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Edited by Lenore Manderson

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Introduction: the anthropology of food in Oceania and Southeast Asia

Lenore Manderson

The production and provision of food is a major aspect of human endeavor everywhere. In small-scale subsistence societies, food getting dominates everyday life, and people of all ages may participate in hunting, gathering, or horticulture. But even in complex social formations, the need for food underpins economic activity, with wages for labor directed first to meet subsistence needs, then to other commodities.

In the first instance, food is important simply to sustain biological life. However, because of its essentiality, food largely features as the matter and symbol of social life, as a means by which people communicate with each other, and as an embodiment of the communication itself. The matter – items of food – is subject to various constraints, including ecological and environmental factors that determine the initial range of potential foods. But beyond this, cultural, social, and economic factors shape food choice, thus diet and nutrition. A basic distinction is made by all people between food and nonfood from the range of possible alternative edibles. Systems of production and the technology for production constrain food availability and accessibility. Changes in the mode of production may reduce indigenous food resources while offering new items, resulting in dietary changes. The marking, enactment, and elaboration of key cultural and life-cycle events through the use of food further determine dietary variation seasonally and throughout the life-span. The differential allocation of food within the domestic sphere and in the larger community; the style and elaborateness or simplicity of the preparation and presentation of food, and the particular responsibilities of individuals in these activities; the act of eating, in the absence or presence of select others – all provide keys to social life and to the role and status of members of a given society. At both micro- and macro-cosmic levels, within the family, in the community, and in an international economic context, food is also matter for manipulation: to censure or reward, encourage or control.

Developments in nutritional anthropology

Food has always been a focus of anthropological inquiry, precisely because of the necessity of food to survival and hence the pivotal role of food in

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productive activity, and as a result of the richness of symboling through food items. Nutritional anthropology, and in more general terms the anthropology of food, has developed relatively recently as a discrete subdiscipline. It has, however, a long heritage. It is not my intention here to offer a general history of the field, but some attention to the early direction of nutritional anthropological studies provides a context against which to view more recent developments, including the contributions to this volume.

Audrey Richards's study of the Bemba, resulting first in the publication of *Hunger and Work in a Savage Tribe* (1932) and subsequently of *Land, Labour and Diet in Northern Rhodesia* (1939), demonstrates the central role of food production and distribution in social structure, and provides the conventional start to this brief overview. Although Freedman (1977:2) noted a number of earlier dietary and food habit studies dating from 1890, Richards's work has pioneer status in the anthropological study of food. She was also probably the first anthropologist to collaborate with a biochemist-nutritionist, resulting in a joint paper in 1936 which examines the nutritive value of foods eaten by the Bemba, as well as methods of preparation and attitudes toward foodstuffs (Richards and Widdowson 1936). A number of other papers reflecting collaboration between anthropologists and nutritionists appeared around this time, in part as a result of the appointment of a Diet Committee of the British International African Institute (Freedman 1977:3). Fortes and Fortes (1936), for example, published a paper on food production, exchange and distribution, and the sexual division of labor among the Tallensi; other related publications include those of Hellman (1936), Read (1938), and Ashton (1939). But in the same year that *Hunger and Work in a Savage Tribe* appeared, Hortense Powdermaker published an article on the role of food and feasting in the economic and social life of New Ireland (Powdermaker 1932). Three years later, Malinowski's massive ethnography and linguistic analysis, *Coral Gardens and Their Magic*, appeared (1935) (of which more below). By the end of the 1930s, a number of British social anthropologists other than those associated with the Diet Committee were undertaking research on food and nutrition, Rosemary Firth's study of household expenditure and domestic economics among Malays in Kelantan (Firth 1943/1966) being but one example.

