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The Paradox of Pride and Loathing, and Other Problems

SIMON J. BRONNER

“This is fieldwork,” another folklorist said to me, grinning, as I consumed a bowl of homemade turtle soup at a church picnic in Fulda, Indiana. “Yes,” I replied, “but most people would call it eating.” True, I had been told by my colleagues that I had “experienced the artifact,” or had been a “participant observer”—orientations which seemed to make my lunch more ethnographic. Underlying these jests, however, is a notion that present methods of collecting and analyzing foodways data are inadequate for an understanding of the complexities of food-related behavior, and a notion perhaps that food researchers are more interested in consuming exotic foods than in explaining food-related behavior. Indeed, too often the literature on foodways merely identifies the completed product rather than elucidating the behaviors associated with that product, and too many researchers seem to adapt their field methods to this literature. Actually, I had not traveled to southwestern Indiana with the intent to undertake a study of turtle consumption or to challenge some conventions in foodways study. But in an effort to document various activities in local communities, I was drawn to the turtle-food complex because it seemed to relate to some basic aspects of human behavior having far-reaching

I conducted this search as part of a field station project in Dubois County, Indiana, during the summers of 1978, 1979, and 1980. The initial purpose for my fieldwork is treated in my dissertation, “Chain Carvers in Southern Indiana: A Study in Material Culture” (Indiana University, in progress). For their help in my research, my thanks to Warren E. Roberts for his guidance, to the Rockefeller Foundation for their financial assistance, and to Michael Owen Jones for his suggestions.

ramifications. The comments on my experience that follow are intended to suggest a few of the limitations of conventional methods in foodways research that I became aware of through my own work and to outline directions for developing new interpretations of food-related behavior.

My previous encounters with interview schedules and questionnaires for the Archive of New York State Folklife had sowed the seeds of dissatisfaction, because I was convinced that such methods treat individuals as one-dimensional, passive recorders of bits of information, rather than as complex, even sometimes capricious, beings who have many options of behavior available to them. Reflection on our own foodways, I realized, should make us aware that behavior and thought are not as static and seemingly ordered as regional food studies based on questionnaires assume or imply.

Nonetheless, as I finished my lunch that day in Fulda, I was still uncertain as to whether I could fully investigate turtle consumption, let alone figure out the best way to proceed. Later, however, while I was exploring a log house in Huntingburg, I saw two men up the road butchering turtles on their front lawn and asked them a few questions. Edwin Englert, a 76-year-old former blacksmith, and his 46-year-old son, Gene, carried on a lively conversation with me regarding their butchering techniques. They also revealed some of their attitudes and feelings towards turtles, personal information that is often neglected in foodways research. It appeared to be a propitious beginning. In subsequent visits to the homes of the Englerts and other turtle butchers, I entered a “directed-interview situation” focusing on these individuals and the specifics of what they said and did. This seemed to solve the problem of how to proceed with the inquiry. Certainly these encounters led me to amass the usual information on the tools and techniques of turtle butchering in southwestern Indiana, which I have reported elsewhere.¹

But my observations of the processes involved in the turtle-soup complex, useful as they were in one respect, led to yet other problems—seeming behavioral paradoxes—which needed to be addressed. Two enigmas concerned the eating of turtle soup especially. One problem, created early in the course of my interviews, is that while residents of a small area within southwestern Indiana con-

1. The technical details and manual procedures of turtle butchering are described in my article “Turtle and All the Trappings,” *Center for Southern Folklore Magazine* 3 (1980): 11.

tinue to butcher and regularly to consume turtles at church picnics, few of the people I talked to reported actually liking the taste of turtle meat or even recognizing it (the soup often is confused with vegetable soup), and even fewer enjoyed the work required to hunt, butcher, and prepare the turtles. A second and related problem, which arose while I was trying to answer the first question, is why an individual—not a “community”—often expresses apparently contradictory opinions about the compelling and repulsive qualities of a food or its preparation, such as turtle soup.

If many people do not enjoy the gore of butchering turtles, or the effort to prepare the soup, or the flavor of turtle meat, I asked myself, then why is turtle soup featured so often and so prominently at social events? Neither this nor the second, related question is limited to turtle soup but is relevant to other instances of food-related behavior. For example, some people who raise their own livestock and enjoy the meat consumed at the table, sometimes wonder whether the ends justify the means. Other people refer to dishes composed of an animal’s organs euphemistically or with terms that disguise or direct attention away from the object. Certain ethnic dishes, especially strong-smelling or unusual-tasting ones, served and eaten on special occasions, similarly produce conflicting feelings in people. Chitterlings, for instance, are both a symbol of racial pride and a source of embarrassment for many blacks who continue to prepare and eat the food despite the laborious process of preparation. Many restaurants serve headless fish in order to alleviate the discomfort of customers who have to face the creatures eye-to-eye. When they receive the fish, some customers drown the meat in lemon or sauce to remove the “fishy” taste, precisely the flavor intrinsic to the product. The same dual attitude was displayed by my fellow researchers who admitted to being repelled by, but still curious, and therefore attracted to my examination of turtle butchering. The point to be made is that the questions regarding turtle consumption and the methods appropriate to answering these questions pertain as well to other instances of approach-avoidance conflicts in food-related behavior. What might be hypothesized to explain the preparation of turtle soup in a community (even though preparing and eating this soup is met with mixed feelings)? What inferences drawn from foodways research in the past might help illuminate paradoxes regarding other foodstuffs besides turtle soup?

