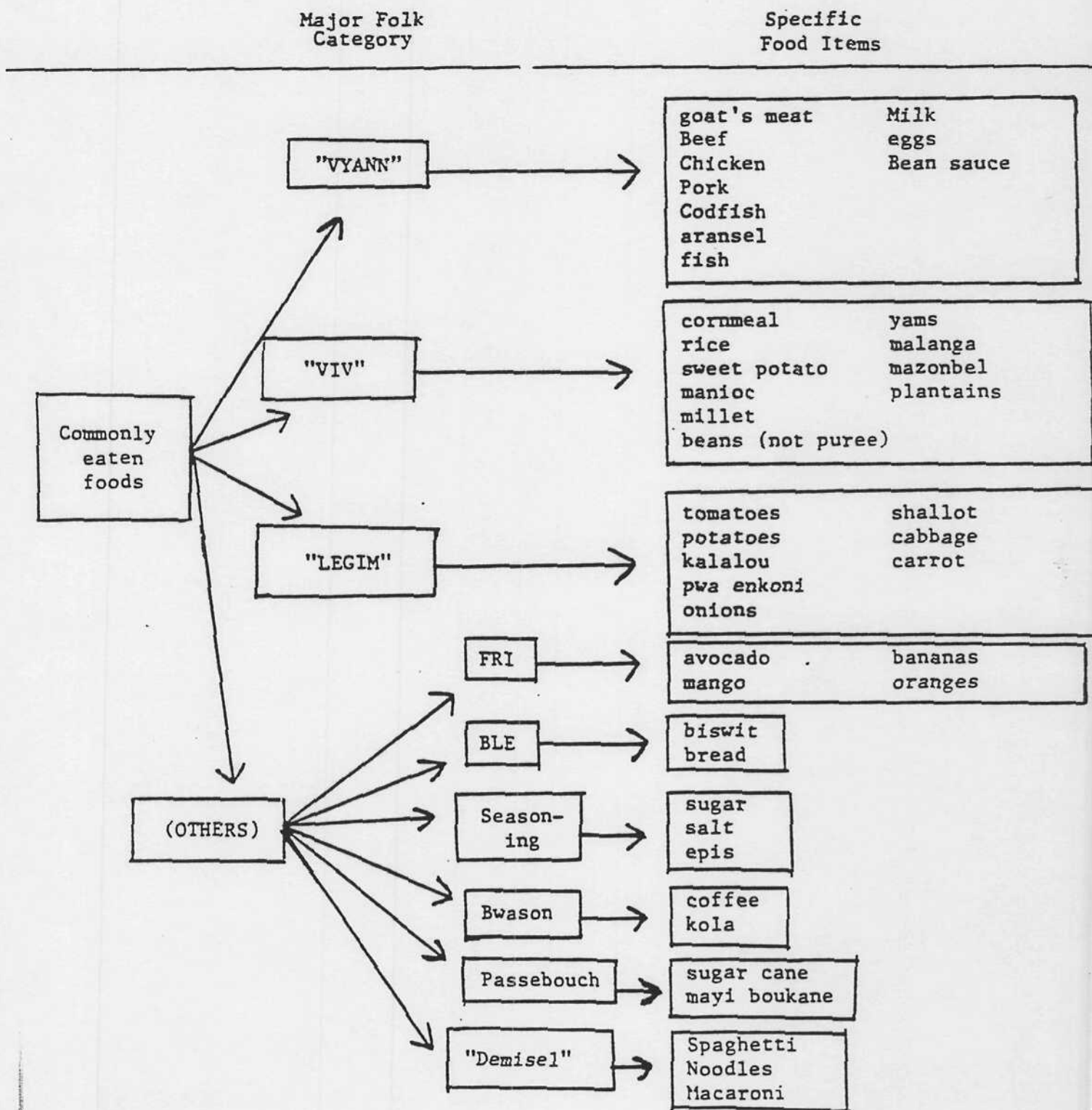
The viv is the backbone of the ordinary meal. In a sense a person has not "eaten" if the meal did not contain a viv. And though a meal with only vivs would not be considered a good meal, the person consuming it would nonetheless consider himself to have manjé, to have "taken a meal".

The status of what are perhaps the two most important items--corn and beans--is particularly interesting. They are classed as viv only when prepared a certain way. Corn will generally be classed as a viv only if it is consumed in the form of cornmeal. If it is roasted and consumed on the cob, it "descends" into the category of snack (pasé-bouch) to be discussed below. By a paradoxical (and nutritionally on-target) twist, beans are treated just the opposite. They will be considered a viv only if prepared in their normal granular form. When they are pureed and prepared as a sauce, however, (as is done with great frequency in the traditional system), they are "graduated" by local classification principles into the "higher" category of vyann which will also be discussed below.