It was British-trained anthropologists, then, who dominated the broad area of the anthropology of food in the 1930s. This related at least in part to government concern with the nutritional status of subject peoples within the colonial empire, leading to the establishment of a Committee on Nutrition within the Colonial Office (see Great Britain Economic Advisory Council 1939), and to a measure of collaboration and dialogue between the Colonial Office and prominent anthropologists, of whom Fortes was one (Files of the Colonial Office CO 859/78). The United States lacked colonial domains as extensive as those of Britain. Not surprisingly then, nutritional anthropological studies by United States scholars date slightly later and were

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concerned particularly with internal circumstance. In 1940, a Committee on Food Habits was established by the United States National Research Council, directed to explore ways to improve physical fitness through improved nutrition. It involved a number of anthropologists such as Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, and led to several publications, including two major volumes by the committee itself – *The Problem of Changing Food Habits* (U.S. National Research Council 1943) and *Manual for the Study of Food Habits* (U.S. National Research Council 1945), and by committee members (e.g., Mead 1943, on changing food habits within the United States, and her later comparative volume in 1955). During this same period, a series of food habit studies were undertaken among both Indian and Spanish-American communities in the Southwest, under the direction of Fred Eggan of the Department of Anthropology, the University of Chicago. In various articles, participants in this project drew attention to the importance of the social and economic context of nutrition (Eggan and Pijoan 1943) and to the effect on diet of changes in the mode of production (Pijoan 1942a; Eggan and Pijoan 1943; Hawley, Pijoan, and Elkin 1943), as well as on specific nutritional questions (Pijoan 1942b) and infant feeding practice (Pijoan and Elkin 1943). Also of note in this period are two other United States studies, one undertaken in the rural Midwest – southern Illinois – and the other in the rural Southeast, both concerned with dietary change. The former study included documentation of differences in dietary behavior in different sub-cultures (Bennett, Smith, and Passin 1942) and drew attention to the use of food as a prestige commodity and the special status of store-bought, refined, and tinned products (Bennett 1943). Cussler and de Give also explored the prestige value of food in their study, but paid particular attention to the implications of cash cropping, and the effect of tenancy and social relations between tenants and landlords, on diet (see *'Twixt the Cup and the Lip,'* Cussler and de Give 1952; but also de Give and Cussler 1941; Cussler and de Give 1942, 1943).

Although not discounting intellectual interest as a factor in the motivation of individual scholars to undertake nutritional anthropological studies, practical and instrumental concerns clearly provided much of the impetus, certainly where governments were involved. In Britain, the concern was to ensure a labor force sufficiently healthy to allow the economic exploitation of the colonies; in the United States the interest was in defense. Following World War II, the practical implications of food habit studies remained important. This was especially so as medical and food science professionals recognized the importance of understanding the interrelationship between diet and culture in explaining particular nutritional problems and in introducing dietary changes through health and nutrition programs. Publications in the 1950s and later reflect the application of anthropological expertise to nutritional problems (e.g., Cassel 1955, 1957; Wellin 1955a, 1955b).

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Under the canopy of the anthropology of food, a broad range of issues relevant to scholarly inquiry had already been set out by the mid-1940s. And although anthropologists continued to work in the area, it was not until the early 1970s that there was an expansion of interest and major developments in the field, inspired in part by general developments in anthropological theory and the use of food as subject matter in both materialist and cognitive analyses. In the latter realm, the works of Simoons (1961), Douglas (1966, 1975), and Lévi-Strauss (1969) are of note. With respect to the former, world political and economic events as well as disciplinary developments had certain impact. Popular publications such as those of George (1976), Lappé and Collins (1977), and Tudge (1979), following from an earlier concern with world hunger and population, sharpened an awareness among anthropologists, as among others, of the social, economic, and political context of food availability, diet, and nutrition. Two fine monographs from the 1970s reflect the divergent interests of cognitive and materialist studies: Michael Young's *Fighting with Food* (1971), a study of the social meaning and political uses of food among the Kalauna of Goodenough Island in Melanesia; and Bernard Nietschmann's *Between Land and Water* (1973), which exposes the nutritional price paid by the Miskito of Nicaragua for their incorporation into the world economy.