A historical precedent exists, certainly, for eating turtle soup. The Dubois County area in southwestern Indiana has always been predominantly German-Catholic; the restriction by the Catholic Church against eating meat on Fridays did not prohibit the eating of turtle flesh. Nonetheless, this conventional explanation of historical precedent as the sole or principal determinant is questionable because turtle butchering and consumption are not limited to Catholics. Moreover, no informants cited historical precedent as an explanation of their behavior. The paradox of seeming pride and loathing therefore remains unresolved, though obviously turtle soup would not be prepared so often if turtles were not plentiful and the butchering of them acceptable. In fact, however, butchers must often travel as far as southern Illinois to obtain aesthetically pleasing and numerically sufficient quantities of turtles.

Is the preparation and consumption of turtle soup regionally determined, a type of boosterism? This is another solution often proposed in foodways research to explain the popularity of other foods. But it is fraught with inconsistencies and uncertainties. George Blume, an ex-turtle hunter, told me that the people of the neighboring communities of Mariah Hill and St. Henry both “thought they made the best soup even though the turtles came from the same people, and often, the same folks prepared it.” People who buy five- and ten-gallon jugs of the soup support through their purchases the claim of some local church members to the best soup available. This fact and George Blume’s remark indicate simultaneous *sub*-regional identifications as well as associations with the general “turtle soup area.” To complicate matters, informants also had different reasons for eating turtle soup. Several expressed a denial of conformity to a region. And some defended turtle soup consumption by proclaiming simply, “Hell, I’ve always eaten it.” Thus, turtle soup may or may not be a regional symbol. And even if it does sometimes serve as a symbol for some people, a direct connection between the vague concept of regionality in the minds of residents and the persistence of turtle consumption in the world of actual experience is difficult to show.

Perhaps the social significance of turtle soup consumption overrides the loathing felt by some individuals, for at church picnics turtle soup preparation is a labor-intensive endeavor requiring the cooperative effort of many individuals. Men gather in groups while

the cooking goes on, and women interact while making preparations for the soup—preparations which may start many days before the picnic. In these situations, turtle soup has perhaps become a ceremonial food that defines the community, maintains social relationships, reinforces loyalty to the church, and provides a framework for interaction essential to the stability of the group. One social aspect of the soup preparation which is particularly pronounced is the sexual division of labor. The men are the hunters and butchers; women are the preparers and preservers. In addition, men assume Sunday cooking and supervisory duties, a pattern not uncommon in America.² Some of the men I spoke to at the Mariah Hill picnic did not think of their cooking as a usually feminine task, but rather thought of it as the assumption of a ceremonial function. “Guys always cooked the turtle for special occasions,” one informant explained; another said, “Keeps you coming back to the church.” This is not to suggest, however, that such functions are causal; they are more properly effects of the tradition. In addition, turtle soup preparation can be an expression of family or individual volition, open to human vagaries, and not just community action, as evidenced by the Englerts’ selecting turtle butchering as a role for themselves apart from church picnics and as a foodway in their homes. The functioning of turtle preparation and consumption for social maintenance, then, seems to be an overstatement, ignoring individual motivation and behavior in deference to the a priori model of sociocultural equilibrium. This interpretation insists on homogeneity of behavior and attitude, single-mindedness within a community, and unity of spirit; yet firsthand observations reveal diversity and capriciousness, contrary to what might be expected.

Could turtle soup consumption have an ecological justification? To the Englerts, one of turtle soup’s appealing features is its ability to absorb a great variety of food substances common to the area. The desirability of mixing together various vegetables and meat in a soup—the “everything in the garden” sentiment expressed by the Englerts—is echoed by others with whom I spoke. Indeed, people in many areas often have recipes that prevent food waste by calling for a “gumbo” style inclusion of a diversity of food substances. Furthermore, eliminating food discards by feeding them to turtles

2. See Thomas A. Adler, “Making Pancakes on Sunday: The Male Cook in Family Tradition,” in this issue.

before butchering offers a convenient disposal system. In this way turtle butchers, like hog butchers, take advantage of the natural ecologic system by manipulating the life-food cycle. The turtle soup tradition supports the butchering of turtles, and conversely, the turtle butchering tradition encourages turtle soup preparation. Yet why would not the ecological justification for hog butchering (which is similar to turtle butchering) and stew (which is similar to the concept of turtle soup) preclude the additional need for turtle butchering and turtle soup? The ecological function, as others cited above, is more likely to be the effect of a phenomenon and not necessarily its cause.

