

## THE INCEST PROHIBITION AND FOOD TABOOS

One does not have to be an ethnologist to know that fear of incest—a fear whose influence on modern man’s behavior psychoanalysis has so ably demonstrated—is as ancient as human society. The overwhelming majority, if not all, of those primitive societies that it has been possible to study have revealed an organization governed by the law of exogamy—that is to say, by the obligation to marry solely outside the kinship group to which one belongs.

Classical anthropology, so disparaged today, had the great merit of distinguishing and clearly defining the particular characteristics of such groups, thus bringing out a fundamental conception of the primitive mentality which one must grasp in order to understand the diverse aspects in the life of non-civilized peoples. In the eyes of its members, the kinship group constitutes “a single animated mass of blood, flesh and bones,”<sup>1</sup> “a homogeneous and compact mass in which no distinctive

Translated by Elaine P. Halperin.

1. W. Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (London, 1927), p. 274.

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parts exist, so to speak,"<sup>2</sup> and "a joint undivided body. If it be struck anywhere, every part of it feels the stroke, and resents it. To revenge an injury done to it is the duty of its every member; and in revenging that injury it is not absolutely necessary to strike at the injurious person himself. Any one of this group will do; for not he alone is responsible for his act—the whole body to which he belongs is involved in it. And the blood of that body flows in the veins of every member of it—in the veins of the helpless infant as in those of the stoutest warrior."<sup>3</sup> Not only does primitive man, by virtue of an affective and magical participation whose power it is difficult to assess, consider himself an integral part of this group but he seems convinced that there is a kind of communication between its members, so that the blood shed by some results in blood shed by others—that the harm done to one of them affects all. This belief in the organic interdependence of group members, which gives them a reciprocal guaranty of security, is probably the condition which, by curbing aggressive instincts, has made possible the collective life that is so necessary for the survival of our species.

But such a notion of "consubstantiality," based upon the consanguinity of a common lineage or upon participation in the same totemic essence, inevitably gives rise to complications. For we have often observed that, in the eyes of the primitives, persons not related by blood—such as adopted children, brothers, friends, or even transient guests—seem to be united by bonds that are in every way similar to kinship bonds. Therefore we must examine what is the true nature of these bonds.

Actually, for primitive peoples, the notion of kinship is not based uniquely upon the relationship uniting persons of the same lineage. There are other factors besides genealogy, for example, the sharing of food.<sup>4</sup> The notion of kinship is the logical projection of the affective and magical participation uniting those who belong to the same group; all those elements that create, consolidate, and make manifest this sense of belonging are therefore to be found in the primitive notion of consanguinity.

2. É. Durkheim, "La Prohibition de l'inceste," *Année sociologique*, I (1897), 52.

3. L. Fison and A. W. Howitt, *Kamilaroi and Kurnai* (Melbourne, 1880), pp. 156–57.

4. See our "Essai sur l'origine de l'exogamie et de la peur de l'inceste," *Année sociologique*, 1955–56, p. 188.

For the primitive mind, since the cause participates in an effect, like the participation of the effect in the cause, cause and effect are not only links in a chain; they are also segments of equal value whose order can be reversed at will. If, for example, the act of eating together is at first the effect of belonging to the same group, conviviality very quickly becomes not only the sign but the cause of a common sense of belonging. In the beginning a certain act is performed because one *is* a member of the same group; then the act accomplished together *signifies* that one is a member of the same group; and, finally, the performance together of the same act *makes one become* a member of this group.

Whether this is the explanation or whether there are others, it is quite plain that the notion of sharing food establishes the primitive notion of kinship quite as much as does the idea of a common lineage. The same invisible and active bonds of organic interdependence exist between commensals as those that exist between descendants of the same stock.

As we know, these conclusions are not new. First Robertson Smith, and then Briffault, had arrived at them before we did. The former understood very well that “commensality can be thought of (1) as confirming or even (2) as constituting kinship in the very real sense.”<sup>5</sup> The latter went so far as to affirm that “identity through the common food eaten is the primitive idea which stood for the notion of kinship.”<sup>6</sup> To our knowledge these ideas have not been contested by our contemporaries. On the contrary, a large number of observations made on the spot testify to their accuracy. However, nobody has attempted to draw out the explicative wealth they contain. Out of sheer scholarly scorn, ethnology today is in the position of a man who wallows in poverty but refuses to use his available capital.

Robertson Smith illustrates his theory of the interdependence created by food from examples taken from the desert Bedouins. He indicates the true nature of their legendary hospitality.

Among the Arabs every stranger whom one meets in the desert is a natural enemy, and has no protection against violence except his own strong hand or the fear that his tribe will avenge him if his blood be spilt. But if I have eaten the smallest morsel of food with a man, I have nothing further to fear from him; “there is salt between

5. *Op. cit.*, p. 274.

6. *The Mothers* (London, 1952), II, 489.

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us," and he is bound not only to do me no harm, but to help and defend me as if I were his brother.<sup>7</sup>

The word "brother" is not fortuitous here. The bond of interdependence having been established by the joint consumption of a pinch of salt, a swallow of milk, or any other food, individuals have become "brothers" in the ancient sense of the word—the sense that, between brothers, any harm done to one will affect the other. Thus the bond is created intentionally in order to guarantee the security of the guest as well as that of his host.

