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**"EATING LIKE A BLACKSMITH":  
SYMBOLS IN KAPSIKI ETHNO-ZOOLOGY**

*1. Introduction*

The study of symbols makes it possible to pursue the analysis of a given culture beyond the overt interpretation of its participants. Though not all anthropologists agree on this issue which has been a much debated topic recently (e.g. Turner 1967, Douglas 1972, Firth 1973), we shall try to support this thesis by presenting a symbolic system in which the structuring of the symbols is highly elusive for the participants.

In order to do so, we concentrate on a symbolic system that easily escapes rationalization and reflection, as it is treated as a matter of undisputed fact in daily life: food from animals. The relative position of the symbols towards each other will be examined, in order to detect the affective and semantic dimensions that underlie their symbolic opposition. This approach differs from the "standard" way of analysing symbols in which a small set of symbols pertinent to a specific action is analysed in its various contexts and settings (e.g. Turner 1969, 1975, Douglas 1970, Droogers 1974, Stanner 1960). By concentrating on the "positional meaning", using one of Turner's many analytic concepts (Turner 1967), the structure of the whole symbolic field emerges, and this symbolic structure appears to be pertinent to our initial observation. In this way we shall try to demonstrate also that Lévi-Strauss' observations on totemic systems as systems of symbols (Lévi-Strauss 1960) offer a testable hypothesis, a current issue of debate.

*2. Method*

For the purpose of this paper we shall restrict ourselves to the symbolic properties of the semantic field of animals in its relation to eating, in one particular culture, viz. that of the Kapsiki of the Northern Cameroons.<sup>1</sup> In doing so we heavily rely on the

approach of ethnoscience as a useful and productive way of handling native classification and its corollaries. As a field technique this implied the collection of all native Kapsiki animal names by means of several eliciting techniques, and the use of sorting tests on these names by our informants (Geoghegan 1971; Berlin, Breedlove and Raven 1969). We explored the use, edibility and symbolic properties of all animal types.

### *3. Ethnographic background*

The Kapsiki-Higi tribe lives in the Mandara mountains on the northern border of Nigeria and Cameroon. It consists of a loose conglomerate of autarchic villages, each with its own territory and set of village-specific patrilineal clans. Within each of these villages the virilocal polygynous or nuclear family forms the basic unit of society. This family is fully autonomous: a powerful sense of privacy, permeating all aspects of Kapsiki culture, shields each compound from its neighbours. Interference from other people, including the village chief, never exceeds the level of advice. However, his authority may be bolstered by the respect the Kapsiki have for the person of the office holder.

The Kapsiki cultivate sorghum, corn, sesame and sweet potatoes as staple crops, and peanuts and tobacco for a cash income. Goats, sheep and cattle make up their livestock, but on the whole animal husbandry is less important than agriculture, economically as well as ritually. The Mandara mountains are densely populated, from 30 up to 100 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>, so game is scarce and hunting is not very important. Only hares, birds and some antelopes form some addition to the menu. The annual cycle of cultivation, characterized by a very distinct rhythm of a short rainy season and a protracted dry season, dominates the working pattern, rituals and human interests in general. The daily tasks vary with the season: discussion topics at beerdrinking parties relate to cultivation and its corollaries and almost all communal rituals are calendrical. Thus boys' initiation, first marriage for girls and second burials, all have their own place on the calendar.

This "seasonality" of Kapsiki life is supplemented by their strong notion of privacy. In religion this is apparent in the orientation of the central religious rite which consists of private sacrifice within the family compound.

#### 4. *Blacksmiths and other people*

Within the Kapsiki society one type of differentiation between people is very important. Though several specialists may be discerned (van Beek 1977) by far the most important division is that between blacksmith (*rerhE*)<sup>2</sup> and *melimu* (non blacksmith). *RerhE* is translated here, as is usually done, as "blacksmith", although only a small proportion of them actually forge iron or cast bronze. *Melimu* indicates everyone else, the common, normal people. As a 5% minority, the blacksmiths form a very distinct social group with caste-like qualities. They are specialists in secular and religious matters *par excellence*, and marry strictly endogamously.

Their central specialization is burial, including everything that goes with it: dancing, music, ritual, grave digging etc. The *rerhE* are ritual intermediaries on many occasions: they perform divination, officiate in sacrifices on behalf of individual *melimu* and serve as medicine-men. This last specialization of healing is economically very important. Most musical instruments are played by *rerhE* only, which provides another substantial source of income. Last but not least they forge iron and cast bronze. Bronze is used mainly for ornamental and ritual purposes, whereas iron tools are the core of their agricultural equipment. The blacksmiths' wives make pottery and have their own medical and medicinal specializations.