The appearance of the journal *Ecology of Food and Nutrition* in 1971 provided a necessary venue for the expanding number of studies of diet and culture of interdisciplinary interest if not execution. Since that time, the published literature within scholarly journals, representing both the social and medical sciences, has expanded rapidly (see the bibliographies of Wilson 1973a, 1979). Most recently, a number of edited collections have also appeared, including those by Arnott (1975), Fitzgerald (1977a), and Jerome, Kandel, and Pelto (1980), each offering considerable variety within the collections in terms of theory, method, and ethnographic area. In addition, a few area-specific collections have been published, notably Chang's volume on China (1977) and Forster and Ranum's collection concerned primarily with Western Europe (1979), each including contributions from both historians and anthropologists. This volume is equally diverse in terms of method and theory, representing recent research interests of both professional anthropologists and other scholars concerned with food and nutrition; anthropological perspectives range from those of a formally trained nutritionist-cum-anthropologist (Christine Wilson) to those whose interest in food derives from a prior interest in ideation and cognition. Geographically the volume falls between the two, neither global in coverage nor focused on a single cultural area. The regional specificity of the collection, with chapters that deal with Southeast Asia, the South Pacific, and Aboriginal Australia, reflects in part the interests of Australian scholars, whose work dominates this volume. Yet regional specificity serves two contrasting purposes: On the one hand, it emphasizes differences in food systems and uses between cultures

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within a single, if large, area; on the other hand, it points to common trends, particularly as a result of the incorporation of various societies within the region into industrial or industrializing nation-states and a world market economy. Individual cultures are subject to broader, now international, forces, and this is reflected in patterns of food production and use. Finally, much of what is said in the contributing chapters to this volume may be applied elsewhere in the world; this collection then offers a basis for a comparative analysis of food in culture and society.

None of the chapters offers an overview of food within a particular culture or society. Rather, each explores a particular area of inquiry: nutritional returns to labor in a subsistence society; national strategies of food production; infant feeding practice and the commercial marketing of milk; food prescriptions and proscriptions. It is useful, then, prior to introducing the chapters, to provide an overview of food in Southeast Asia and Oceania, drawing out certain common themes while highlighting again the differences within the region.

Food and culture in Oceania and Southeast Asia: an overview

Physical and cultural diversity rather than unity distinguishes the societies of Oceania and Southeast Asia and determines food resources and use. Topography, climate, soil, animal and plant reserves, social structure and organization, economic and political systems, and history all have influenced the exploitation of the environment and the utilization of its products. The differential use and perceptions of these products highlights the individuality of each society. Yet diversity notwithstanding, the very significance of food stands out as a common theme across cultures. Tikopians believe that their island “does not exist without food . . . It is nothing . . . There is no life on the island without food” (Firth 1959: 84). This, as an expression of social rather than biological existence, is a sentiment still echoed throughout the region. As in any other culture, food in Southeast Asian and Oceanic societies is both nutrient and symbol, central and fundamental to social survival and to cultural identity.

The significance of food in culture is perhaps most explicit in Melanesia, partly because until recently small-scale subsistence societies predominated in this region; it is therefore not surprising that the ethnographic record is richest here. The pioneer work of Malinowski, particularly *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* (1935), provides an enduring record of the centrality of food to society, as do the later articles of Bell (1946–8). More recent ethnographies make this same point: Rappaport’s analysis of ritual and ecology (1968), Young’s study of leadership and social control (1971), Strathern’s monograph on women’s roles (1972), Schieffelin’s work on reciprocity and ceremony (1977) are all also finally ethnographies of food and are only a few of the many publications that illustrate the importance of food in Melanesian

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culture. For Polynesia, Australia, and Southeast Asia, the record is less complete, in part because the relationship of people to food is less explicit as a consequence of the earlier incorporation of the peoples of the regions into national agrarian and industrial states. Even so, ethnographies again provide detailed descriptions of the production, distribution, consumption, and symbolism of food. The special issue of *Asie du Sud-Est et Monde Insulindien* (1978), with articles dealing with the preparation, presentation, and vocabulary of food for a number of Southeast Asian societies (see also Martin 1978 and Pagezy 1978); the publications on Thai food habits and nutrition by Hauck and others (1956, 1958, 1959); Rosemary Firth's *Housekeeping Among Malay Peasants* (1943/1966); Hanks's *Rice and Man* (1972); and Ruddle, Johnson, Townsend, and Rees's book *Palm Sago* (1978) stand out, but they are not alone. Golomb's study of ethnic adaptation (1978), for example, explores the ways by which Thais and Malays in rural Malaysia are able to live adjacently in a spirit of relative cooperation and harmony, despite the fact that the former produce, eat, and use as a prime symbol of group identity and allegiance the very food, pork, which is most abhorred by and considered antipathetical to Malay society. And virtually every ethnography for the region deals to some extent with food: To not do so would be to ignore a vital and essential element of both everyday and ceremonial life.