The same principle gives rise to feasts intended to conciliate enemies or to seal an understanding—the familiar fraternization rites. Among the Ba-Ila of Africa, for example, an exchange of food serves to sanction a pact; it is called "a clanship of porridge."<sup>8</sup> And, again, among the Dogon, the sharing of a meal reuniting ancient enemies established the alliance between so-called *mangu* groups and created a kinship bond that rendered the slightest altercation or bloodshed impossible.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, there is no society, from the most archaic to the most civilized, that is not familiar with the custom of eating and drinking together to honor an agreement or to celebrate a reconciliation.

Another example of belief in the bond established by the sharing of food is shown by the care enemies take during a war or a vendetta to avoid eating or drinking together. Having taken Renaud de Châtillon prisoner, Saladin does not allow him to quench his thirst in his tent because, had he done so, he would have been obliged to spare the life the crusader.<sup>10</sup> The Arabian writer Sukkari reported that during the Battle

7. *Op. cit.*, p. 270.

8. A. Richards, *Hunger and Work in a Savage Tribe* (London, 1932), p. 190. G. Davy has indicated that the primitive basis of the pact and of the contract is found precisely in "the blood brotherhood and the food brotherhood between human-beings" (*La Foi jurée*, p. 47). He cites Glotz to the effect that people who eat and drink together establish among themselves a sacred bond. The *blood covenant* is achieved through the *bond of food*. The formula of the oath puts one in mind of the Greeks, for whom the pact of hospitality, true treaty of alliance, had of old as an essential condition the clause, "the table and the hearth," "the salt and the table." The primitive idea rests then even more visibly in the peaceful repasts than in the sacrifice (*La Solidarité de la famille dans le droit criminel en Grèce*, p. 160). This is a paraphrase of the French.

9. D. Paulme, *L'Organisation sociale des Dogons* (Paris, 1940), p. 275.

10. E. Westermarck, *The Origin and Development of Moral Ideas* (London, 1906), I, 589.

of Coshāwa a prisoner refused to eat the food of his captor.<sup>11</sup> The latter had slain his son, and the prisoner wanted to preserve the right of blood revenge. Actually, this has to do with possibilities, not with rights; had he shared his enemy's food, he could no longer have taken his revenge, because the harm that he would inflict would have affected him and his people. Among the Nuer of Africa, those who are engaged in a vendetta avoid eating and drinking with others; if they do so, the others, being consanguineous, would in turn be involved in the "blood feud."<sup>12</sup>

What is dreaded, then, is the formation of a bond that entails undesirable obligations and even more so when it is believed to entail danger, particularly bloodshed. For this reason one avoids eating with people in mourning, with murderers, and with women during their menstrual period. The fear of establishing such a bond is readily to be found at the origin of a great many food taboos which are always present in any non-civilized society.

Considerations such as these can lead us far. If it is true that for the primitive mentality commensality is equivalent to a common lineage and constitutes a form of consanguinity, it follows that concepts based on kinship—which are peculiar to primitive peoples—must be reviewed in the light of this fact. Hitherto, exogamy was understood to be a ban against marriage between consanguineous persons because of their lineage. But, since we know that the idea of kinship is based not only on common lineage but on a second element—the sharing of food—which is equally important if not more so, it would seem that the concept of exogamy which until now we have attributed to primitive man scarcely corresponds to reality. For, if the exogamous system is based on a notion of kinship that transcends the notion of lineage, it cannot limit itself to prohibiting sexual union between people of a common lineage but must encompass a much larger area of human relationships: it would have to forbid sexual union between persons related by virtue of the bond of commensality. No longer would relationships between blood relatives alone be considered incestuous but also relationships between persons who were consanguineous through food-sharing. We must therefore expect to find admonitions to persons about to marry to

11. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 271, n. 1.

12. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer* (Oxford, 1940), p. 158.

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avoid not only the consanguinity created by a common lineage but also that created by the sharing of food. And, indeed, as we shall see, such admonitions are to be found in most primitive societies.

Lacking a better term, we have called "food exogamy" the rule that forbids marriage between persons united by the bond of commensality, and, to meet the requirements of this study, we will use the barbaric term "genealogical exogamy" to designate exogamy as it has been understood until now.<sup>13</sup> "One must not be consanguineous in order to be able to marry," genealogical exogamy proclaims; "one must not eat together in order to be able to marry," food exogamy in turn enjoins. These two prohibitions, which for reasons of clarity we are obliged to dissociate here, must not be considered as separate from each other. They are not two forms of exogamy but two facets, as inextricably connected as are, in the minds of the primitives, the notions of kinship and food-sharing. The concern to separate consanguineous persons in order to prevent their marriage and the concern to distribute food in such a way that those who are united sexually do not share the same nourishment comprise the dual foundation on which primitive societies repose; and we must add that this structural fact is altogether as universal as the fear of incest.

Everywhere among primitive societies, whether they are barbaric or merely backward, we encounter the alimentary separation of the sexes; men and women in general, husbands and wives in particular, do not eat together or do not eat the same foods.