Figure 6 gives a breakdown of the entire system. It is clear that the viv group for the most part consists of items which modern nutritionists would rate as high in carbohydrates. We are aware of no analogous commonly used term in English, French, or Spanish which, with such uncanny inclusiveness, succeeds in lumping together under one traditional category those foods which are high in carbohydrates. The closest contender is the commonly used folk-category of vívere found in the neighboring Dominican Republic and in several other Latin American countries. However, whereas the vívere includes root crops and plantains, it does not include the cereals. Of the more than half-

Figure 6

Traditional Taxonomy fo Major Foods



dozen New World societies with which he have direct familiarity, only the rural Hatians have a traditional system which correctly places all locally grown high-carbohydrate foods under one commonly used lexeme.

There are, of course, other high-carbohydrate foods in Figure<sup>6</sup> which local tradition does not place into the viv group. But virtually all of these (biswit, bread, spathetti, noodles, macaroni) are made from imported, rather than locally grown, materials. They have come too late to "invade" the already established traditional taxon. The other item high in carbohydrates but not a viv is, of course, sugar. But this is a very special type of food item which by itself could not form the "backbone" of a meal. Perhaps this term "backbone", or a term such as "meal base", would be the best English translation of this nutritionally incisive and ethnographically interesting traditional food group.

#### 10.1.2. The Vyann Group

The second major traditional food group is the one referred to by the villagers as vyann. Literally translated as "meat", the major members of this group are in fact the different types of meat consumed by villagers: beef, goats meat, pork, and chicken. But the group in addition includes fish, locally caught as well as dried and imported.

But in addition to these items, which are literally the flesh of mammals, birds, and fish and (which are also called chê i.e. "flesh" by villagers) the traditional food-group vyann also includes three other non-flesh items: eggs, milk, and bean sauce. Informants regularly asserted that each of these items, sé you vyann li yé ("is a type of meat"), that they belong in the same general category as the flesh items mentioned above.

It is ethnographically somewhat astonishing to see that traditional village food categories have succeeded in lumping together under one word all those commonly used local foods which modern nutritionists would place as high in protein, in a manner analogous to the carbohydrate grouping into the above mentioned viv category. We are aware of no traditional term in English, French



or Spanish which so explicitly lumps meat, fish, milk, and eggs together into a "protein" group in the way that the Kinanbwa villagers have lumped them all into the vyann food group.

The question of bean sauce is particularly interesting. Beans are prepared both as grains which are cooked whole and as a quasi-liquid thick puree. When cooked whole, the beans are considered to be a viv. But it is believed that the process of preparing them as a puree (sos poua) has the effect of releasing certain vitamins that are used by the body in a way that they cannot be used when the grain is cooked intact. Thus sos poua is explicitly referred to, not as a viv, but as a nutritionally superior vyann. The distinction between whole beans and pureed beans, and the assigning of higher nutritional value to the latter, was part of village tradition long before those recent nutrition campaigns which attempt to teach Haitian mothers to puree the beans they feed children so that less of the nutrient content will be expelled in the child's feces. The Kinanbwa women have never been exposed to these educational messages, nor do they need them in this particular matter. The food categorization principles which they learn from village tradition has already taught them to treat as "rough equivalents", not only meat and fish, but also the eggs, milk, and bean sauce which modern nutritionists place into a general protein group.

When we have discussed these astonishing similarities between the viv/vyann distinction and the modern carbohydrate/protein distinction with nutritional and medical professionals, we have on occasion received polite inquiries as to whether the villagers might not have devised their categories on the basis of exposure to one of the several nutrition programs that have been launched in Haiti. We have verified this matter with a broad variety of older village informants and can state with assurance that this nutritionally incisive categorization scheme is part of village tradition. We have no explanations as to why village tradition has come up with this protein/carbohydrate dichotomy as the central axis of local food beliefs, in contrast to the hot/cold dichotomy which is reported to be the guiding principle in other parts of rural Haiti (and which bears little if any relationship to the vyann/viv distinction). But we can only point out that it is the dominant classificatory principle and that it is

not the product of contact with either modern nutrition messages or the urban milieu in general. Furthermore, brief conversations with villagers in other parts of Haiti lead us to suspect that the vyann/viv distinction may be a central element in the traditional food system of many regions in Haiti.

Nutrition educators may feel some ambivalence towards this finding. On the positive side it means that the population has a pre-existing readiness for "modern" insights. On the other hand, however, if "traditional" village categories are already so incisive as to teach food grouping principles which industrial children must go to school to learn, then an honest observer must question the relevance of any "education-based" nutrition intervention program that posits (either explicitly or implicitly) villager "ignorance" as a major cause of malnutrition.

