

11. THE DISTRIBUTION OF FOOD WITHIN AND BETWEEN HOUSEHOLDS

Nutrition researchers are aware that increases in domestic income in the village do not necessarily lead to short-term increases in the nutritional well-being of children. Increments to the family cooking pot may not be equitably distributed among all household members. A frequent observation is that adult males appear to appropriate for themselves the bulk of any caloric improvements to the family pot. These dynamics occur within the context of the intrafamilial distribution of cooked food.

Earlier mention has been made of misleading images of the rural family competitively hand-feeding themselves out of a pot of recently cooked food. In actuality, there is a very carefully calculated intrafamilial food distribution procedure that appears to hold throughout rural Haiti. The variant prevalent in Kinanbwa will be described here.

11.1. Calculating Food Gifts

The basic procedure is for the cooked food to be spooned out onto individual plates in the kitchen when the cooking is finished. This distribution of cooked food is a task that requires much experience and finesse. While young teenage girls may have done all the cooking, at the moment of food distribution, a more experienced member of the household takes over the task. Balancing the proportion of sauce to main staple (i.e. rice, corn, etc.), so that nobody is left over to eat a mangé chèch, is only one of the intricate techniques to be mastered.

The first critical decision to be made is whether any plate or plates of cooked food will be set aside for people living in other houses. Most village families exchange cooked food with a small number of neighboring households on a daily basis. The technique consists, not of inviting the neighbors over for a meal, but rather of sending over plates of hot food to the recipient's house. Households involved in such dyadic exchange

relationships may set aside two or even three plates of food for their "trading partners" (though the entire process unfolds in the idiom, not of exchange, but of neighborly generosity). The nutritionally adaptive character of these patterns will be discussed further below. For here it suffices to say that such plates are faithfully separated. Only if there is truly little food will a stern order come from the man of the house to "separate the food of those who sleep in the house first," to the effective exclusion of the neighbors for that meal.

Having settled in her mind the issue of food gifts for that particular meal, the woman must then determine whether there are any visitors to the house or kitchen who "happen" to be present when the food is being separated. There are very strict rules of etiquette making absolutely mandatory the offering of food to visitors.

It is for this reason, paradoxically, that food distribution is a very private matter. Most visitors will discretely leave if they realize the process is about to begin, and those that stay will become self-effacing, but will eventually be given something, as is customary in the village. Thus, people who do not want to be criticized will either not accept the offer claiming they have just eaten or something of that sort, or discretely leave at this time. Visiting adults may stay and eat from time to time but never on a regular basis, as they risk public criticism. People in the house are also put on the spot by visitors. When they are in no position to offer food they will publicly comment how they sent for a certain number of biswits, for example, but even people in the house had not been able to eat because the amount was insufficient. In any case, any deviation from the accepted and expected standard of conduct appears to deserve an explanation. When outsiders are offered food, however, it is usually half of what family members get. In a case observed, family members got four biswits each while the outsiders got 2 each. In another case, the food portion appeared to be about half of what family members had received.

11.2. Separating The Food of Family Members

But, in any case, before actually separating food for the family members, the woman in charge must take into account these socially mandated food gifts. The separation of food for the family members then begins. The father's food is generally separated first. Because most meals have more than one food item cooked separately, the decision must be made as to whether to spoon all foods onto the same plate or to serve the individual's food on two or more plates and allow him to mix it. Etiquette calls for serving the adult male's food on separate plates rather than mixing it. The man himself will then spoon the vyann and sos onto the plate containing the viv. It is when this etiquette of two plates is followed that the man will be served at table inside the house. But most other family members will receive their food pre-mixed on the plate that is handed to them.

In terms of quantities, the adult males get the largest plates of food. But, we have never seen them appropriating to themselves all of a given item such as meat, leaving the women and children with none. Meat eating is rare, and when done enough will be placed in the pot to give each person at least a little. The one exception will be the withholding of fish from very young children. This is done merely because the bones are considered dangerous. For this reason also, very young children will not be allowed to clean off meat bones. But such strategies have a genuine protective function, not a protein monopolizing function.