Food separation of the sexes is general throughout Africa. According to a recent study made in Leopoldville, only 14 per cent of the families had no objection to women eating with the men.<sup>14</sup> The great majority of monographs devoted to African peoples mention food segregation as still being practiced or as evidenced by tenacious survivals. The same is true of North and South American Indians. We are familiar with Catlin's statement that, wherever he traveled in Indian country, he never saw an Indian woman eating with her husband.<sup>15</sup> "The women and

13. These terms, which are unsatisfactory from many standpoints, must be looked upon as purely conventional.

14. S. Comhaire-Sylvain, *Food and Leisure among the African Youth of Leopoldville* ("Communications from the School of African Studies" [Cape Town: University of Cape Town, 1950]), p. 70.

15. E. Crawley, *The Mystic Rose* (London, 1932), p. 144.

children eat apart and they form a separate group from that of the men," the Marquis de Wawrin writes in his *Mœurs et coutumes des Indiens sauvages de l'Amérique du Sud*. And he adds, "This is the way it has always been" (p. 163).

Such separation is likewise to be found in the Pacific. The custom is mandatory throughout Polynesia and Melanesia, where there is a true segregation of the sexes, the men usually eating in the refectory reserved for them. In Hawaii each family has to have two separate dining rooms, one for the women and one for the men. The description Ellis gives of the prohibition of commensalism between the sexes in the Sandwich Islands and of the society there is one of the classic ethnographical texts. He says that the institutions of Oro and of Tane rigorously demand not only that the woman should not partake of the foods that her husband eats but also that she should not eat in the same place and that she should not prepare their meals in the same kitchen. This restriction applies to the wife in relation to her husband as well as to all members of the female sex, from birth until death.<sup>16</sup>

The alimentary separation of the sexes is enforced in New Guinea, New Zealand, and Australia, where women sometimes have separate camps from those of the men. We find the same rule in countries of continental Asia and Asia Minor. There are similar examples in northern Arabia, where, Robertson Smith informs us, no woman eats in the presence of men. Arabs of the tribe of the Bani Harith would have preferred to die rather than to accept food or drink from the hands of a woman.<sup>17</sup> Of the Bedouins of Egypt we are told: "Perhaps the most curious thing about Europeans in Bedouin eyes is that men and women feed together. This is unknown among the Arabs, where only the small male children feed with the *harim*."<sup>18</sup> Actually, it is impossible to give a systematic yet succinct description of these customs, which are extremely widespread and assume the most diverse forms.

Some will point out that the men's habit of eating apart stems from their fear of being contaminated by the impurity of women who might be menstruating. This is certainly true, and it does explain, as we have

16. William Ellis, *Polynesian Researches* (London, 1829), I, 129. This is a paraphrase from the French edition used by the authors.

17. W. Robertson Smith, *Marriage and Kinship in Early Arabia* (London, 1903), p. 261.

18. George W. Murray, *Sons of Ishmael* (London, 1935), p. 85.

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said, a great many food taboos between the sexes; it is all the more true because the imaginary danger, which serves as the motivation for exogamy, is *the same* blood-connected danger that arouses apprehension about feminine impurity. But the general fear, inspired in all men by all women between adolescence and menopause, does not suffice to explain separate alimentation; because, if this were so, the men would avoid eating with all the women, with their female blood relatives, their sisters. Yet, although this avoidance is occasionally observed, in the vast majority of cases the sharing of food with blood relatives and especially with brothers and sisters is not only prevalent but practiced ostentatiously. Furthermore, there are many facts to prove that, although as a rule men fear the danger inherent in all women, they particularly dread the establishment of a food bond with those women who are—or will become—their sexual partners, illustrating the fundamental incompatibility that exists in the primitive mentality between sexual union and the sharing of food.

Africa offers us evidence of this. "It is a strict rule of Nuer society that the sexes, unless they are close kin, avoid each other in the matter of food. . . . A man may mention food but not sexual matters before kinswomen, and he may mention sexual matters but not food before unrelated girls."<sup>19</sup> Among the Zulus, "If a man . . . sees a girl whom he would like to take for a wife, he must not sup milk in the kraal to which she belongs."<sup>20</sup>

Camara Laye, a native of Guinea, writes in his novel, *L'Enfant noir*:

My aunts would have liked me to share Marie's meal; but could I do this? No, I would not have allowed myself to do so and I do not believe that Marie would have wanted me to: surely, we would have been ashamed to face each other over a meal. Such, in truth, was our delicacy . . . and such was our respect for the rules. We began to think about joining each other only after eating.

The people of the Gold Coast do not regard children who suckled at the same breast, slept on the same mat, or ate from the same dish as eligible for marriage one with the other. Such children are looked upon as brothers and sisters even if they do not have the same parents.<sup>21</sup>

19. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Kinship and Marriage among the Nuer* (Oxford, 1951), p. 55.

20. J. G. Frazer, *Native Races of Africa and Madagascar* (London, 1938), 53.

21. M. Manoukian, "Akan and Ga-Adangme Peoples of the Gold Coast," *Ethnographic Survey of Africa*, Part I (London, 1950), p. 77.