#### 10.1.3 The Légim Group

There is a third food group which forms an important part of village meal-planning: the category of légim. Literally translated as "vegetable", the légim group in village tradition is in fact a group of foods which are used to make the sauces (sos) in which the vyann are generally prepared. We shall see below that, in evaluating the adequacy of meals, the presence or absence of a légim-based sos is one of the major factors.

#### 10.1.4 Other Food Groups

In addition to the "big three" major traditional food groups of viv, vyann, and légim, there are other foods also consumed in the village. Figure 2 breaks these down somewhat arbitrarily into different sub-categories. Villagers are explicit in excluding these other foods from the "big three", but are not explicit in subcategorizing them into smaller subgroups. They are included in Figure 2 for inclusiveness.

#### 10.1.5 Water as a Valued Food Item

There is one particular complex of beliefs in which village opinion places strong emphasis on a practice which, while not harmful, appears to have little basis in biological fact. It is thought that the nutritional value of even a good meal will be weakened or nullified unless the person downs a glass of water after the meal. Water drunk even by itself in the day is viewed as being to some degree nourishing. But it is in combination with food that water is most helpful. It helps you digest the food, and it is the water which is what helps children grosi (grow) It is the water which fõtifyé ("fortifies") the child. Thus children are taught to consume great deals of water after each meal. This is taught by explicit training, and in fact it was village children who were most articulate in explaining to us the nutritive value of post-meal water.

In line with this belief, there is a corresponding belief that places a particular value on foods that make people thirsty. And it is this belief in the nutritive role of water that perhaps underlies the practice of referring to adult food as manjé sel, literally "salt food". It is the power of solid foods to make you thirsty and to force you to drink water that endows them with at least part of their nourishing effect.

This belief in the need to follow eating by drinking can be found throughout Haiti. The general emphasis is on liquids, rather than on water per se, and persons in urban areas will say that meals should be followed by a juice, a kola, or even coconut water. But the rationale is the same: without liquids, the food itself will not have its effect.

#### 10.2 International Ranking of Items Within the Vyann and Viv Group

The categorization of items as vyann and viv by villagers merely places the items into certain classes whose principal behavioral relevance is in terms of meal planning and meal preparation. But by no means are all of the items within each group considered to be equivalent. On the

contrary, there are widely shared and quite explicit rankings made of the different food items along at least two somewhat independent local dimensions: perceived nutritional value of the item and the tastiness of the item. In discussing the relative nutritional value of items, villagers frequently use the verb kinbé (to "hold" or "support"). A nutritionally solid food is praised because lap kinbé ou tout nan jounin ("it will hold you up all day long"). A nutritionally inferior member of either group is given a low ranking either because la fè ou mal (it can hurt you) or simply (and more usually) li pa kinbé-ou, li pa fè anyin pou rou ("it doesn't hold you up, it doesn't do you any good"). In discussing the second evaluative dimension, that of taste, villagers may simply use the adjective gou ("tasty"). Another dichotomy is sometimes heard with respect to taste: lou ("heavy") vs. léjè ("light"). Good taste is associated with lightness.

But the villagers distinguish between the gustatory dimension of "lightness" and the nutritional dimension of "holding power". An item can be high on holding power and lower on taste -- and vice versa. That is, village food assessment criteria avoid a simplistic association of tastiness with nutritional worth. Traditional discriminations are somewhat more differentiated, being made along at least two axes. (As we will see below, the adequacy of cooking techniques adds yet a third evaluative dimension).

Within the viv group, the two undisputed champions in terms of holding power are cornmeal (mayi moulin) and plantain (banan). And of these two cornmeal is seen to be the leading viv. Its holding power is believed to be so great that, if a family is planning to cook two grains on a given day, the cornmeal will generally be given in the morning, because of its superior power to help one through a heavy work day. The other grain will be saved for later in the day. Only in matters of postpartum feeding will villagers prefer the plantain over cornmeal. As was seen in an earlier section, the plantain is the viv which village tradition mandates as the best food for filling the recently vacated stomach of the woman and for placating the wandering lamè. But for daily life, cornmeal is accorded the highest nutritional value.



In terms of taste, in contrast, the favorite viv is rice. It is not seen as having the holding power of cornmeal, but is seen as having an inherently better taste. Millet is given a generally low rating both on nutritional power and taste. In terms of beans, villagers make discriminations between the nutritional worth of different varieties of beans. The highest is the poua noua (black bean). Toward the lower end of the scale would be the drought resistant but low-valued poua kongo. The most common red bean is somewhere in the middle in terms of village nutritional ranking.

Similar preferential rankings are also made within the vyann group. It appears that in terms of holding power, the favorite and most highly appreciated meat is goat's meat. Goats meat is to the vyann group what cornmeal is to the viv group, in terms of perceived nutritional worth.

In terms of taste, however, goats' meat is ranked as somewhat low. Food preparations norms emphasize that goats' meat must be washed thoroughly with sour orange and lemon. Otherwise it will "stink" (santi di).

