THE SOCIAL MEANING OF FOOD SHARING IN MEXICO

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The custom of forcing food on a guest in the Zapotec town of Ixtepeji is described. Previous theories of food sharing--the social function of expressing group solidarity and the psychological effects of early gratification experiences--are then discussed. Finally, beliefs and behavior regarding eating and talking are explained in terms of Mexican folk beliefs about muina and envidia and the nature of Ixtepeji social interaction and impression management. One specific incident is described and interpreted. [exchange, folk beliefs, food sharing, Mexico, social interaction, talking, world view, Zapotec]

The offering and receiving of food is perhaps the most fundamental economic and ritual act in human society. One variant of this exchange behavior is particularly conspicuous to the anthropologist doing field work in rural Mexico and in other peasant societies: the insistent offering of some food or drink by a host to a stranger or casual acquaintance upon their entry into the home, plus the virtually unavoidable obligation of the guest to partake. This paper examines theories of food sharing relevant to this custom and presents another approach to the data. The data come primarily from the Zapotec-mestizo town of Ixtepeji, in the Sierra Juárez of Oaxaca, Mexico, but the explanation probably applies to rural Mexico in general.

In Ixtepeji, when a guest enters a home, a representative of the host family offers him something to eat or drink, which he will then decline until he is eventually coaxed, or literally forced, to accept.[1] Outside of the home similar coercions are also applied to induce reluctant individuals to accept alcohol (Kearney 1970). To give an indication of the strength of these pressures to partake, suffice it to mention that I have collected accounts of men being shot for refusing to accept a drink. Although my own life has never been so imperiled, on a number of occassions I have had a sore arm from the vise-like grip of acquaintances who forcibly insisted that I eat and drink at their invitation.

THEORIES OF FOOD SHARING

Among existing theories of food exchange we find none that explain this particular kind of host-guest interaction, especially the insistence with which food is pressed upon the guest and his sense of obligation to consume it on the spot.[2] At present there are two theoretical approaches to the social psychology of food sharing; we may refer to them as the commensualist and the genetic theories. Proponents of commensualist theory argue that there is some cohesive social function inherent in the act of communal eating, or that somehow the individual perceives that eating in the presence of others is of potential magical benefit to himself (Richards 1964: 174-182). According to proponents of genetic theory, a proclivity to share or to not share food arises from the cultural patterning of the child's physiological dependence on its mother and other members of the family, rather than from inherent social functions or in magic beliefs (Richards 1964: 212-213). Cohen (1961) presents an interesting genetic argument about personality and world view formation being dependent on early gratification experiences. In short he says that consistent gratification of hunger on demand, "...instils within the maturing infant a world view predicated on the notion that there is enough food in the world, that one can always secure food when one needs it, and that other persons will give food when asked for it" (Cohen 1961: 325). By similar reasoning he hypothesizes that food deprivation in infancy and early childhood predisposes the individual to perceive "...himself as an inadequate person, specifically, a hungry and impoverished one. Just as the individual views himself as one who 'never has enough'--and this impression is inescapable in the 'non-sharing' societies--so does he view the world as 'not having enough <u>for</u> him'" (Cohen 1961: 326).

On the basis of Cohen's argument and Ixtepeji world view and economy as outlined below, one would logically suspect that food sharing would be greatly attentuated in Ixtepeji. But it is precisely there, with a world view of general deprivation or "image of diminishing good"

(Kearney 1969: 899), that the pattern of food sharing under discussion appears so intensely.

By showing that there are reasons to share food other than those summarized above, I do not imply that the various explanations are contradictory. One could make a good case for commensualist theory by looking at eating patterns at fiestas and other ceremonial occassions in Ixtepeji (Kearney 1968: 129-130). Also, a good case for Cohen's second genetic hypothesis can be made; Ixtepeji children often go hungry and, aside from the particular pattern of food sharing described here, Ixtepejanos prefer to eat in the seclusion of the nuclear family's kitchen. There is also much secrecy and tension surrounding food and economic resources in general. Therefore, a search for the most parsimonious explanation can often distort, by oversimplification, the intricacies of so complex a behavioral trait as food sharing. The very strength of this social pattern in Ixtepeji is itself in large part explained by the existence of so many varied levels of explanation that we must bring to bear on it; viz., there are psychological, social and cultural forces maintaining it.

ATTITUDES ABOUT FOOD AND SOCIAL INTERACTION

Although Ixtepejanos live at a higher level of economic security than for example the Siriono of Bolivia, for whom Holmberg (1960) has shown that food anxieties significantly affect behavioral and cultural forms, there is still much anxiety about subsistence. Ixtepejanos perceive themselves as precariously dependent on an effete and harsh environment. Although few people experience continuous hunger, many do go hungry occasionally. The possession of meager or no capital resources to fall back on in time of need adds to this basic food anxiety which in turn affects world view and social interaction.