Among the Bantu Kavirendo, a man and a woman would say, for example, that they cannot marry "because they have eaten from the same cow."<sup>22</sup>

Let us now turn to the Pacific. At Isabel in the Solomon Islands, a man is forbidden to marry a woman from whom he has received food.<sup>23</sup> Among the Trobrianders, young men never share food with their girl friends. In their eyes, Malinowski writes, it is just as improper for a man to share a meal with a girl as it is in ours for her to share his bed. And Malinowski's informant, Monakewo, after describing a carnal scene in the brush, comments thus: "We make love: . . . our fire, our lime gourd, . . . our tobacco . . . [ours] no, shame."<sup>24</sup> Margaret Mead speaks of the taboo in New Guinea most deeply felt among the Arapesh: the one which separates the mouth and the genital organs, food and sex.<sup>25</sup> The Kwoma say that an adolescent must avoid eating food prepared by a girl with whom he has had sexual intercourse. This taboo also applies to adults except for food cooked by a wife for her husband.<sup>26</sup> In new Guinea, again, to explain the impossibility of marriage between persons belonging to the same group, the Busamas declare: "They eat together, and you don't think of sexual relations with a girl who gives you food: she is a sister; other women don't feed you."<sup>27</sup> The same author tells us that at Wogeo his informant expressed himself in this way: "The more intimate with a woman one is—'if you are accustomed to eat with her often,' was the phrase used—the less one thinks about sexual relations and marriage when in her company."<sup>28</sup> Among the Mufulu, a girl who is not a close relative of a young bachelor should never see him eating.<sup>29</sup> The Kiwai Papuans assert that two young peo-

22. G. Wagner, *The Bantu of North Kavirendo* (London, 1949), I, 387.

23. W. H. R. Rivers, *The History of Melanesian Society* (Cambridge, 1914), I, 256.

24. B. Malinowski, *The Sexual Life of Savages* (New York, 1929), p. 335.

25. *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (New York, 1935), p. 62.

26. J. W. M. Whiting, *Becoming a Kwoma* (New York, 1941), p. 68.

27. Ian Hogbin, "Sex and Marriage in Busama, North-Eastern New Guinea," *Oceania*, XVII (1946-47), 134.

28. Ian Hogbin, "Marriage in Wogeo," *Oceania*, XV (1944), 327.

29. R. W. Williamson, *The Ways of the South Sea Savage* (London, 1914), p. 215.

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ple who have grown up together cannot marry even if they are not blood relatives because “same *Kaikai* been feed two fellows.” And a man cannot marry the widow of an intimate friend because, while the husband was alive, he had been invited too often to partake of food that she had prepared, and “smell belong that woman he fast along *kai-kai*.”<sup>30</sup> At Orokololo in New Guinea our way of approaching a girl—to invite her to eat or drink—would be considered simply despicable.<sup>31</sup>

In India, in the province of Orissa, near Bondo, where the village constitutes an exogamous group, the food dedicated to the divinities on feast days is called *soru*, and those who eat and offer up the same *soru* cannot marry one another. The Bondo declare that the women of their village “are their mothers and sisters.” When a new family comes to settle in a village, for a certain period it does not have the right to offer the same *soru* to the divinities as the other villagers; during this interval marriage between members of this family and those of families in the village is authorized. The author designates as “*soru-exogamy*” the prohibition of marriage between those who share the same *soru*.<sup>32</sup> In this instance we see that the ban against commensality for those about to marry is extended to ceremonial food.

At Punjab, a young couple’s engagement, which ordinarily is very difficult to break off, can be annulled if they drink a glass of water together, provided one of the pair is seriously ill. The young man merely says: “You are my sister,” and that is enough to break the engagement.<sup>33</sup> The kinship bond created by drinking together constitutes an obstacle that renders marriage impossible.

Marcel Granet, alluding to exogamy in China, writes:

The same idea of consubstantiality is to be found in the ritualistic concepts that govern exogamy. In addition to the bond created by possession of the same name, the rites always mention the bond of food. *Only those who remain commensals cannot be united in marriage.* Even when exogamy of the “name” is stressed, one is careful to note that the essential unity signaled by the name is a consequence of the common ownership of land. Two brothers, although born of the same mother

30. G. Landtman, *The Kiwai Papuans of British North Guinea* (London, 1927), p. 248.

31. E. F. Williams, *Drama of Orokololo* (Oxford, 1940), p. 51.

32. V. Elwin, *Bondo Highlander* (London, 1950), p. 25.

33. Sumner Keller, *The Science of Society* (London, 1927), IV, 943.

and father, possess different essences [to] if they have not grown up on the same land. Exogamy of the name comprises an exogamy of the soil.<sup>34</sup>

We note that for this great Sinologist the use of the phrase “exogamy of the soil” has obscured the newer notion of commensality’s ban against marriage—yet he himself formulates it in very precise terms. Besides, exogamy of the soil (while embracing this idea of continuity which helps to shape the primitive conception of kinship) is not, as hitherto believed, a gradual extension of the law of food exogamy. Marriage between persons of the same locality is discouraged because it is presumed that a common residence entails the sharing of food. Thus, among the Nyakyusa, for example, a man will not readily marry the daughter of a neighbor with whom he has eaten and whose cows have grazed with his.<sup>35</sup> Or, perhaps, this repugnance might be attributed to the fact that “the fathers ate *embalaga* (a dish made with bananas) together.”<sup>36</sup>