Food serves to distinguish humanness. Choice and definition of food from a wide range of available plant and animal resources, the preparation of selected and acceptable resources prior to consumption, and ideas regarding the appropriate consumption of foods according to time of day and in association with other foods differentiate people from their potential and actual nonhuman competitors for food, and between each other, within groups, and with other groups. Meal composition of the Semai of the Malay Peninsula demonstrates this difference: Meat, fish, fowl, or fungus is an essential element of a "real meal," but a meal by definition includes a starch, either rice or tapioca: "What do you think we are, cats?" (Dentan 1968:50). The production and distribution of food similarly serves to denote humanity: Kalauna people thus perceive their ability to garden as a symbol of civilization: "If we did not grow yams we would be like dogs. . . You think we are birds or dogs and can't plant food?" (Young 1971:195–8).

Food classification systems provide a shorthand to distinguish food and nonfood, edible and inedible plants and animals. Following the first distinction between humans (edible or inedible, depending on the culture) and animals and plants (edible or inedible), Thai folk taxonomy, for instance, designates like resources further into edible and inedible subcategories. Accordingly the animal kingdom is first differentiated into insects (inedible), birds (edible), and animals; animals are further categorized into those of the water and those of the land, with the latter group then classified as domestic,

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field, or forest dwellers. Within this system, animals that are unaffiliated, or that are ambiguously or anomalously classified by virtue of their habitat, behavior, or physical appearance, tend to be classed as nonfood. According to Tambiah (1969), Thais do not eat animals that are not readily classified, such as animals that may be either of the land or of the water (e.g., snakes, monitors); animals that are classified and yet are exceptional and therefore ambiguous as food (e.g., the otter, which lives in the water but looks like a dog); or other unaffiliated animals that leave their habitat and invade, ominously, human environs (toads enter houses, vultures rest on roofs). Further taboos here include animals that are metaphorically and/or metonymically linked with human society. The dog, living in the house and in close association with humans, has a metonymical relationship to them, and at the same time its dirty and incestuous behavior provides an analogy with human conduct: A dog therefore cannot be eaten or incorporated into human society because it is already part of it. Monkeys likewise may not be eaten, for although they have a nonmetonymical relation with humans, they bear a metaphoric resemblance and are believed to have descended from humans. Bulmer similarly has argued that among the Kalam of Papua New Guinea, the controlled killing and consumption of cassowary relates not simply to its anomalous and thus unaffiliated position within folk taxonomy, but to its metaphorical cross-cousin relationship to humans. Dogs are avoided absolutely because they are seen as distant potential affines and adopted children; but pigs are edible even though they share human habitat and eat human food (including human milk) and even though, on the other hand, they are dirty (e.g., eat feces), for they are considered not metaphorical humans but rather “sub-human or non-human members of the human family” (Bulmer 1967:20). In the first instance, then, people determine which animals are edible and which are not edible both on the basis of the animal’s environment and behavior and on the perceived relationship of the animal to humans.

Yet humans, while apart from the natural world, are also of it. Food allows and sustains human existence both literally and symbolically. Fetal development and maternal diet are frequently associated directly. Kaberry reported (1939:56) that Aboriginal women in the Kimberleys in Western Australia believe that the fetus is nourished by the food eaten by the mother, and hence she abstains from ceremonial food throughout pregnancy and until the child is over a year old. Thai villagers explain that “babies grow within their mother’s stomach where they sit eating the food the mother eats. Tissue is made of rice because it derives from rice” (Hanks 1972:22). Throughout Southeast Asia and Oceania, women avoid a range of foods during pregnancy for sympathetic magical reasons, believing that the foods they eat will physically affect the infant, and eat other foods to ensure the healthy growth of the child. Beyond birth, food continues to contribute directly to physical being. An Arapesh father “grows” his son, providing food for him from which he himself must abstain: “Piece by piece he has