Females and children in approximate order of age will then be served their own mixed plates of food. It is exclusively young children's privilege to protest when they feel they have been unfairly treated. Their demands usually lead to concrete increases in their rations, either from the family pot, or from an older member of the family. Passed a certain age, however, people have to settle for whatever they have been given without protest. Food distribution time is also a time when some disputes may be settled. A child that has violated the family pot by

surreptitiously having taken a sweet potato or helped him or herself to a spoonful of whatever was being cooked, may be given less food than the others, the separator claiming they have already helped themselves, and to prevent something similar from happening again.

Very young children are generally the last in the food separation process. But, their precarious situation is alleviated somewhat by the privilege they have of getting small bits of food placed in their hand either during the cooking or at the beginning of the food separation.

In separating the food, the woman in charge must be very careful to prepare plates for family members who happen to be out of the compound at the moment. Women washing clothes, or young girls fetching water or doing some other errand have a right to their own food plates. If they are not given cooked food, there is nowhere in Kinanbwa where they could buy a meal when they return, even assuming the availability of money. They would have to settle for biswit purchased in one of the village boutiks. Returning from Port-au-Prince, we have on occasion served as messengers to village households to save food for a family member who would be coming on such-and-such a day.

Occasionally, the person separating the food may miscalculate. The sudden appearance of a visitor just after the food is being distributed will automatically result in small bits of food being taken off of the plates already spooned out. It is usually adults, rather than children, who have to supply the visitor with food. But, villagers are categorical in insisting that the person coming has to be offered something.

Different women will use somewhat different food separation techniques. Some will shoo everybody out of the kitchen at the moment of distribution, spoon out the food, and send a child to deliver each plate to its intended recipient. Others adopt a more lenient system and allow the children to come and extend their own empty plates.

There are very strong norms against male involvement in the food distribution process. It is considered in bad taste for the man even to show up in the kitchen during cooking, let alone to challenge his wife's prerogatives during the separation of the food. Men who show an inordinate interest in kitchen activities will be teased. These norms are relaxed frequently in Kinanbwa due to the frequent absence of adult females doing business in Port-au-Prince. Thus men will be seen as having a right to supervise the cooking activities of teenage daughters and to personally supervise the taking of food items and fuel from the family depo. They themselves may keep the key. When the mother arrives, however, the man backs off, and will certainly not supervise her food distribution activities.

11.3. The Absence of "Meals": Eating as Individual Behavior, not Social Event

Once the plates of food are distributed, household members tend to disperse. Eating itself is not construed as a collective event. The practice of sending food to neighbors houses rather than inviting them to join you in a meal is indicative of this same general orientation toward the consumption of food. Several observers have commented on the apparent absence of the social dimension to meal eating that is so important in many other settings, particularly urban middle class.

There is at least some factual basis to this observation. In middle class settings, the "meal" is a social event. More concretely, the biological act of eating is accompanied by the following social patterns.

1. All three age/sex groups (men, women, children) sit together at the same table.
2. Conversation is mandated, governed by general rules, and inclusive of all three social groups.

In Kinanbwa, in contrast, and throughout most of rural Haiti, one could say that:

1. The three age/sex groups almost never sit together at the same table, nor are there any genuinely salient notions that they are supposed to. Men occasionally sit at table, but women and children never do. Each group eats by itself, nor are there even any strong rules that say that members within the same group should eat together. Physical contiguity during eating is neither mandated nor socially engineered.
2. There are likewise no norms that people are "supposed" to converse with one another while eating, and certainly no notions that mealtime should be an occasion for conversational interaction between husband, wife, and children. There are no injunctions against conversing, of course. But, we found absolutely no trace of the "middle class" notion that eating should be the occasion for intrafamilial dialogue consciously involving the children as well.