In certain cases the precepts of food taboo seem to conflict with those of “genealogical” taboo and even to triumph over the latter. This is true, for example, when a marriage which normally should be forbidden is tolerated because one of the betrothed comes from a distant region. This is clearly expressed by the Wogeo informant whom we cited in the preceding pages and who told Ian Hogbin that the prohibition against marrying one’s cousin (even though this cousin would be considered a sibling by all normal persons) is not taken seriously when a girl who lives in a distant village is involved: “If he did not eat with the girls often, Wiawia continued, he might be tempted to have an affair with one of them and end by making her his bride.”<sup>37</sup>

In Australia an old man of the Yuin tribe defined the laws of marriage in the following manner for the edification of his son: one must

34. *Catégories matrimoniales et relations de proximités dans la Chine ancienne* (Paris, 1940), p. 148. W. Robertson Smith also has touched upon the law of food exogamy. He commented upon the Bani Harith, who did not permit themselves to receive food from the hands of women. This custom, he thought, seemed to point to a time when men and women were not allowed to eat the same food; and totemism combined with exogamy ordained that a man and a woman must always obey different laws in regard to forbidden foods (*Marriage and Kinship in Early Arabia*, p. 261).

35. M. Wilson, *Nyakyusa Kinship: African Systems of Kinship and Marriage*, ed. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (London, 1950), p. 129.

36. M. Wilson, *Good Company* (London, 1951), p. 85.

37. “Marriage in Wogeo,” *op. cit.*, p. 327.

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be careful in marrying never to mix the same blood; one must take a woman bearing a different name from one's own (from another totem); and, furthermore, a man should go as far as possible from the place where he lives in looking for a wife. And he added that the rule was that the "waddy-men," that is to say, those who procured food by climbing trees in search of game, must go to the coast and take a wife from the people who live off of fishing. Should an irregular marriage take place, the culprit would have to fight all his close relatives and would be riddled with sword thrusts and killed.<sup>38</sup>

Here we have an authority in the field who discloses a conception of exogamy that is certainly a faithful description of the marriage law as it is understood in primitive societies: a global conception of exogamy, embracing the idea of a genealogical exogamy (with which the idea of "name" is associated), and the idea of food exogamy (with which the notion of contiguity is associated). Furthermore, we see from this example that violation of the law of food exogamy certainly involves the danger of bloodshed. The punishment inflicted upon the culprit, who would be "riddled with sword thrusts," represents a typical redemption by bloodshed designed to neutralize the danger which blood symbolizes.

Examples of the power of food taboo are also to be found in another category of facts. When two human groups fraternize by the sharing of food, the men of each group are forbidden sexual relations with the women of the other group; the latter, because of the food shared, have become their sisters, and, consequently, the sexual act would be incestuous. Among the natives of Ceram and Wetar, for example, those who, like the head-hunters, perform the ceremonial act of eating together are obliged to come to each other's aid in case of war but cannot contract marriage relations.<sup>39</sup> The Dogon established with neighboring groups the so-called *mangu* relationship, which entails exogamy and is consecrated by a meal shared.<sup>40</sup> To drink milk with members of another clan signifies for the Zulus and the Bondo the sealing of a blood fraternity

38. A. W. Howitt, *The Native Tribes of South East Australia* (London, 1904), p. 262.

39. Crawley, *op. cit.*, p. 327.

40. Paulme, *op. cit.*, pp. 275-76.

and bars them from marrying into this clan.<sup>41</sup>

Actually, there is no aspect of primitive life (in which alimentary questions obviously play a very large role) that does not bear the imprint of this great and misunderstood law, the law of food exogamy.

Doubtless one may wonder why such a universal and highly influential law has remained unknown until now. The answer is complex. It must take into account at least three causal factors: the very nature of primitive thought, the ambiguity inherent in the notion of commensality, and the distinctive character of the evolution that food exogamy has undergone.

Primitive thought—we might better say “human thought,” so long as it cannot rely upon the accumulation of experience to establish its landmarks—does not resist suggestions that stem from ideas that are either interwoven or closely associated with one another. Thus, when confronted with the phenomena produced by food taboo, we find that they have already been metamorphosed by all kinds of extensions, transferences, and symbolizations. The taboos imposed by food exogamy will, for example, spread in every direction that thought can follow. They will spread from the food itself to the receptacles in which it is cooked; to the hearth, to the fire, to the sticks used to rekindle the fire, to the smoke, to the odor of the food, to the sight of it and even to the shadow that it casts; to the kitchens, to the cooks, and so on in an inexhaustible sequence. We also encounter all varieties of the transference of taboos; the danger inherent in the food shared by a couple is transferred, for example, to the cooked food because raw foods are considered to be harmless. Or the regulations are observed only by some members of the community, or telescoped for a few days of the year when some com-

41. Hoernlé, “The Importance of the Sib in the Marriage Ceremonies of the S.E. Bantu,” *South African Journal of Science*, XXII (1925), 481. Other examples go back to antiquity. Herodotus tells of the women of Caria who were accustomed to eat separately from their husbands. In ancient India the Code of Manu decreed that “one must not eat in the company of one’s wife.” In a clause of the peace treaty that authorized the abduction of the Sabine women, the Romans promised not to ask these women, whom they married, to mill the wheat, knead the dough, or cook, and this promise was always kept. There are examples which are survivals of taboos in modern Europe: in Brandenburg and in the region that once belonged to Serbia, it is said that lovers and married couples who eat or drink from the same receptacle will suffer a diminution in their love for each other; near Potsdam, engaged couples or young married people still observe the prohibition against biting into the same piece of bread.