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built his son's body. The Arapesh father does not say to his son: 'I am your father, I begot you, therefore you must obey me'. . . . Instead he says: 'I grew you. I grew the yams, I worked the sago, I hunted the meat, I laboured for the food that made your body. . . .' (Mead 1935/1963:77). In the same way, a man's claim to his wife is also that he has "grown" her, contributed the food that has become her flesh and bone. Covarrubias (1936/1973:71) has recounted that Balinese similarly believe that a person's body and soul are built from the rice that is eaten; central Thai villagers maintain that "man's body itself is rice, and eating rice renews the body directly. . . . Thus the rice grower's image of man becomes rice itself; perhaps, according to this vision, man differs slightly from other living creatures, largely because of the diet that sustains him" (Hanks 1972:22). Malay villagers again believe that life itself is dependent on eating rice (McArthur 1962:127). Thus not only economically and socially but quite literally, food creates, sustains, and is "the bones of the people" (Moerman 1968:16).

Conversely, or perhaps in consequence, mythology frequently relates the origin of food to human or superhuman union. Southeast Asian and Papua New Guinea myths explain the origins of sago often either from a culture heroine by birth, vaginal secretion, or defecation; from the corpse of a culture heroine; or from a substance scattered by a culture hero. In West Seram myth, for example, the corpse of a grandmother gave rise to various palms, *arenga* from her head, coconut palm from her genitals, sago palm from her body. In myth from the Humboldt Bay area of Irian Jaya, a woman gave birth to sago starch and thence the sago palm; animals originated from her placenta (Ruddle et al. 1978:71, 75). In Balinese myth, rice was born from the cosmic union of the divine male and female creative forces: Wisnu, God of Water, raped and impregnated Mother Earth to give birth to rice for human consumption (Covarrubias 1936/1973:70). Agricultural ritual frequently involves offerings to personified spirits; the growth of the plant is likened to human pregnancy. Thus both Balinese and the Semai of the Malay Peninsula not only refer to rice in the field as pregnant, but offer or sprinkle the crop with sour or acidic foods favored by pregnant women (Dentan 1968:45; Covarrubias 1936/1973:77). Humans and food, then, are inextricably linked: Food originates from and is produced by humans; humans originate from and are sustained by food.

Thus humans are the food they eat, and are defined and recognized accordingly. Individual and general, temporary and permanent proscriptions of certain foods may express a person's relationship to his or her environment, and identify kin affiliation, family status, age, sex, physiological condition, ritual status, class position, rank, or ethnicity. Totemic associations with particular animals, thereby taboo as a food resource, serve to identify the individual by kinship, subclan, or clan affiliation by what he or she does not eat; religious proscriptions similarly provide a medium for the articulation of cultural identity. Regional cuisine and food preference serve a similar

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purpose. In Thailand, for example, glutinous and nonglutinous rice are regarded in such a way: Central Thais eat ordinary rice and associate the consumption of glutinous rice with stolidness, sloth, and sluggish thought. Government officials in northern Thailand express their class position vis-à-vis the local rice farmers by eating central Thai food, or minimize class difference by choosing to eat, and being seen to eat, local food (Moerman 1968: 11). In Malaysia, the distinction is one of ethnicity and is a barrier all but immutable: In Malay eyes, Chinese and Thais are pork eaters by definition and regardless of actual dietary practice, and as such exist in a state of permanent ritual contamination. The state of pollution may be revoked only by conversion to Islam, whereby the converts in effect “become Malay” and assume the Malay/Muslim taboo on pork and other ritually tabooed flesh.¹ For Malays, the grossest vituperation is pig or dog; Malay fishermen avoid the very mention of these animals while at sea, lest their catch be unsuccessful (Raymond Firth 1946/1966:115). Chinese historically have exploited Malay abhorrence of pork especially during periods of interethnic tension.² But Golomb’s monograph on ethnic adaptation in northeast rural Malaysia demonstrates the resolution of the seemingly irreconcilable difference between pork-eating Thais and pork-avoiding Malays: In a spirit of reciprocity, Malays, forbidden to handle let alone eat taboo flesh, kill wild pigs and other animals that desecrate their gardens, whereas the Thai Buddhists, forbidden to slaughter but not to eat the animals, remove and consume the offensive flesh. Thus ethnic, class, or clan conflict may be resolved by the manipulation of food.

