

Human Ecology, a South Pacific Island, and Food "Fit to Eat"

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ABSTRACT The foods we eat are partially determined by the influences inherent in our culture. Travel and cross cultural experiences may bring us into contact with strange of exotic foods, which gives us opportunities to either adjust and adapt to new foods, or to reject. Food is such a basic component in our lives that our thinking and feelings about what is fit to eat serves as a boundary marker for our own ecological fit in various cultures and locales.

The many possible principles of human ecology would certainly include the notion that all people, things, and environments are related, and that the web of human life is intimately connected to the physical environment. Yet just because something is available in the environment, that something may be avoided because of cultural and social and psychological patterns of life. Links and relationships are especially apparent in the food we eat and the food we choose not to eat, for culturally and socially defined boundaries regulate what is deemed appropriate and what is not. This article illustrates the influence of some of these boundaries in the matter of choices in food.

THE SOUTH PACIFIC

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to live on a South Pacific Island? Perhaps of even greater interest, what would you eat? Well, I had an opportunity to live for 15 months on the island of Tanna in what is now Vanuatu (Gregory, 1993). Back when I was there, it was still called the New Hebrides.

My wife Janet and I lived "in the bush" about 6 miles from Western Civilization. I was there as an anthropologist to study the use of kava, a relatively mild drug used in many parts of the Pacific, and its influences on the way of life (Gregory et al., 1981). And now, I recall vividly the many foods, the daily experiences, and the

good memories I retain of the custom people in this distant Melanesian Island.

The interior of the island was mountainous. The highlands where we lived were some 400 metres above sea level, an important factor in climate, vegetation, life-style, availability and diversity of foods (Gregory and Gregory, 1996). Tropical jungle indeed - the location was idyllic, except for the malarial mosquitos, the potential cyclones, and the daily struggles to learn and use a complex and different language and way of life. But it is the food I recall most, both those items I now miss and those for which I retain a strong distaste. Modern day and Western diets are very different.

As custom people, our hosts followed their roughly 4,000 year old Melanesian traditions. They did not use knives and forks, plates and cups. We learned to follow their custom, and their unique way of life. We handled food with leaves of certain specified trees and obeyed many other taboos, such as not mixing yams with meat, or not eating chickens except under certain strict conditions. Women were totally forbidden from taking part in the kava ceremonies, and so Janet was excluded from the nightly kava ritual. On the other hand, I was expected to attend regularly and to drink large quantities of kava.

Some local customs remain unexplained. For example, I still wonder about certain men who did not speak about fire, for flames, like the kava taboo for women, held sacred meanings on this island. But many customs became our own, as we learned to cope with a different way of life.

Staples

In Western Civilization, potatoes, corn, and apples might be regarded as staples. On Tanna, our staples were different, of course, from what we were used to eating. The annual cycle was

governed by the yam, the most revered and valued of all foods. Yams took a year between planting and harvesting, and consequently the word for year and yam were identical in the Nvhaal language. The yams, some of which weigh over a hundred pounds, were symbolically "male."

Another major vegetable crop was taro, symbolically "female." We learned how to grow, tend, harvest, select, cook and eat both yams and taro of many types, differentiated by color, size, taste, and growing habits. Although some yams and much of the taro roots were tasteless, others were delicious, particularly when roasted in small, ever present household fires.

Cassava, bananas, and other root or vegetable crops were made into "laplap" like a pizza or pudding, and were cooked in earth ovens. Cassava had to be specially treated, for if not, the roots were poisonous. Meat, particularly pork, was treasured, and chicken or wild birds were relished when available. Pork was reserved for festivals or celebrations, when dozens or even hundreds of pigs were slaughtered. Rarely, a goat or a bullock was killed, usually the meat was then widely distributed to many relatives, neighbours, and friends. Because our diet was protein deficient, the taste of any meat was especially appreciated.

Exotic Foods

In all, we tried at least a hundred different kinds of strange foods. The most unusual still stick firmly in my vivid memories. Bats, cats, walking stick insects, and witchery grubs were some. Janet ate the veil of a wing of a giant fruit bat, which is sometimes served as a delicacy in French restaurants in Port Vila, capitol city of Vanuatu.

Another time, I tried a witchery grub, not entirely by choice. When the neighbourhood young men carefully asked me if I was on their island to learn their way of life, or to just be a tourist, I naturally said I was sincere in wanting to learn proper custom and traditional ways. They smiled, interpreted my comments for an entire watching group of people and then said that I could and should eat the same foods they ate. I quickly found myself facing an eight inch long white grub, and their subtle smiles. I got the morsel down, but found myself feeling queasy

later. After an hour, I vomited and it was only a full day later before I felt better. I was never able to bring myself to eat roast cat, even though I was offered several, nor the walking stick insects, which averaged a foot long!

We tried unusual nuts, mushrooms, sugar cane, papayas, lemons, grapefruit and some other citrus which was not like any we ever had. We also sampled some leaves or bits of plants which we figured were the equivalent of herbs, herbal medicines, and plants used to treat diseases. We delighted in a small "May apple," fragile, delicately skinned and flavored and colored in red, pink and cream. These apple trees were profusely covered with bright red flowers, and the ground underneath became a magic carmine carpet once a year. The taste was delicious; and yet, this fruit along with many others, was seasonal - one week per year only! We enjoyed guavas, breadfruit, and mango. Unfortunately for us, the mango season was severely limited for when the flowers were in bloom, a sudden strong and cold wind killed them off.