Maybe the pride felt for the success of specialists contributes to the continuance of turtle-butchering and soup-making traditions. Attainment of personal status through turtle specialization is a motivation that could be achieved by individuals who excel at hunting and butchering turtles. Some interviewees expressed great respect for successful hunters and butchers, because of the central role these men play in the church picnics and because they independently follow an "older," rural model of behavior; but informants also recognized that these figures are often peripheral to the community. The Englerts, for example, live on the extreme northern edge of their town on a road officially known as Cour de Lane but commonly, and perhaps revealingly, called Pig Turd Alley. Thus while personal status achievement is one element in reconciling the paradox of turtle butchering, such achievement also reinforces the conflict by highlighting the singularity of behavior.

Another argument might claim that socially derived and shared food aesthetics and tastes support the continuance of the turtle soup complex by placing turtle consumption in a cognitive category of acceptable meats. Edwin Englert will butcher hogs and turtles, but not cattle—"I don't have the stomach for it," he said. But individuals often defy area standards, proclaiming either their preference for or dislike of turtle butchering in order to establish their individuality or to imply an identification with or against selected others. Personal motivation, then, might actually weaken the tradition of turtle butchering. And the extreme individuality of many tastes, preferences, and aesthetics makes it difficult to establish connections to large aggregates of behavior and makes less defensible in this instance an aesthetic or motivational explanation.

What I have proposed thus far are interpretations suggested by conventional approaches in the study of foodways and eating habits. Each interpretation seems defensible to some extent, but each also appears to be inadequate to the task of solving any of several problems regarding what people eat and why they consume these things. It might even be contended that the seeming paradox of pride and loathing—on the level of abstraction of “community”—results from the very existence of these kinds of explanations in the literature and from their effects on researchers, who confront contradictory evidence while making firsthand observations. For a researcher familiar with the trends and preoccupations in the foodways literature is likely to assume that the community as a whole perpetuates the tradition of turtle soup (or some other food substance) and that the community simultaneously objects to the continuation of turtle butchering. In fact, however, while turtle soup appears at weekly church picnics during the summer, the turtles are hunted, cared for, and butchered by only a few men; the soup is not prepared or countenanced by everyone; and those who eat the soup are not necessarily of the same mind as to its taste and aesthetics. Thus, disparities as well as continuities in individual behavior and thought must be significant to the analysis of foodways. And in the search for consistencies in aggregates of human beings, the singular nature of eating and acting should not be neglected in favor of attention to similarities.

It is apparent also that conventional explanations are based on the assumption that paradoxes and the conflicts they manifest need to be resolved; yet the reconciling by the researcher of seemingly conflicting behaviors, such as those that pivot around turtle butchering and consumption, might be presumptuous in light of the coexistence of opposing impulses in the minds of the people they study. Contrary to the usual assumption, attitudes towards foods are not mutually exclusive nor are they static or tangible. It is not uncommon for an individual to entertain—virtually simultaneously—attitudes, beliefs, and preferences that when isolated and examined in the deceiving glare of logic are seemingly incompatible and irreconcilable. The existence of opposing impulses, however, does not necessitate anxiety or dissolution. Indeed, some analysts like Michael Kammen have shown that tensions may stiffen a particular character, provide a strong motivation for action, or supply

decision-making options.³ Often individuals are compelled to approach exotic foods but simultaneously avoid or compromise their approach because of risks sensed in attempting the unprecedented. Yet, this approach-avoidance affects behavioral variations, attitudes, and options in personal food habits—options which change in subsequent food encounters. Human behavior and thought involve processes which allow for a variety of orientations—polarities so to speak—which are comprised of elements one of which may become prominent momentarily while others recede only to give way to those temporarily ignored or suppressed. Individuals thinking these opposing thoughts may or may not recognize the paradox. They may resolve it temporarily in various ways, or they may leave it unresolved, perhaps to trouble themselves occasionally at other times.