As for the food itself, there are relatively few basic dishes, although they vary from one kitchen to another. But if the cuisine is simple, attitudes and feelings about it are not. Strongest among these

are feelings about foods from one's natal area. Nowhere else is the food as good, and in that region the food of one's own town is the best, the best cook in that town is of course one's own mother or wife. Men in particular are concerned that they have proper food to fortify themselves for manual labor. The crucial staple here is corn, which to be effective must be eaten as tortillas. A meal without tortillas is in effect not a meal. Even though gorged, a man is apt to say that the meal "did not give me satisfaction," if tortillas were lacking.

Communal drinking of the three locally used alcoholic beverages (mezcal, tepache and beer) is in some respects a special variation of the food sharing pattern. Here we can mention several motives to share alcohol; the first is expressed in folk belief. Ixtepejanos themselves are ready to explain that a man or group of men who are drinking are insistent that all men present drink with them so that no one will be more sober and so be in a position to take advantage of the drinkers. But after observing interaction in such settings another reason becomes apparent which does not necessarily contradict this folk explanation. As described below, there is a great deal of suppressed hostility in interpersonal relations in Ixtepeji. For the most part hostility is not openly expressed but comes out in disguised form and surreptitious attack, often under the guise of kindness (Kearney 1968: 52-67). In accord with this pattern, the presentation of food and drink is on the surface a kindly gesture, but when it is pressed upon an unwilling recipient (who as we shall see has reasons compelling him to accept it) it becomes a hostile act calculated to inconvience the guest.

A psychologically related dimension which also enters in here is that of masculine honor and respect. The same was true in ancient Gaul and Germany and turn of the century France where among farmers and students one was obliged "...to swallow quantities of liquid to 'do honour' in grotesque fashion to the host" (Mauss 1967: 40). Similarly in Ixtepeji, to refuse an invitation to drink is usually tantamount to a direct insult. That men can be and are insulted by a refusal to accept a drink (refusal to accept food is not usually such a strong insult) seems, however, more

bound up with the psychology of machismo than with food sharing per se and so I mention it here only in passing.

Let us now look at that other main oral activity, talking, for folk ideas about it are relevant to patterns of food sharing. Ixtepejanos are talkative people. Talking is an important part of social interaction and one gets the definite impression that Ixtepejanos are more concerned with the manner and content of speech than are, for example, Anglo-Americans. Why should this be so; what other funtion besides direct communication can language be serving? Here it is to be noted that it is not talking per se that is valued, but rather talking directed at a single individual. This is to say that the kind of talking which most interests Ixtepejanos is speech that is addressed directly to an individual. Other patterns of speaking such as an individual addressing a formal group or addressing several people at once are not necessarily of interest and are often considered an annoyance. In their concern with paralinguistic aspects of speech, Ixtepejanos are especially attentive to cues revealing the emotional state of the person with whom they are speaking. This is understandable in view of certain folk beliefs, most importantly the concept of muina.

Without greatly distorting the folk system, we can speak of muina as suppressed hostility. Furthermore, it is believed that muina, because it is not expressed, poisons the person's blood, which in turn may cause severe physical disabilities. Eating aggravates the condition caused by muina and may result in death. The main cause of muina is envy (envidia) which may create a desire to attack, most likely by witchcraft, the person envied. Therefore, a person who is known to have muina is potentially dangerous, and defensive measures against him, also probably by witchcraft, are in order.[3] Similarly, the person who has the muina acts on the same logic and attempts to conceal it, and so avoid a counterattack. He does this either by withdrawing from interaction with others, or by feigning normal behavior. Two of the main symptoms are loss of appetite and an unwillingness to talk. Therefore,

to conceal muina, a person who has it will also sometimes force himself to eat and to talk, despite the harmful effects eating may have.[4] But since such behavior is forced and not natural, it can be detected by a discerning observer. How does one detect muina in another? As one informant put it, "The only way to tell if a person has it is to notice how he looks at you and speaks to you. If he is very short with you or gives you some ugly glances, you note these things." From this point of view, individual to individual speech serves as a check to determine if another person is possibly harboring evil intent toward oneself. An exchange of muina free speech over a bowl of beans or a bottle of mezcal assures one that at least for the time being he has no cause to fear his companion.[5]

From the individual's point of view then, openness and naturalness is a desirable quality in others, but for him to behave in this manner himself involves certain double binds. On one hand he wants to present an image of himself as open and without muina, whether he has it or not. For to be suspected of having muina is to be defined as dangerous and to be avoided and retaliated against. But on the other hand, this demonstration of being free of muina goes against another desired mode of self-defense, namely concealment of any good fortune that one may be experiencing.[6] Thus a balance must be struck between two conflicting ideal modes of presenting one's self to others in everyday life: one must convince others that he himself is free of muina by appearing open and unenvious, but he must do this in a manner such that he does not appear too contented lest he incur another's envy.

A good deal of social interaction in Ixtepeji involves individuals managing impressions of themselves so as to strike a compromise in the above dilemma. Although such behavior is impossible to quantify, it appears that rather than trying to strike an even balance between the two, Ixtepejanos attempt to give the impression that they are worse off than they really are. To this end they also often present themselves in a self-disparaging manner.[7] With these social strategies and attitudes

about speech and mųina in mind we can now discuss how they affect food sharing. Let us proceed by analyzing an incident which took place in Ixtepeji.