On the whole these specializations — all of which are part-time occupations as all *rerhE* cultivate their own fields like everyone else — give them economic privileges. In sharp contrast their social status is clearly inferior. The blacksmiths are despised by the *melimu*; in official matters they have no judicial competence, in political meetings their voice is never heard. "They are like children", informants state. Formerly, when there was famine, people sold children and *rerhE* as slaves to Fulani merchants. In social functions a smith may be present to provide some background music with his guitar, but his comments are not appreciated and his word is never treated with the respect due to the opinion of an adult man.

Each smith has his own *ndemara*, someone in authority over him, who will conduct negotiations for bride-price and plead in court for him. This *ndemara* is his adult "alter-ego", for Kapsiki do not consider a blacksmith to be fully grown-up. At the wedding a bride is presented to a friend of her father who will shield her from mistreatment by her husband. For blacksmith-brides

these friends are always *melimu*. Important property such as the smithy is owned by the patrician of the *ndemara* and built and repaired by the whole village. Though only the blacksmith may work in it, it is explicitly not his, as he himself is but one of the "children of the village".

### 5. "Eating like a blacksmith"

One statement frequently made by *melimu* is that "blacksmiths are dirty". Three reasons may be adduced for this stereotyped observation. The association of the *rerhE* with death pollutes them, their central task being the disposal of the dead. Also according to *melimu*, the *rerhE* do not wash properly. The last and most important reason is that blacksmiths eat "dirty food". On the whole blacksmiths eat anything the *melimu* eat, but the *melimu* never eat food prepared by a *rerhE*.

The main source of dirtiness, however, resides in food-habits: the blacksmiths eat "things", especially animals, not considered edible by the rest of society. *RerhE* eat all kinds of animals never touched by the *melimu*: donkeys, horses, monkeys, snakes, felines and many others. *Melimu* like to say that "the *rerhE* eat anything", but we shall prove that this statement is false and just another stereotyped notion the *melimu* entertain about the *rerhE*. In order to assess the symbolism of these food-customs we have to consider the way in which the Kapsiki perceive their animal kingdom, with respect to this dichotomy *rerhE-melimu*.

There is no general term for "animal" in Kapsiki: all animals fall under the term *wushi* ("things") and are designated as *wushi ta gamba*, things in the bush. The Kapsiki divide animals into seven distinct subgroups, which we shall term "classes":

1. *wushi nyi kedzerhwa le seda* (animals walking on legs),
2. *wushi nyi kedlu* (animals that fly),
3. *wushi nyi kedzerhwa le hwu* (animals that crawl on their belly),
4. *wushi nyi kwa yEmu* (animals in the water),
5. *kwi* ("mice"),
6. *hegi* ("locusts"),
7. *mcili* ("ants").

Correlation of the various species from these classes with their edibility by *rerhE* and *melimu* can be tabled as follows:

<i>class</i>	<i>eaten both by melu and rerhE</i>	<i>eaten by rerhE only</i>	<i>not eaten at all</i>
1. "walkers"	ruminants rodents (exc. mice) porcupine pig chicken  (29 species)	monkeys felines horse camel hyena weasel  (24 species)	dog bush dog      (2 species)
2. "fliers"	seed-feeding birds cranes cow-heron coloured toucan cursorial birds  (46 species)	birds of prey fishing birds carrion birds raven black toucan black cow-heron  (22 species)	flies bees mosquitoes wasps beetles butterflies dragon-flies bats woodpecker (44 species)
3. "crawlers"	—  (0 species)	water iguana boa water python  (5 species)	venomous snakes polypods lizards gecko blind worm (14 species)
4. "water-animals"	fishes hippopotamus  (14 species)	reptiles crawfish  (6 species)	amphibians molluscs arthropods (exc. crawfishes) worms leeches (17 species)
5. "mice"	fieldmice housemice mice living in mountains and holes hedgehog (14 species)	flying fox  (1 species)	musquash   (2 species)
6. "locusts"	all locusts except cicadas and non- edible kinds (17 species)	cicadas  (2 species)	scarab non-edible locusts  (6 species)
7. "ants"	—	borer	termites ants

<i>class</i>	<i>eaten both by melu and rerhE</i>	<i>eaten by rerhE only</i>	<i>not eaten at all</i>
	(0 species)	(1 species)	worms spiders fleas caterpillars lice (29 species)
Total	120 species	61 species	114 species

Contrary to the usual ethnoscientific method we had to take recourse to cover terms instead of treating each animal name separately. One normally avoids this because occidental ways of categorizing animals are often not relevant in another cultural context, such as of the Kapsiki. However, the sheer number of 295 species as discerned by the Kapsiki makes this impossible. Moreover our goal of discovering general rules of food-symbolism makes details less relevant.