As taboos distinguish between groups, so too they may distinguish individuals within their own society. Taboos applied differentially to men, women, or children, for example, underline both ritually and practically the importance of age and sex. In ancient Tahiti, taboos prevented women generally from eating pigs, dogs, turtles, albacore, shark, dolphin, whale, and porpoise, highly esteemed foods which were in short supply either seasonally or throughout the year. Neither could women eat food prepared in the *marae* precincts where contact was made between men and the spirit world (Oliver 1974:224ff). In this society, food taboos operated to disadvantage women nutritionally – what Lindenbaum has referred to as the “politics of protein” (1977:148) – whereby foodstuffs symbolically represent and in actuality explicitly define women’s subordination to men.³ Among the Kaluli of the

1 The Malay term for conversion to Islam is *masuk Melayu*, literally “to enter [thus become] Malay.”

2 During the period immediately after World War II, for example, Chinese guerillas were alleged to have taken revenge on Malay informers by desecrating mosques with pigs, forcing Malays to eat pork, feeding their bodies to pigs, and wrapping their corpses in pig skin (Burridge 1957:163–5).

3 See O’Laughlin (1974) for the elaboration of the interrelationship of food taboos and the status of women. Others prefer to explain taboos that direct prime protein sources to men as a resource allocation strategy (see Ross 1978).

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Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea, only unmarried men and the very old may eat freely fresh meat. Young children avoid certain birds and snakes, considered to be “too strong” for them; women from the time of menstruation to menopause may eat only cassowary, domestic pig, and dry or smoked meat; at marriage men must also assume their wives’ taboos. In addition, women and children may not eat food found in supernaturally dangerous areas (Schieffelin 1977:66). By contrast, men rather than women in Maring society carry the burden of taboo: “Fight magic men” and other men involved in warfare avoid a variety of marsupials and snakes, eels, catfish, lizards, and frogs which might deplete their magical, ritual, and physical strength. Although there are no explicit restrictions for men against eating rats, small birds, or insects, these foods are generally considered suitable only for women and children. In addition, pigs killed in connection with the festivals of other local populations may not always be eaten by adult or adolescent men, although they may be eaten by women and children. Accordingly, Rappaport has argued (1968:79ff, 150–1) that here food taboos function to divert protein to those who are nutritionally the most vulnerable while at the same time preserving scarce resources, even though men in fact may circumvent the bans.

Food taboos operate also to recognize and define the ritual status of men, in a similar way that taboos, instituted largely for sympathetic magical reasons, govern young male initiands and women at menarche and during pregnancy and lactation; such taboos during rite of passage are observed throughout the region. Taboos during mourning again acknowledge ritual status as well as loss. Aboriginal women in Kaberry’s study (1939:214) could eat only their own vegetable food while in mourning; Maring and Kaluli people avoid a number of specified foods and additionally may for sentimental reasons declare as taboo, foods that were particularly favored by the deceased.

Taboos operate also with regard to the production, preparation, and distribution of food, either generally or as a result of individual ritual status. The Kaluli people invoke food taboos during planting time, prohibit certain food combinations, and avoid entering gardens after eating pork, in order to ensure the fertility of the soil and the abundance of the harvest (Schieffelin 1977:65). In Polynesia, crops of fruit groves may be declared taboo by demarcation of the area with a coconut front, in order to allow the food to mature and to conserve potential scarce resources (Firth 1939/1967:202ff). Although both women and men may eat common foods, in some cases taboos operate to control consumption according to the ownership of resources. In ancient Tahiti, women could eat pork only if they owned the pig or provided from their own gardens the food it ate; eat fish only if they caught it themselves or if it was caught by a man not designated ritually as having full male status; eat breadfruit paste only if the fruit came from their trees and was fermented in their own pits (Oliver 1974:224–6). Moreover, women’s cooking utensils touched by men had to be replaced. In addition to the taboo