This difference between "middle class" and "village" norms is, we believe, subtly but decisively reflected in linguistic usage. The word "meal" in English can be interpreted as a type of event, in the way that the word "food" cannot. But whereas village Creole has a word that corresponds to the English word "food," there is no word in Kinanbwa that truly corresponds to the word for the social event that we call "meal".

Since this point is likely to be disputed by students of Creole, it is important to clarify the basis for this claim. The following two sentence frames will be useful.

- A. English: "_____ here begin at 9:00 and end at 11:00."
Creole: "Isit _____-yo konn komanse a neve epi yo konn lagé a onzè."

B. English: "There's not enough _____. Pretty soon there won't be any left."

Creole: " _____ piti. Talè pou-l fini."

In both languages, the blank in sentence A can be filled by words referring to social events, such as party, dance, wedding, funeral, meeting, and the like. (The corresponding Creole words that would fit perfectly into sentence A are *fet*, *bal*, *nos*, *lanteman*, *reinyon*.) These words cannot, in contrast, be used to fill the blank in sentence B. The result would be nonsense sentences rejected by native speaker informants. For sentence B, food and drink items would be perfectly appropriate. The English words *meat*, *rice*, *sugar*, *water*, and *milk* would fit perfectly, as would the corresponding Creole words *vyann-nan*, *diri-a*, *sik-la*, *dlo-a*, *let-la*. But these mass object-nouns could not in turn be used to fill the blank in sentence A.

The point is this. The English word *meal* could be used as an event word to fill slot A, the English word *food* could be used to fill slot B. In Creole, the word for "food" that could fill slot B is *manjè-a*. But, there is no word for "meal" in rural Creole that could fill slot A. The word *manjè* would be rejected. We defy anybody to come up with a word for meal that would be used by villagers with the event-verbs "begin" (*komansé*) and "end" (*lagé*). The peasant will not say *manjé-a lagé*. He may say *manjé-a fini*, but, in this case, he means, not that the "meal is over", but that "we've run out of food." When he says *lantéman-an fèt dépi katr-è*, he means that the "funeral takes place at 4:00." But when he says *manjé-a fèt dépi katr-è*, he means, not that "the meal takes place at 4:00," but that "they begin cooking the food at 4:00." *Manjé* refers to the physical food objects, not to the social event. To repeat, though rural Creole is rich in collective social event-nouns that can be said to *komansé* and *lagé*, there is no such event-noun for the concept "meal."

We believe that this linguistic gap is not accidental. These event-nouns refer to socially recognized collective events. But, we have indicated above that in fact in rural Haiti, there are no regular occasions when men, women, and children sit at the same table, eat together, and converse together. That is, though there are strong norms to prepare several balanced plates each day, there are no "meals" in this social sense that form part of the daily routine of rural domestic life.

Does this mean that food-related behaviors in rural Haiti are totally individualistic? Absolutely not. It would be much more on-target to say merely that, whereas middle-class society emphasizes the social dimensions of food consumption, rural Haitian society focuses much more social attention on the preparation and distribution of the food. It is at the preparation and distribution phases, rather than at the moment of consumption of the rural meal, that the most important social dynamics are worked out in rural Haiti.

11.4. The Etiquette of Eating: Hands vs. Spoons

Related to this is the question of eating etiquette. The absence of interactional norms during food eating itself is perhaps related to another noteworthy difference between village and middle class eating habits: the rapidity of food consumption. When a drink is offered to a villager, the middle-class practice of sipping it while conversing is rarely followed. More often than not, conversation will be suspended while the guest or guests quickly down the drink. Food will also generally be eaten in this determined manner. Conversation is frequently suspended while eating, and people may actually move somewhat apart from others eating. The tendency to give psychological or biological ("food scarcity") explanations to this approach to eating should be held in abeyance. What is occurring is that eating itself is treated as though it were an individual task rather than a social event. The somewhat rapid pace of eating and drinking is perfectly compatible with this orientation. Given this basic mind set, there is no more reason to dawdle over eating and drinking than over bathing, mouth washing, or other biological functions performed in the course of a day. To repeat a point made earlier, village social

etiquette focuses much more strongly on the distributional aspects of eating. What is of social concern is who gets the food, not how it is eaten.