Although we tried to follow the traditional diet, after about two months we realized we were beginning to suffer protein deficiency. Our energy levels went lower and lower. The proof came by an unexpected route. Boys and some girls hunted with their bows and arrows for tiny wild birds. We initially passed them by, indeed we exhorted people to protect the birds, but . . . these canaries and other little birds were protein-rich, especially after we became starved for meat. Eventually they became tasty and delicious to us too!

Eating Well

Ultimately, we hiked once a week to the trading post, six miles distant, to buy a piece of beef. The butcher used quite different cuts from those we knew, for he preferred to "chunk" the beast, sometimes with an axe or machete. By cooking carefully, we could supplement our weekly diet with beef for two or even three days. Without refrigeration, of course, it was never easy. Repeated cooking, drying, curry powder and hunger helped.

On Tanna, children are weaned abruptly at about 2 years of age. After this trauma, they often suffered, and sometimes bloated with worms. We treated them, and provided first aid and

minor medical care to many others. Eventually, we realized that the children had to accommodate with the worms, for they became re-infested quickly. Building up their strength and assuring sufficient high quality food was more important than just ridding their bodies of the worms.

Along the seashore, virtually everything became fair game for the hungry: octopus, sea urchins, fish of many colors and shapes, shrimp, seaweed, and the shy inhabitants of certain sea-shells. Coastal residents did not follow the traditional customs and their Westernization enabled them to sample trading post tinned goods more frequently. In addition, they had greater access to coconuts which grew along the coast, and consequently they enjoyed coconut: as a jelly like food, as milk to drink, as the coconut we are familiar with from stores, and even the early stages when a new growth is beginning within the nut - a spongy but excellent snack. When a tall coconut tree was cut because it endangered our house (hut), we were awarded the heart of palm salad, a gourmet delight. These "million dollar salads" were so called because of the value to people of palm trees. Cutting one tree is equivalent to a vast sum of money in Western Civilization. The lettuce like interior melted in our hungry mouths.

We tried sea urchins, octopus, and a giant 300 plus pound turtle. The man who wrestled the turtle ashore made his kill on another person's land. In custom, the owner of the turtle was the landowner, and so his tribal group cooked the meat in a three day ceremony. The man who captured the beast never received even one piece!

The dark rich red meat of the turtle was close to spoiling because of delays in hauling the creature up hill, assembling guests, gathering sufficient cooking stones and supplies of wood, and organizing the feast. Nevertheless, we ate with gusto when opportunity finally arrived.

Dangers

A distant acquaintance ate fish which carried "fish poisoning". He suffered a stroke, presumably as a direct result. The trader helped him to a hospital on an adjoining island and though the custom people sent along herbal medicines, the man never regained full use of his body and mind. Consequently we were always

careful about eating fish, and only ate those types which were regarded as always safe. We did try various shellfish, learning to place the little animals over the fire, wait patiently until the heat killed and cooked them, and then we popped the morsel into our mouths. As we learned to differentiate and spot the edibles, the seacoast became like a shopping market for we could walk along and find all manner of goodies, particularly early in the morning or after storms.

The Trading Post

Six miles distant from our jungle camp, we visited the traders, and quickly became good friends. We fattened ourselves on their roast beef too. Rarely, familiar delicacies such as ice cream were flown in from the capitol city. We checked out the local market conducted near the trading post. Gardeners brought their produce and the staff at the trading post, the hospital, and the government outpost as well as occasional tourists, purchased a wide range of vegetables, root crops, and other goods. We saw and sometimes purchased carrots, lettuce, tomatoes, potatoes, cabbages, and other Western crops too, all of which were rare or non-existent in the custom villages.

One of the custom people with whom we lived travelled with us to the trading post, and remarked that he had never seen a tin can opened. We promptly bought a can of spaghetti, opened it with a knife, heated it, and let him try. Surprised by what he found, our friend spat the spaghetti out, then stated quickly and flatly that he did not like the taste. Others in the custom area had already acquired a taste for tinned fish and rice, and in time, so did we, for mackerel was an easy to prepare and filling meal.

Towards the end of our stay, an Agricultural Show was staged by the French District Agent to show off the produce from the villages that had been influenced by their government. Most of the French efforts were vegetables, packed and sent for shipment to other islands. The show was political as well as agricultural, and the use of alcohol led to several fights and many heated arguments. Fortunately, the use of alcohol was kept to a limited level, but on weekends, the pay-day effects were all too real. We preferred the custom villages up in the highlands where alcohol

was banned and kava was used daily - it was much more peaceful!

CONCLUSION

In summary, the contrasts between Western processed foods and traditional natural foods was evident in a number of ways. Boundary markers were several. Teeth were significant, for the highlands people had near perfect teeth, without dentists, while the teeth of people in the more Westernized villagers suffered from the sugar laden products. Alcohol and associated violence was another distinguishing criteria, for the highlands people used their traditional kava, and banned alcohol entirely. Though their diets were low in protein, the custom people were generally healthy, happy, and economically independent. If the need arose, they could be fully self subsistent, even though they did purchase some goods from the trading post. The lowland folks, in marked contrast, were dependent economically, socially, and politically, and sometimes this led to conflicts, some of which turned into

resentment and anger often directed against the colonial powers.

Those people transposed from their own familiar environments, and forced to partake of different foods, will probably appreciate the struggle to adapt to another locale, as well as their previous culture and the socialization they went through into accepting particular food habits. The almost endless possibilities about what is and what is not "fit to eat" becomes readily apparent in cross-cultural travel. People moving through varying ecological settings may thereby become much more aware of their relationship, and their limits in adjusting and adapting, to the environment.

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