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munal taboos will be established and customs neglected at other times will be rigidly observed; or perhaps these regulations will be mandatory only during a certain period of an individual's life, usually adolescence. Often, as occurs in Africa, couples are relieved of excessively inconvenient prohibitions at the time of the birth of one or several children, and responsibility for compliance with these prohibitions will fall entirely on the in-laws. Or else interest will be focused on a single dish—cooked cereals, fermented drinks, or some dairy food. Because they are impractical and difficult to apply, these taboos are subject to all kinds of modifications as well as distortions; those who must submit to their sway are constantly seeking, more or less consciously, ways of avoiding them or reducing their impact. Moreover, taboos often evolve either because the initial reason for the prohibition has been forgotten or new meaning has been attributed to it. In addition to the primitive fear of sharing food, there is, for example, the anxiety that the left-overs might be used to practice sorcery, or some other such apprehension.

A major difficulty, however, both for those who try to interpret and implement the precepts of food exogamy and for the ethnologists who study these precepts, stems from the ambiguity inherent in the notion of commensality. The bond of consanguinity resulting from a common lineage is easy to trace and define, but the bond of consanguinity that stems from the sharing of food lends itself to the most diverse interpretations. In order to establish the bond of interdependence, must one share food daily, or is it enough to share just one meal? To create an incriminating bond, should the food be eaten at the same table or in the same plate, or is it enough to eat identical food? To avoid creating such a bond, is it enough to refrain from sharing the same rations, or should one go so far as to eat a different kind of food? Furthermore, in case the same kind of food did not come from the same soil, the same harvest, the same granary, or the same animal, can it be consumed without incurring alarming consequences? Can the danger of an incriminating bond be exorcised by resorting to some ritualistic expedient—the first swallow of every drink or an offering of the first fruits—so that the sacrifice of part of the food would guarantee the harmlessness of the remainder? Can one consider one's self protected if certain precautions are taken, like eating without looking at the other, or sitting back to back, eating at night, or eating in silence, or by smearing one's face with soot? Or should one seek safety in some magical means of protec-

tion like mouth or nose ornaments, taboos, or the strategy of “redemption by blood”?

The infinite casuistry to which the interpretation and application of the law of food exogamy lend themselves is evident. It is probably these initial exercises in sophistry that gave our ancestors the opportunity to play the very human game of equivocation, subterfuge, and sleight of hand. Depending upon the answers to the questions we have just enumerated and to many more—answers dictated by the pressure of prevailing circumstances which defy analysis—we find ourselves faced with frequently contradictory manifestations of the law of food exogamy, whose number and heterogeneity have, until now, disconcerted researchers.

Once the final structure has disintegrated as a result of the process of social evolution, the tenacity of alimentary superstition will continue to assert itself. In societies which hereafter will tend to become patriarchal, recourse will nonetheless be had to a very general, widespread precaution: the commensal segregation of the sexes, the separation of men and women for eating purposes, a practice that is still being followed today in underdeveloped countries.

The separation of the sexes at mealtimes represents a gentler way of dealing with the Draconian imperatives of food exogamy; for the differentiation of foods consumed, it substitutes a simple differentiation in space or time—the women eating elsewhere than the men or at a different time. Moreover, as the patriarchal character of society becomes more pronounced and as the wife is entirely assimilated to her husband's group, the restrictions imposed by food exogamy, so typical of primitive society, will gradually be relegated to the realm of outmoded ideas. Instead, the impurity of women in general will tend to be stressed, and this will serve to insure more effectively the subservience of the second sex.

Since both genealogical and food exogamy are inspired by the principle that the bonds of kinship and sexual relations are incompatible, exogamy's function—in the narrow sense attributed to it until now—will be to prevent sexual intercourse from occurring where kinship bonds exist because of a common lineage; inversely, the task of food exogamy will be to prevent the establishment of kinship bonds among persons likely to engage in sexual intercourse. As a result, its restraints and prohibitions will involve both individuals and the food they con-

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sume. Its role, hitherto ignored, will be to distribute food, to prohibit or authorize its consumption, to regulate what should or should not be eaten in order to avoid the sharing of food—all this lest a kinship bond be established which will make a sexual union incestuous. This exogamy will require a Draconian discipline in regard to food and will fashion social structures in accordance with the order it intends to impose.