In contrast to goats' meat, chicken is thought to be less nutritious, but inherently better tasting (as rice is preferred over cornmeal in the viv group). And just as in the case of rice, it is the "lightness" of chicken in comparison to the "heaviness" of goats' meat which produces its superior taste, in spite of the nutritional superiority of the goats' meat. Beef is also appreciated in the village, but is generally thought to be less sustaining than goats' meat.

Pork is assigned a generally low nutritional value in the village. The scavenging habits of the pig, and its tendency to eat garbage and other unclean items, constitute one factor in the perceived inferiority of its meat, in contrast to that of the two more highly valued ruminants. The recent epidemic of African swine fever has merely added to village perceptions of the "dangers" inherent in pork. As a postpartum food we have seen that pork is viewed as being of little value to the woman. Some villagers would go further and say that it is dangerous for the woman

and should not be eaten until three months after delivery. And then it should be eaten only in dry, well-cooked griot form by itself, rather than being cooked by simmering in liquid sauces, as is true of other meats. That is, one behavioral effect of the low nutritional value and health hazards which village tradition assigns to pork is to create tighter cooking constraints, an attitude that is well in line with modern medical advice as well.

This differential rankings of meats, it could be added, is also carried over to the religious sphere. The folk religion of the village ("Voodoo") involves frequent sacrifices of animals. The world of the local spirits is divided into two groups: gentle spirits ("sweet loua") and violent spirits ("bitter loua"). The most gentle and "lightest" of the spirits have a preference for the meat of white chickens and pigeons. Pork, in contrast, is fed only to the violent spirits. Goats meat and beef will straddle both groups of spirits. But the strict confinement of pork to the violent "bitter" group merely gives ritual manifestation to a dislike and fear of pork that is part of the more general village food preference system.

But there is one meat that is disliked by villagers even more intensely than pork: mutton. The meat of sheep is believed to be dermatologically dangerous, causing skin to break out in white blotches. But many sheep are raised locally for sale in Port-au-Prince markets. In recent years, however, sheep owners have taken to killing sheep and selling the meat in the town market as though it were goats' meat. The trick is to place the meat next to the head of a slaughtered goat in the market stall. The flesh of the two animals is sufficiently similar to deceive all but the most experienced buyers. This fear of being duped into eating mutton is one of the stated reasons for the infrequency of meat purchase (and meat consumption) in village life. One can also suspect that this danger in some cases provides a not-unappreciated rationale for not spending scarce money on this somewhat expensive food item. But the fear of mutton in the village is intense. Recent regulations enforced in the town mandate for the actual slaughter of the animal to take place in the market itself to reduce the likelihood of switching.

In summing up this discussion of food preferences within the traditional categories of vyann and viv, we are impressed at four patterns:

1. The explicitness of the contrasting nutritional assessments
2. The assumption of inherent, collectively perceived taste.
3. The differences between these preferences and those found in the urban areas and in the rural areas of the neighboring Dominican Republic.
4. The manner in which barbaric food preferences are attributed to whites.

With respect to the first point, we have found the Kinanbwa villagers to be much more explicitly concerned with the matter of the nutritional value of a particular food item than is true either in our own respective subcultures or in other settings where we have carried out research. In our own subcultures, for example, the choice between different meats or vegetable appears to be made much more on the basis of the different tastes of the meat rather than on a knowledge of their different nutritional values. Though our intercultural comparisons here are admittedly impressionistic, we suspect that few people in our own subcultures would have an explicit theory about the different nutritional value of beef as opposed to pork, of corn as opposed to potatoes. Unless such matters are explicitly studied in school, such nutritional comparisons are either non-existent or on the periphery of concern. In Kinanbwa, in contrast, these nutritional comparisons are a cognitively salient element of local socialization, and even many pre-teens (perhaps especially pre-teens) can elaborate at length about the different nutritional value of cornmeal as opposed to millet, or of goats meat as opposed to chicken.

Secondly, we have also noticed that in terms of taste, there tends to be an assumption that some items taste inherently better than others. Chicken, for example, seems to be considered inherently tastier than goats meat. Persons are known to differ in their tastes, just as they are in

our own subculture. But whereas in our groups, the person preferring pork over chicken would be seen as choosing between two equally plausible alternatives, the person expressing this preference in Kinanbwa would be seen as making a strange (but entirely acceptable) choice. Stated differently, there appears to be not only an emphasis on folk-nutritional knowledge, but also at least a light tendency to pre-structure "tastes" themselves toward certain directions and away from others. But this pressure is light. Everybody is seen as having a right to his or her own preferences.