One morning a vendor selling pitchers and chiles came into Doña Paulina's patio. Paulina bought nothing, explaining that she had no money, but she did invite the man, a complete stranger, to have some food, which he accepted and ate in her kitchen. After he left, I asked Paulina if he would be given something to eat in most of the houses that he entered. She said no, because very few people "know how to be good people." She explained how persons like this man who were travelling into strange towns often had nothing to eat but a cold tortilla because they had no friends and no one invited them to eat. She said that she felt sorry for such people and that it was the duty of people who had food and were eating to share it in such cases, since to do so was the sign of a good person. She went on at length with this theme and then casually remarked that sometimes such people who <u>were not</u> invited to eat in such circumstances later did <u>maldades</u>, or "evil things," to the person who did not invite them in. She also told how potentially dangerous such strangers were and how they frightened her, and that she always gave them something to eat "to be safe."[8] She told how she always explained to such people that she was very poor and only had a few tortillas and beans in the kitchen, but that they were welcome to what she had. She further explained how she was going to keep a large basket full of tortillas during the fiesta in the coming month since there would be many pilgrims and vendors, viz., many strangers, coming to her house.

In this instance Paulina herself well articulates the logic of her actions. First she expresses the common theme that the man who came to her house was a stranger, an unknown person, and therefore someone to beware of since such people are potentially dangerous in this capacity alone. But in this case, such a person is doubly dangerous since he came to the house while those inside were eating, which is something he could be envious of if he were arriving with an empty stomach. To prevent

this Paulina does two things. First, she shares food with the stranger, and second she attempts to create the impression that she is really very poor and not worthy of his envy. Also, since one of the symptoms of muina and envy is loss of appetite and of desire to talk, offering food to the man is a test of whether or not he bears ill feelings. Insisting that a visitor eat accomplishes two things then. First, it lessens the possibility of engendering envy. Second, it provides an opportunity to observe nuances in the visitor's speech and general behavior which are indications of his emotional state.

The above example is a variation on a common Latin American pattern that is acted out whenever an outsider to a family group comes on the scene during a meal. In Ixtepeji this compulsion to feed outsiders is not limited to strangers, but also applies to close friends and relatives, people who because they are in close contact with one are in a position to know his personal state of affairs. Intimate knowledge of this kind has two implications. It may be a source of envy and muina, and it also allows for more effective aggression which the envy and muina provoke. Intimates and relatives are thus equated with strangers as the potentially most dangerous category of people. In contrast, it is acquaintances in the mid-range of familiarity who are the least threatening. That is those with whom one interacts enough so that he is able to discern something of their general state of being, but yet not enough so that they can deeply penetrate into his own inner state or economic situation.[9] As with strangers and intimates, the emotional state of persons in this category is also assessed by astute observation of their eating, speech and general demeanor.

CONCLUSION

Various anthropological theories have examined systems of reciprocity in psychological and functional terms by analyzing their integrative and adaptive functions. What I have said here does not

contradict these approaches, but instead demonstrates that exchange, in this case the exchange of food and speech, may also be viewed from another angle. In Ixtepeji, at least, an invitation or insistence to share food and a few moments of conversation involves more than the fulfilling of reciprocal obligations. It also serves as a means of social self-defense and reality testing.

NOTES

1. Hammel (1967: 59) describes a similar pattern in Serbia where the women of a household coerce guests to eat, but in Ixtepeji men are as adamant in offering food as are women.

2. An exception to this occurs in more Indian, as opposed to mestizo, areas of southern Mexico where, although there are also strong pressures to accept offered alcohol, the guest may pour it into his own bottle for latter consumption.

3. Reference here is to attitudes about the causes and frequency of witchcraft rather than the actual incidence of witchcraft attacks.

4. Rubel (1966: 166) relates that a Mexican-American woman informant in Texas gave as a cause of empacho, forcing oneself to eat something not desired in someone else's home so as not to offend the host. Not offending the host as an explanation for forcing oneself to eat offered food is one level of folk explanation often given in Ixtepeji and does not logically contradict the muina explanation which, as with all subjects touching on witchcraft, is much less likely to be mentioned by informants.

5. It is interesting but not necessarily significant that "companion" and related words such as the Spanish compañero derive from the Latin com (with) and panis (bread) and originally denoted someone with whom bread was shared.

6. Cf. Foster (1965), re "the Principle of Equivalence."

7. I have discussed this elsewhere (Kearney 1968: 127-136); cf. also Cleaveland and Longaker (1957: 170-171, 184-194).

8. The possibility that the stranger was bringing "cold air" into her house did not enter into her thinking in this instance, although, in accord with prevalent notions of disease etiology stemming from the Hippocratic humoral theory, this is a common concern throughout Mexico.

9. This mid-range of intimacy is institutionalized, for example, in compadrazgo relationships, which often entail a shift to a formal relationship, expressed among other ways in a change from an informal tu

form of address to the formal usted. The implication of this seems to be that where it is desirable that relationships be functional for long periods of time, they are best maintained at the mid-range of intimacy where there is less chance for emotional disruptions.

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