The *melimu* stereotype "the *rerhE* eat everything" proves to be wrong. About 40% of all animal species discerned by the Kapsiki through a special name, is not eaten at all, neither by *melimu*, nor by the blacksmiths. Only 20% of all species is special *rerhE*-food, and on this category we shall now focus our attention.

Is a logic hidden behind this edibility? What is the symbolic meaning of this division in the food-system? At a first glance it is clear that no hard and fast rules can be given that hold for all classes of animals and by which *rerhE*-food can be quickly discerned from *melimu*-food. But still there is some "system in this madness". The animals in the central column (eaten by *rerhE* only) somehow are clearly different from those in the left and right hand columns. This difference can be demonstrated quite easily in class 4 (water animals), because in this class Kapsiki categorization closely resembles our western taxonomy: fishes – reptiles – amphibians.<sup>3</sup> Here the reptiles form part of the blacksmith menu. Only the hippopotamus and the crawfishes do not fit our categorization; the former species does not live in the mountains of the Kapsiki territory of course, but some may be found in the river valley of the Chari and Benue some 200 km away. Crawfishes live in the wells and ponds of the Kapsiki plateau and are used for divination.

One common denominator which distinguishes the central column from the other two, is the fact that it houses nearly all carnivores. With the exception of the dog, the hedgeshog and the

porcupine all carnivores are in the *rerhE*-column: felines, weasel, hyena, snakes etc. Most clearly can this be seen in the case of the birds: all the birds of prey, carrion-eaters and fishing birds are *rerhE*-food. The lefthand column (*melimu*-food) mainly consists of herbivorous animals (ruminants, rodents, seed-feeding birds etc.) whereas the animals that are not eaten at all are neither clearly carnivorous nor herbivorous: they eat insects, earth, blood etc. The case of the woodpecker is very illuminating in this respect: the Kapsiki consider it a wood-eating bird!

Other criteria pertain only to some classes and not to all. In the case of class 1 ("walkers"), the Kapsiki themselves discern between horses and ruminants by pointing to their hoofs: "even hoofs" are food for everyone, "odd ones" for the *rerhE* only. Another feature is that animals such as horses and donkeys are used as beasts of burden and so perform a special task within the economic structure. They are not directly used for productive purposes, but despite their marginality they are very important.

In the class of the "fliers" not only the criterion of carnivorous-herbivorous is relevant, but also that of colour. All non-carnivorous birds associated with blacksmiths are black, whereas the *melu*-birds are multicoloured.

The case of the cicadas deserves special mention. Only those two species among the 25 *hegi* are eaten by the *rerhE*. The cicadas are the true musicians among the locusts. Their Kapsiki-name *rhwEdE* closely resembles that of the one-stringed violin played exclusively by the blacksmiths, *rhwEdErhwEdE*.

Summing up, the main criteria for discerning *rerhE*-animals are:

- carnivorous
- carrion-eating
- black
- special function
- oddness
- musicians

Taken as a whole this reads like a social definition of the blacksmiths themselves. It echoes the way in which they see themselves and others perceive them. Black is the colour of death, black is the garment the blacksmiths wear (dark-blue in fact, which is called black) just like the garment in which people are buried.

Carrion is a symbol of the goat, sheep or bull slaughtered during the burial rites, the meat of which is reserved explicitly for the *rerhE* officiating in the burial. In many tales, stories and myths this burial goat is equated with carrion and myths of

*rerhE*-origin may refer to it. One of them says that in the beginning there was no *rerhE* in the village. Burials were performed by a pair of brothers, one of whom was musician and housed the guests, while the second brother slaughtered the animals, the meat of which was thrown away. Once the oldest child of the musician was ill during a burial dance and saw that the second brother slaughtered the animal, cooked it and ate it. As soon as that was known throughout the village, people decided that this second son would become *rerhE*, in order to avoid this problem. A few *rerhE* from a distant village were invited to teach this brother the tricks of the trade.