With respect to the third observation mentioned above, we are impressed at the manner in which the judgements and preferences of the villagers emphasize the desirability at least some items which just across the border in the Dominican Republic, for example, are considered highly undesirable. Cornmeal will be rejected as virtually subhuman by peasants in many parts of the Dominican Republic, whereas it is valued as the most nutritional viv (though not the tastiest) by the villagers of Kinanbwa. The favorite meat in the village — goats' meat — is considered virtually inedible by many foreigners visiting Haiti (who may never have had opportunity to try it). We are not in a position to comment here on the scientific accuracy or inaccuracy of the nutritional judgements made by different groups. But if one group says cornmeal is better than rice, and the other group says that rice is better than cornmeal, either one of the groups is wrong or each is simply operating on a different definition of the term "better". We leave in abeyance the question of the precise accuracy of the villagers' comparative ranking of different items nutritionally. But the presence of this nutritional sensitivity should itself be seen as a strength.

Finally we were also impressed at the manner in which many villagers assumed barbaric food preferences on the part of whites. More than once we have had to decline the offer of a "low priced" dead crocodile killed in a nearby lake by a would-be seller who suspected that our interest in the creature's meat might possibly exceed our interest in its skin. And we have likewise had to decline offers of the carcasses of a number



of locally killed birds of whose genus we had not the faintest idea but whose meat was thought to be possibly attractive to us as blan. This attribution of repulsive food preferences to the blan can be seen as a paradoxical type of unintentional village retaliation against the equally erroneous attributions of incorrect food preferences which so many well-meaning, flipchart-toting blan will frequently level against the villagers.

### 10.3 Ranking Meals: Excellent Meals vs. "Dry Meals"

Societies not only teach their members that some food items are better than others, but also that it is important to combine food items and to eat a variety of items at each major sitting.

This general notion of "balanced meals" is by no means an invention of modern nutritional science. It is an ancient principle deeply built into traditional cultures. Modern nutritional science merely systematizes and rationalizes a combinatory strategy that is a virtually universal element in human dietary practices.

This notion of the balanced meal is a principle which exerts a strong influence on the meal-planning and food-preparation activities of Kinanwa villagers. Prevailing village beliefs emphasize that a meal will be most nutritious if it contains a combination of some viv and a vyann which has been cooked in the sauce of some legim. It is becoming increasingly rare for families to have such three-pronged meals and a number of compromises have been instituted. Every meal will have at least a viv. But if there is no vyann available, the meal will still be considered acceptable if it has at least some sauce available, generally from a legim. Lacking this, the meal can still be considered acceptable if the viv is at least accompanied by an avocado. This particular fruit has come to play the role of minimally acceptable accompaniment to vivs such as cornmeal and millet.

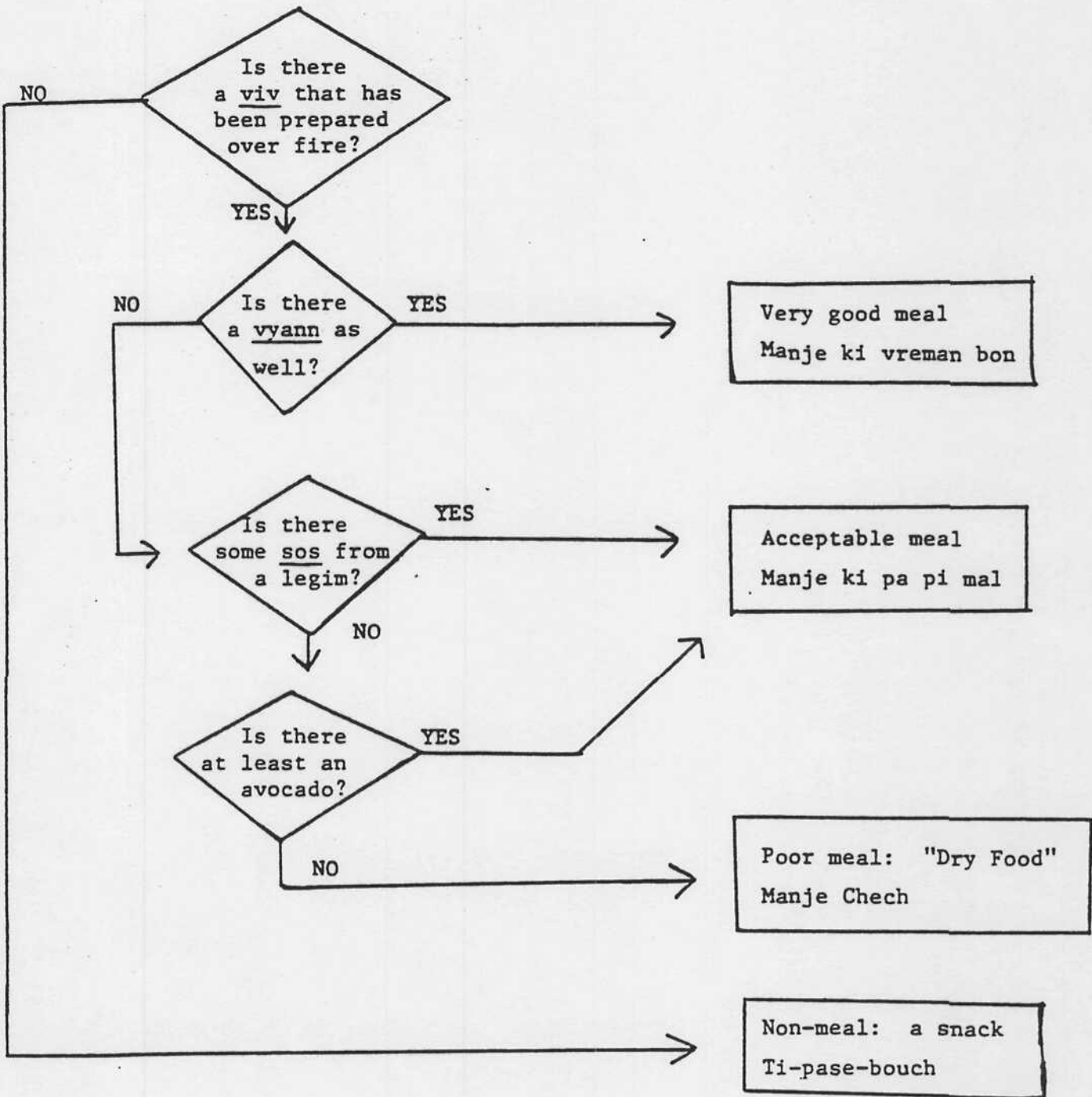
If, however, the household has only cornmeal, millet, or some other viv, but nothing with which to accompany it, family members will accept it and will consider themselves to have "eaten". But such an unaccompanied viv meal is referred to as a manjé chech (a dry meal). The "dry meal" is considered to be inferior, not only in taste, but also in terms of its nutritional value. The major exception to this is the practice of preparing early morning portions of cornmeal with no accompanying sauce of any sort. This is viewed as a good way to begin the day, especially for children. But in general, after late morning, such an unaccompanied meal will be referred to despectively as a "dry meal".