In presenting the complications that primitive peoples have to face in order to feed themselves—difficulties that demand a deliberate sacrifice of part of the available food—the notion of food regulation based upon sharing will seem hard to accept. This sharing does in fact exist, and the radical nature of such measures is altogether in keeping with primitive thought. But, since such regulations are in themselves essentially impractical and uneconomical, they can only create highly unstable organizational structures. The social developments that result—on which we cannot dwell here—can be defined as conscious, semiconscious, and unconscious efforts to escape the tyrannical impact of those measures and to strike a balance between them and the requirements of life. The major outlet by which humanity can escape the coercion of sharing is totemism. The result of, or reaction to, food exogamy—totemism—wherever it takes root, obliterates, obscures, and completely blots out the primitive outline of the structures that engendered it. Thus it is entirely understandable that this outline should not have been seen in its separate parts and that it should have finally been perceived in its totality as a picture of primitive society.

One of the first objections that will be raised against the theory outlined here will doubtless be that the custom of celebrating a marriage by having the young couple eat or drink something together is a universal one. How can we maintain, we will be asked, that two young people about to be married must eat different foods when marriage is symbolized by an act of alimentary communion?

It is quite natural that marriage should be consecrated by a ceremony representing union, one that indicates the beginning of a life together, a coupling of destinies. All kinds of acts symbolize the union of marriage, like being tied together, exchanging clothing, joining hands, etc. The nuptial rites of conviviality fit into this framework, since, as we know, festivity represents a bond between people.



However, in contradiction to these customs suggested by the very logic of life, and even within the framework of convivial rites, we see elements that introduce discordant notes into the harmony of this image of union and which only food exogamy can explain. It has been observed that among very diverse and distant peoples all kinds of taboos prohibit couples from eating or drinking in public on their marriage day, or forbid them to eat together, or to eat as much as they want, or to eat certain foods; there are even rules that require fasting. To cite but one example from many, among the Bondei of Africa, a couple on their wedding day rinse their mouths with hot water and do not eat at all; three days elapse, and still they have not had a meal together. They will do so only when the husband gives his wife a coin “enabling him to eat with her”—an indication that an existing taboo has been overcome.<sup>42</sup>

An extreme example, which at first seems strongly to disprove our thesis, is that of the Mentawai of Sumatra. The Mentawai assert that “the couple must always eat together in the *lalep*. For a man and his wife not to eat together is a sin that has a special name, *masoilo*, which provokes the anger of the altar spirits.” But, when one studies the Mentawai marriage system closely, one discovers that there is a period during which the couple is not authorized to eat together; each must be fed in the house of his or her parents. The couple is permitted to share a meal only after having performed the rite of *lia*, which consists of sacrificing every kind of food upon the altar, and this continues for a period of two months.<sup>43</sup>

It is quite natural that a marriage should be the occasion for a joyous banquet. But why are the main characters of the feast so frequently excluded from it? And why, when they do attend, are they sometimes treated the way the Yakut treat their newlyweds? The latter remain seated in a corner behind the door, with their faces turned toward the wall, touching nothing, while their relatives partake of the wedding meal.<sup>44</sup> And why are wedding banquets sometimes celebrated separately

42. Rev. G. Dale, “An Account of the Principal Customs and Habits of the Natives Inhabiting the Bondei Country,” *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, XXV (1895), 200.

43. E. M. Loeb, “Mentawai Social Organization,” *American Anthropologist*, XXX (1928), 428.

44. Briffault, *op. cit.*, I, 557.

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by each family, as is the custom among the peasants of Sicily, where the young bridegroom goes back to his family as soon as the meal begins at the home of the bride?<sup>45</sup> Among the Hopi, as Don Talayesva's autobiography shows, each family eats alone in its own house the dishes prepared by the other family.<sup>46</sup> In Australia, among the tribes of the Daly River, on the occasion of a marriage the husband distributes food generously to his wife and her family. But for himself and his blood relatives food is *tyayait*, ritually forbidden, and they remain seated and hungry while the others eat.<sup>47</sup>

In all cases where taboos obstruct the natural tendency to celebrate in good company and to honor a happy event by a good meal, it is plain that we are confronted with facts that can be explained satisfactorily only by the prevalence of food exogamy.

Yet there are cases where there is no indication of food exogamy. In these instances the act of sharing food seems to accompany the sexual act as if it were an intimate, functional necessity. Maurice Leenhardt writes about the New Caledonians:

When the period of maturity seems near, the grandfather summons her [the girl] with the young man, her cousin, and invites her to cook a yam which she will eat with the young man; or else he tells her to sit on the same mat on which the young man is seated. These two gestures are equivalent to the breaking of a taboo. Masticating the same yam is a communion of the essential nature of the same clan. These young people are henceforth free to live together.<sup>48</sup>

These "People of the Great Land" are exogamous, and yet the sexual act is preceded by "mastication of the same yam [which] is a communion of the essential nature of the same clan" and therefore makes them consanguineous. It is quite clear that here the rite of conviviality touches upon a survival of the period prior to exogamy; food exogamy had not even been conceived at that time, and men and women were united sexually and shared the same foods because they were consanguineous

45. W. Foote White, "Sicilian Peasant Society," *American Anthropologist*, 1944, p. 70.

46. Don Talayesva, *Sun Chief*, pp. 215-21.

47. W. E. H. Stanner, "Ceremonial Economics of the Mulluk-Mulluk and Mandgella Tribes of the Daly River, North Australia," *Oceania*, IV (1934), 469.