Cognitive ideas in the literature on food traditions tend to appear absolute and complete. Yet it must be realized that while models of food-related behavior are available to people, these people make choices and alterations on the basis of their own orientations, the demands of certain situations, and personal assessments of the balance of polarities. The biformity of eating behavior—social activity/singular act—is paralleled by the biformity of social behavior: human beings conform to societal models yet strive to retain an individual identity. Researchers often isolate the societal models without recognizing or appreciating the importance of the individual identities. Hence, all the explanations cited above—separately or in combination—may be relevant depending on particular individuals' attitudes at any given moment. But while some explanations may indicate that harmony exists, one should not be misled into supposing that discord does not exist; for discord is a natural part of the human condition. Thus, many reasons might be

3. See his *People of Paradox: An Inquiry Concerning the Origins of American Civilization* (New York, 1972), especially his chapter "Biformity: A Frame of Reference." For other treatments of this concept or something analogous to it, see Margaret Clark and Barbara Gallatin Anderson, *Culture and Aging: An Anthropological Study of Older Americans* (Springfield, Illinois, 1967); John M. Roberts and Michael L. Forman, "Riddles: Expressive Models of Interrogation," *Ethnology* 10 (1971): 509-33; Hasan M. El-Shamy, "Folkloric Behavior: A Theory for the Study of the Dynamics of Traditional Culture" (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1967); Michael Owen Jones, *The Hand Made Object and Its Maker* (Los Angeles and Berkeley, 1975), especially 140-67; Simon J. Bronner, "Investigating Identity and Expression in Folk Art," *Winterthur Portfolio* 16 (1981), in press; Milton Sapirstein, *Paradoxes of Everyday Life* (Greenwich, Connecticut, 1955); and Anthony Storr, *The Dynamics of Creation* (New York, 1972).

given generally as to why some people in southwestern Indiana butcher turtles or eat turtle soup: historic, religious, sociocultural, geographic, and so forth. None, however, is the only explanation or necessarily pertains to any particular individual. Each suits the bias of a discipline, but does not satisfy everyone. And all of them together, when offered as an eclectic explanation, simply underscore but do not account for the disparities in human behavior. We must reconcile ourselves to the fact that human beings are not consistent in their behavior, however disconcerting that fact might be to our analytical egos.

Assuming for a moment that an individual is aware of and distressed by the existence of a paradox in attitude or a conflict between attitude and action, then how does he or she cope with this dilemma? Several mechanisms prevail. Some people express their dislike for the “turtle taste” of turtle soup jokingly, in the form of “nervous laughter,” to make their dislike less threatening or less offensive. Others compensate for conflict by reacting in a way contrary to existing standards. That is, an individual may take pride in what others claim to loathe, thus making this person different and presumably superior to those who reject the attitude or activity. Though he himself might not always relish the butchering of a turtle, one of the aspects of frying turtles sometimes appealing to Edwin Englert is watching his wife “squeal” when the turtle’s feet “scratch and squirm” as if it were alive in the pan. Still others who butcher turtles, or eat the soup, seem to be aware that not everyone does so and that perhaps the activity is abhorrent to some; perhaps this very fact is a source of justification. Another mechanism for dealing with the conflict is to erect mental blocks to, and to establish “psychic distance” from, the disturbing activity or object. In this way one need not confront the image of the creature whose flesh is being eaten or admit to participating in its destruction (particularly if someone else is required to do the preparation and if the product “masks” the taste or image of the creature). Similarly, an individual may also construct a mental image that redirects the supposed, intended use of an object for consumption (the eating of turtles for their nutritional value) to some other use that might be more acceptable—for example, to allowing people to support the church or to interact with others of a similar regional, ethnic, or religious identity. In the end, however, such mechanisms actually

preserve rather than resolve paradoxes by contributing to the persistence of tradition.

In sum, an apparent paradox arising out of observable behaviors may exist largely because of presuppositions in the literature with which researchers are familiar and which affect their conceptions of what to expect; when the expectations are not met but are in fact contradicted, then a dilemma is created. In this instance, turtle butchering and soup preparation seem to be simultaneously encouraged and rejected by the community; however, only some people—and not the “community”—butcher turtles or eat the soup, despite expectations to the contrary. Further, a paradox may actually exist in the thoughts or actions of an individual, a dilemma that might never be resolved by that person or one which can continue because of external factors and internal motivations. Finally, turtle butchering and consumption serve as reminders of a number of matters usually ignored. Aggregates of behavior display disparities as well as continuities; conflicts are inherent in the transmission of models of food-related behavior to which people are exposed; polarities in behavior and thought often are preserved and not always resolved; food and attitudes are dynamic, complex reflections of fundamental thought processes; and food-related behavior must be analyzed in terms of individual options first and foremost. These observations indicate the need for a reorientation in study that will illuminate more fully the complexities of human activities. And they suggest that many specific reasons, rather than a single general one, explain why individuals consume the foods they do—even if or when they eat these things with mixed feelings of pride and loathing.

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