But there is a form of eating that is seen as being less adequate than the "dry meal". During the worst months of the year, the poorer village families may not even have, on a given day, a viv to cook and will be obliged to get by on biswit, sugar cane, roasted corn, or some other such item on that day. In such cases people will not consider themselves to have had a meal. These emergency (or in-between meal) items are referred to as pasé-bouch, literally "mouth-passers," perhaps best translated as "snacks". In Figure 7 we have attempted to schematize these distinctions in an approximate fashion.

Further elicitation would permit refinements to Figure 7. But what is important here is that local traditions already endow villagers with strong beliefs concerning the need to balance meals, and concerning the inferiority of meals that are not balanced. The particular combinations may vary from one part of the country to another, but the evidence is strong that one or another variant of the meal-balancing principle can be found throughout rural Haiti. Nutrition professionals, be they Haitian or foreign, are merely exposing their own lack of familiarity with rural Haiti when they make well-meaning but uninformed pronouncements about the urgency with which peasants must be taught to eat a nutritious combination of foods.

Figure 7

Village Criteria for Ranking the Adequacy of Meals



The problem stems in part from the fact that visitors to a rural community may in fact observe plates of food being eaten that contain only cornmeal or millet. But such meals are done, not out of obedience to local beliefs, but rather in spite of local beliefs, a deviation that in virtually all cases is caused by scarcity. The peasants themselves are fully aware, not only of the inferior taste, but also of the nutritional deficiencies of such "dry food". If a community of peasants really thought that such one-item meals was adequate, then the educator could swing into action. Such one-item meals, however, stem not from flaws in the village belief system, but from the earlier discussed stresses in the village economic system.

#### 10.4 Food Preparation Standards

There are standards not only with respect to the combination of items within a meal, but also with respect to the manner in which the food should be cooked. There are three basic standards for cooked food: tastiness, safeness, attractiveness. Expectations are placed for food to taste good. Steps such as mariné enhance the possibility of making food taste better. Much time is allocated to cleaning fish, a process that may take over an hour and a half cutting off unwanted parts, and cleaning each fish carefully with lemon or sour orange. Even young children learn fast how to season foods and what are acceptable and unacceptable tastes. Yonal, age 2, threw some unsugared coffee to the floor, in disgust. Only under their father's threatening remarks did a set of siblings drink the unsugared tea. Likewise, surprising even her father, a five-year-old went into the food dépo, got a little salt, mortared it, and put it on the avocado she had just been given before she proceeded to eat it. People are also very aware of how things should taste. Diluted coffee immediately elicits comments of "pa fô" (not strong) or is treated as a "tí dlo" (a little water). Likewise with soups, sauces and other things that can be potentially watered down, people complain when the thinning is excessive.