The blacksmiths consider themselves to be the carnivores of the Kapsiki society. This view is supported to some degree by the facts of everyday life. Because of their different food-prescriptions they eat more animal protein than their fellow Kapsiki. Though the bulk of the edible meat comes from the ruminants (cattle, goat, sheep) and the chicken, the other animals in the *rerhE* diet are responsible for quite a few extra animal proteins. Whenever a Kapsiki-*melu* happens to kill an animal that is inedible for him, he gives it to the nearest blacksmith. When horses or donkeys die from famine, drought or sickness, their meat is also for the *rerhE*. Besides that, the burial goats and sheep (the "carrion") do form an important contribution to their diet.

In the village where we did most of our research, a total of 41 blacksmiths' compounds housed 115 adult *rerhE*. In one year about 20 burials of some importance took place which added up to a revenue of about 60 goats per year, making up about 1/4 of the total consumption of goats and sheep by all blacksmiths. A demographic study on the neighbouring Matakam tribe reports that the blacksmiths are better fed than the *melimu* (Podlewski 1960). With the Kapsiki this is also the case, which is attested by the lower incidence of infant mortality among the Kapsiki blacksmiths (the Kapsiki *melimu* have an extraordinarily high infant mortality, Podlewski 1966).

As for the other criteria, the special functions of the blacksmiths are evident. The *rerhE* are specialists whenever a task requires specialization; they form a group of "general specialists". Odd numbers are also closely associated with them. Even numbers dominate the rituals and myths of all *melimu* activities, the numbers 4 and 8 being associated with male activities, the other even numbers with female pursuits. Odd numbers only appear in *rerhE* rituals. The last criterion is clear: the *rerhE* are the musicians among their people.

### Conclusion

The food-customs of *melu* and *rerhE* function as a symbolic field through which the difference between the two castes is expressed. The animal kingdom symbolizes in its internal divisions the perception of the social reality. In defining edibility, the social characteristics of the Kapsiki smith are stressed and symbols of ethno-zoology are used as an expression of those characteristics of human behaviour that segregate groups of fellow-men.

The situation reminds one of Lévi-Strauss' approach to totemism (Lévi-Strauss 1960) in that totemistic food taboos are "good to think with" instead of "good for eating". Though in this Kapsiki case there is not the slightest trace of totemism, the same is true here. In food taboos the distinction *rerhE-melu* is thought. The fact that Lévi-Strauss' observation appears to hold for totemic as well as non-totemic systems, makes his claim that this homology between natural and cultural categories is a fundamental trait of totemism dubious. One would rather state that his approach of interpreting nature in terms of human traits presents a fundamental way of giving meaning to intrinsically meaningless objects, i.e. of symbolizing.

So the blacksmiths eat specifically those animals that most closely resemble them: they eat the "*rerhE* among the beasts". In this light it is hardly surprising that "eating like a blacksmith" is nearly identical with "being a blacksmith". Eating is a social definition of oneself. In myth this is expressed time and again by pointing at diverging food-preferences as the origin of the *rerhE* caste. When someone eats like a blacksmith, he becomes one. People claim that still today this is the way some *melimu* turn into *rerhE* by eating this "non-food". Nevertheless, as far as we have been able to find out, both *rerhE* and *melimu* are unaware of the symbolic dimensions of the way they divide the animal kingdom. As far as they are concerned, *rerhE* food simply is food unsuited for *melimu* without any second thoughts as to the inherent meaning of these food symbols. The absence of any overt reason for non-edibility points in this direction: some things seem so self-evident that no native theorizing is called for; only through a symbolic analysis such as we have tried to perform, the hidden meaning of the system of symbols can be explored.

## NOTES

- 1 Research on the Kapsiki and Higi has been carried out between February 1972 and August 1973, and has been made possible by a grant from the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (Grant W 51-91). The name Kapsiki will be used for both parts of the tribe.
- 2 The notation of Kapsiki terms follows the orthography set up by the alphabetisation programs in the Cameroonian Kapsiki-area.
- 3 In colloquial English reptiles and amphibians merge as classes, as both types of animals (e.g. crocodiles and frogs) live in the water as well as on land. In scientific taxonomy however the distinction is sharp and clear: reptiles are born with lungs from eggs on the land and amphibians are born in the water and have gills instead of lungs during their early stage. The Kapsiki categorization follows this latter taxonomy.

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