48. *Les Gens de la Grande Terre* (Paris, 1937), p. 134.

and because these acts occurred exclusively between consanguineous persons. We must see in this a repetition of primitive endogamy and assimilate these acts to the well-known marriage rites which appear to be an attempt to make the couple consanguineous by an exchange of blood.

On the other hand—and this is typical of the dialectical trend evident in social evolution—the nuptial rites of conviviality which, as we have seen, can be considered as survivals of an ancient, pre-exogamous epoch, can also reappear to indicate a later period. In this case, the nuptial rites correspond to a conception of marriage that belongs to the period when patriarchy prevailed and when the woman had to be integrated into her husband's group. Food exogamy has thus been held in check by the desire to assimilate the wife to the group of which she thereafter forms a part. Hence, in this instance, the purpose of the nuptial rites of conviviality is to effectuate such an incorporation. Among the Larkas, for example, the wife is offered rice and meat, and “by eating she becomes a member of her husband's caste.”<sup>49</sup> Among African cattle-breeding peoples, the woman becomes identified with her husband's clan by consuming milk and meat; the economic aspect of this integration is emphasized by the persistent reminder that this food is from her husband's livestock.

Finally, to complete the story, we should point out that there are cases where the nuptial rites seem to have the appearance of “the breaking of a taboo.”<sup>50</sup> The taboo of food exogamy is recognized and respected; but for an unusual occasion it is solemnly and temporarily broken. This underlines the importance of the event and perhaps demonstrates in a dramatic way the efficacy of rites that make it possible to defy any danger, even that involved in consanguineous marriage.

The marriage ceremony, Briffault tells us, is often the only occasion on which the bride and bridegroom eat a meal together.<sup>51</sup> This was true of the Serbian woman who ate with her husband on her wedding day for the first and last time in her life. A similar restriction obtained for

49. Crawley, *op. cit.*, p. 355.

50. An example of this “sacré de transgression” is defined by Roger Caillouis in *L'Homme et le sacré*, pp. 127 ff. and 54–55.

51. *Op. cit.*, I, 556–59.

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women of Bengal in Asia and for the Niam-Niam women in Africa.<sup>52</sup> In the French Indies where the wedding feast “is celebrated in silence and without the presence of the newlyweds and where nobody thinks about them until the end of the meal,” the two young people on their wedding day eat together “the one and only time in their life, seated on the same banana leaf.”<sup>53</sup> An instance that illustrates unmistakably the breaking of a taboo associated with the marriage rite is the ceremony in Ceram. Here the young bride eats a male opossum on her wedding day, while the bridegroom eats a female of the same species, thus reversing the established rule.<sup>54</sup>

Whether the convivial rites of marriage are formal ceremonies that take place after restrictions imposed by the traditions of food exogamy have been surmounted, or reminders of a period that antedates the concept of food exogamy, or, inversely, manifestations of a stage in social evolution that has gone beyond it, or, finally, whether these rites are inspired by the ritual called “the breaking of a taboo”—the fact nevertheless remains that all the nuptial rites of conviviality correspond to the nuptial rites of consanguinity. And just as the latter do not challenge the reality of the law of exogamy, properly speaking, so, too, do they pose no challenge to the reality of the law of food exogamy.

The nuptial ceremonies in which the rites of conviviality are so curiously mingled with the taboos imposed by food exogamy suggest that, perhaps precisely at the moment of marriage, the fundamental contradiction inherent in this taboo is felt most keenly. The young people who marry in order to unite their destinies, to live together, inhabit the same hut and share the same bed, cannot share food—which represents for primitive man even more than it does for us the symbol of life together. This inconsistency becomes even more flagrant as the family circle begins to take shape within the primitive group and as, with the beginnings of elementary farming, the preparation of food becomes increasingly burdensome, and, in the division of labor, the woman assumes all responsibility for the meals. And the situation is really insup-

52. Crawley, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

53. F. G. Hardy and Ch. Richet, *L'Alimentation dans les colonies françaises*, p. 303.

54. Crawley, *op. cit.*, p. 354.

portable when the reasons for it, which sprang from a partly unconscious elaboration of fears aroused by the hunt, tend inevitably to be forgotten or misunderstood.

In spite of these complications, food exogamy, which at first might seem destined to crush the emerging society under its weight, not only persisted but showed itself to be, in the last analysis, the necessary condition for the establishment and maintenance of that society.

The restrictions it imposed curbed the yearnings for violence that might otherwise have sought expression among hardy young hunters who were armed. They also made possible, without any need for coercion, a fair distribution of the group's resources. They continuously forced men to extend the areas where they sought food and to exploit thoroughly all the edible objects that nature offered them.

Because of the difficulties we have indicated, food exogamy—through an evolution impossible to explain here, since the process is not the kind that can be described briefly—engendered the totemic system. This was an articulated social system controlled, balanced, and relatively stable, admirably suited to tribal life and capable of making it blossom—a social system to which men affixed the beliefs they still cherish today.