The other standard for food is safety. There are certain foods that are recognized as being dangerous, unless properly cooked. Adults repeatedly warn young children as to the importance of cooking food well and as to the consequences of their failing to do so. Corn that is not well roasted can make children feel ill.. Young girls learning to cook for the family are also closely supervised to make sure they have prepared the foods to the desired doneness and have followed the proper steps of cleaning both foods as well as pots and pans before proceeding with the cooking. The safety standards also extend to the water used for drinking and cooking. There are various sources of water in the village that are recognized as not being appropriate for drinking or cooking. This has been discussed earlier.

Family cooks do their best to make the food look attractive. And to this effect, again, there are certain standards to be met. Coloring is very important, especially in the case of sauces. People buy extra ingredients such as tomato paste just to give a sauce a deeper coloring, to make a "bon sos jòn". Sauces should also have the proper thickness, which is yet another dimension along which the attractiveness of foods is evaluated.

#### 10.5 Actual Cooking Practices: The Time Factor

The cooking process in Kinanbwa is time consuming even under ideal circumstances. Given current cooking technology, even light meals such as porridge (labouvi) take an average of 60 minutes to prepare. Major meals, normally extend between 3 and 4 hours. Of 10 major meals carefully followed in two households, 6 exceeded three hours preparation time, while none was completed before two hours.

What factors actually contribute to lengthen the process? First of all, the food preparation task is itself elaborate. Let us consider the seemingly simple task of preparing the morning coffee. Before one even begins water has to be fetched, and pots and cups that may have been

visited by rats and roaches the previous night have to be carefully washed. Fire has to be assembled and lit, a process that takes a good 20 minutes. Then the water has to be put to boil, after which coffee powder and sugar are mixed in. After several minutes the mixture is finally strained. By the time you send for the accompanying biswits, over an hour may have elapsed. Other processes are even lengthier, as the preparation of bean sauce, or preparation of foodstuffs such as fish, that require careful cleaning.

Secondly, the lack of an ingredient usually contributes to extend food preparation time. In recent years, charcoal and even fuelwood have become less and less available and the prices have reached unprecedented levels. A direct result of fuel scarcity and dearness has been that most families have to do all their cooking with one source of fire. Thus, a family has to wait for the bean sauce to be ready before they can cook the accompanying cornmeal, a process that adds almost a full hour. Other pitfalls concern running out of fuel in mid-process, having to send for more, and perhaps upon arrival finding your child has not brought what you consider to be your money's worth and having to go all the way to re-negotiate the transaction.

Most missing ingredients, however, can be done without if unavailable. If vegetables, beans or fish are missing to make a sauce, a family may settle for a "manjé chèch" and may go ahead and eat whatever they have. Likewise, if no sugar is found one may substitute for rapad or may have to drink the coffee or cook the labo without it. Other unavailable ingredients may be borrowed, especially salt, garlic, and various herbs. Cooking oil, however, is essential and people find it difficult to do without. Since it is not the kind of item neighbors usually borrow from one another, people may have to buy it on credit if they lack the cash. This constant need to send for items, whether free (water), borrowed, or brought contributes to lengthening considerably the process of food preparation.

#### 10.6 Norms Governing the Timing of Meals

The preceding sections have discussed the local variants of three virtually universal human food rules:

1. Foods are divided into different groups.
2. Meals should provide a combination of foods at the same sitting.
3. The foods should meet certain basic esthetic cooking standards.

But there is yet a fourth rule that appears to prevail in most human societies and which is certainly the ideal in rural Haiti: you should eat several times a day.

Many observers have correctly noted that some families in rural Haiti may eat only one meal a day. This is becoming increasingly true, especially at certain times of the year. However, it would be quite erroneous to attribute these one-meal days to faulty knowledge on the part of the villagers. As is true of the "dry meal", the spread of the one-meal day is an adaptation to increasingly serious seasonal scarcity.

In terms of beliefs and ideals, it is felt both desirable and proper for people to eat throughout the day. But people distinguish between what would be called snacking or munching in English and the eating of meals. We shall see that the concept of "meal" itself is somewhat problematic from a linguistic point of view. But there is no question concerning the existence of cooking/food-distribution/food-consumption sequences that in English would be called a meal.

When food and money are abundant, better off rural families may give themselves the luxury of what is probably the most widely-held village ideal: three meals during the day, framed by an early morning snack and a pre-bedtime tea or porridge.

Thus village ideals emphasize eating five times a day: three meals and an early morning and late afternoon snack. This is all in addition to the continual snacking on sugar cane, roasted corn or sweet potato, or seasonal fruits that is seen as perfectly appropriate. If such village ideals were followed throughout the year, there would be little malnutrition in rural Haiti.