This raises the oft-noted practice of eating with one's hands, a behavior which the villagers view as less proper than eating with utensils. Village households have two types of spoons: larger ones (frequently made of wood) used to stir food during cooking and to spoon out the food onto the individual plates after the cooking is done; and smaller spoons used by household members to eat. Knives and forks are in general not used at all as eating utensils in the village.

Virtually all eating of reasonably solid foods by children under 10 is done with the hands. Children will use spoons for the most part only when the food being eaten is highly liquid in content. Even when spoons are available, most children will eat solids with their hands. The washing of hands before meals is not part of common village hygiene norms, which for other areas is quite strict. But mothers will vigorously call the attention of children who attempt to eat with obviously dirty hands.

In the case of adults, the use of a spoon as opposed to hands appears to be governed by a combination of three factors:

1. the physical consistency of the food.
2. the immediate availability of a spoon.
3. the presence or absence of visitors at the moment of eating.

If a) the food is liquid or b) a spoon is handed to the individual with the food or c) there is an outside visitor present, then an adult (especially an adult male) will eat with a spoon. If, however, a) the food is solid and b) the individual would have to make a special effort to get a spoon and c) there are no outside visitors, then the person will probably eat the food with his hands. There are rules of etiquette, but they are simply different from those prevailing in middle class settings. The middle class child learns that eating even solid rice or cornmeal with the hands is "bad." The village child learns that both forms of eating are acceptable, but that one is slightly more "proper" than the other.

But village etiquette rules are weak in this matter of how to consume food. As we have seen in an earlier section, village tradition places its emphasis on the preparation and, above all, the distribution of food. When the middle class person calmly eats in front of another person without offering a plate to the other person as well, the villager sees that as barbaric behavior, even though the person may be daintily transferring the food to his mouth with a shiny fork. The laxness of villagers with respect to spoon use is merely the rural counterpart of the middle-class laxness with respect to their own notions as to food sharing. Both groups have both sets of rules. The middle-class person takes the eating utensil rules seriously, the food-sharing rules lightly. The villager takes the reverse emphasis. And readers will make their own value judgments as to whether one of these emphases represents a more advanced behavior proper to the species Homo sapiens.

11.5. Children's Prerogatives: Not Eating and Saving Food

A very important nutritional question concerns the attitude of parents toward children who do not want to eat. The prevailing practice is to let the child do as he or she wishes. There is little notion that children have to be forced to eat. It is our strong impression that in this food-scarce village, there is very little of the mealtime resistance to eating that goes on between children and parents in middle class homes. Village children await meals with an eagerness not found in settings where a regular supply of abundant food is assured.

But, for those children, for whatever reason, who show little inclination to eat, we have seen that parents' tend to accept the child's lack of appetite as something that cannot be combatted, that must go away by itself. This is one area where village custom and nutrition advisers would come into clear disagreement.

Somewhat different is the behavior of those children who may not eat all of their food but will "lock it up" for later or for the next day. Children are aware of the irregularity of meals and quickly learn to predict when they will feel hungry. At least some children prepare for this by tucking away part of their food, still in its plate, for later use. In such cases, the food will generally not be reheated, another

pattern which will raise the eyebrows of physicians aware of the dangers from microorganisms.

When discussing the laissez-faire stance of parents toward children's rights to save food or not to eat at all, there is no question here of parental ignorance of the need for eating. Children who do not eat heartily are known to be sick, and the absence of eating is an occasion for parental concern. Here village parents differ little from middle class parents. Where the two groups differ is rather in the tendency for village parents not to force their children to eat.

11.6. Interhousehold Exchanges of Cooked Food

Reference has already been made to the manner in which even food-scarce households might become involved in regular food-gift relationships with other households, by virtue of which they will send out plates of cooked food from their own cooking pot. Families that do this are literally taking the food out of their own mouths and those of their children.

These food gifts are regularly reciprocated, and they function as "money in the bank", a security against the sudden food shortfalls that frequently afflict village households. The importance of these gifts in the local food economy is perhaps a partial determinant of the tendency of households to be very flexible in the timing of their meals, almost to the point where it is difficult for an analysis to assign "normal times" for the different meals. But, rather than being the "absence of a system," such meal-staggering behavior may in fact be part of an adaptive food-exchange process. What we know for certain is that for many families, these plates of cooked food sent from a neighbor's kitchen -- though sent over as a friendly pase-bouch (snack) -- may in fact function as the principal meal for that particular time of that day. The system is not explicitly formulated in the village. It is almost in "poor taste" even to mention the possibility of calculation in these manifestations of "spontaneous generosity." But there is no question that these plates of food that crisscross the community are playing some important function. They do not, of course, increase the total amount of food in the community.

But they certainly do spread out this food over time.

There is a certain etiquette to be followed in this as well. Older recipients of such plates will generally be given the vyann and the viv on separate plates. It is somewhat less courteous to send the food pre-mixed on the same plate. And oftentimes the food will be sent over covered with a cloth. The rule is to prevent people from "knowing your business" (pa kite moun konn afe-ou).

These food gifts can function only because they are in fact carefully circumscribed to a small number of trading partners. And these relationships are dyadic in character. Every household will have its own partners. And the partners are not groups per se, but rather a series of criss-crossing dyads.

11.7. Cooked Food Gifts to Neighboring Children

But village children have even more aggressive tactics for increasing their daily food intake. When the food is being separated, the woman in charge will notice a number of children from other houses standing around, "playing" with her own children. Such children must also be given bits of food, though not with the same serious obligation or in the same quantities as visiting adults.

But even these visits from neighbors' children are carefully circumscribed by strong social and parental pressure. The general pattern is that

- 1) children from a small number of households will come to my kitchen;
 - 2) my children also have a right to go to their kitchens.
- Households exchanging plates of cooked food will also "exchange" child visits as well (though there are no explicitly formulated rules to that effect). But, in addition, these child-visit exchanges can also be entered between houses not involved in a dyadic food-plate exchange. But the numbers are kept restricted.

Children are strongly socialized not to go to the kitchens of strangers or even of neighbors not on intimate terms with their parents. The parents fear two possible outcomes:

1. Their child could be a victim of sorcery or direct poisoning. There is a fear of poison in the village and many deaths are attributed to such maliciousness on the part of persons ostensibly proffering food gifts.
2. The constant visits of their child to another person's kitchen could be used as a theme for public mockery or criticism if the parents ever get into a disagreement over anything.

We suspect that it is this latter fear which is paramount, but the sorcery/poison danger also has an impressive salience in village social relations.

Thus there are two conflicting sets of norms balancing the child's behavior. The permissiveness with respect to showing up at certain kitchens, in combination with the "unintentional" but quasi-engineered meal staggering in the village, provides yet another food circulating mechanism protecting children against really serious food shortages in their own homes. Adults have to wait for the plate of cooked food to come from the neighbors. But, children, in addition to eating from these plates, can take matters into their own hands and meander over to the neighbor's kitchen at a nutritionally strategic moment. Such behavior is permitted up until about the teens. But a strong series of norms strictly limits this "scavenging" to the confines of carefully predetermined social dyads. These constraining rules keep the system from becoming unworkable. And the surprising prominence of beliefs in sorcery and poisoning should perhaps be partially viewed as cognitive mechanisms ensuring the continuing viability of a nutritionally important food circulating system operating for the benefit of village children.