But a number of factors, including the growing fuel crisis discussed earlier, appear to be producing a modification even in terms of village ideals. Probably the ideal toward which most families now strive is the day in which there will be an early morning snack, generally entailing biswit and coffee, a late morning heavy meal containing viv, vyann, and legim, and a late afternoon meal also containing at least two of the food groups. There will also be a pre-bedtime tea or some other light snack. That is, current village food-timing ideals emphasize the two-meal day framed by early morning and early evening snacks.

#### 10.7 Actual Eating Schedules

We have seen that village norms strongly mandate eating more than once a day. Traditional ideals emphasized three meals framed by an early breakfast snack and a post-retirement tea or porridge. More recent shifts in ideals have come to settle for a two-meal day -- one in the late morning, the other in mid- or late afternoon.

In examining actual eating schedules, however, as well as meal contents, it is obvious that the much sought - after ideal can seldom be put to practice. As will be seen below, either the timing, or the food consumed fail to meet desired standards.

#### Ideal Meal Schedule and Menu

07:00 Coffee and Biswit  
10:00 Cornmeal with avocado  
01:00 Diri/pwa kolé with sos meliton  
05:00 Plantains with sos arancel  
06:00 Tea with Sugar

#### Actual Meal Schedule and Menu

7:30 Piece of Avocado  
1:15 Cornmeal  
3:30 Cornmeal and sos pwasson  
(couple of snacks in between second and third meals).



People end up eating less often than they would want, and the time that elapses between one meal and the other differs from day to day even in the same household. But the major differences are to be found among households of different economic levels.

Table 8 represents the cooking of meals or snacks in three different households (HH) during a five day period. Each "meal event" is here defined as the lighting of a fire for cooking. The first meal is generally only a snack of coffee and biswit, but is included because of the lighting of a fire. Such a breakdown, while giving no information on the contents of the meal, shows interhousehold differences in timing and even intrafamilial variation from one day to the next. As we shall see, this staggering of meals within and between households, though partially random, is at least partially engineered around the interhousehold cooked-food exchanges that constitute such an important element in the village food system.

In the table HH1 represents a family among the more economically stable in the community. HH2 is representative of median income families, while HH3 falls among those less well-off families.

## Timing of Meals in Three Households over a 5 Day Period

<u>Households</u>	<u>Meal Schedules Days Observed</u>				
	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
HH1	6:00	7:10	7:30	8:00	7:30
Better-off	7:00	12:30	11:15	11:00	1:30
	10:00	5:00	3:30	4:00	5:25
	12:00				
	4:00				
	6:00				
HH2					
Intermediate	6:20	7:10	7:10	8:00	7:30
	1:10	10:30	11:40	12:15	11:45
	4:25	12:15	6:30	5:30	3:30
		5:00			
HH3					
Worse-Off	8:00	9:30	8:15	9:00	7:45
	9:30	4:25	10:15	1:50	12:25
	2:15		5:45	4:35	5:15

From the table, it becomes clear that the better off family from time to time achieves the ideal of eating many times a day. The worse off family never does but rather occasionally has to settle for two-meal days. Spacing of meals seems more regular in the better off households than in the poorest one. This is both true if one looks at the day to day regularity of mealtimes as well as at the time that elapses between one meal and the next.

Even if it is an ideal not often attained, much emphasis is put upon spacing meals adequately. For instance, when the last meal of the previous day has been early in the afternoon, say around 3:30 p.m., people do their best to provide an early breakfast. Adults may comment the children have to be given food early that morning because they have not eaten in a long time and will be hungry. Likewise, if a family can only provide one major meal on a given day, they will schedule it for the early afternoon, and may send the children to bed early that evening, to make sure they fall asleep before they get hungry again. Adults are also very concerned about the time that will elapse between one meal and the next, and do their best to speed up the process or find some hunger-mitigating "passe-bouch"

Families with young children are under special kinds of pressures. It is widely held that young children are not as able to withstand without food as adults and older youth are, and children often contribute to reinforce this widely held view by applying a series of pressures that may take various forms. It is also feared that hunger may drive children to stand at other people's kitchens thus putting the family publicly to shame. In this way, parents are not only under strong pressure to provide for their children but to make foods available at the right times. Sometimes, time between meals lags are filled by different "passe-bouchs": sugared water, a biswit, a spoonful of the rice or fish being cooked, a piece of sugar cane brought from the garden by the father in anticipation of the children's needs, a seasonal passe bouch such as mango , corn, avocado. Families with older children or without children are under less

pressure. Adults are able -- and expected -- to subsist on less food and also able to withstand longer intervals between meals. Thus it is not uncommon for a family to prepare a meal exclusively for the children, a meal from which the adults do not partake at all. In fact, a pregnant woman in the community who had been given a bag of flour at the dispensary to supplement her diet, allocated all of this to her children and never ate of it herself.