Women's Studies International Forum 60 (2017) 144–152

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Women's Studies International Forum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif

Weaning and the rendering of substances nourishing: food shamanism amongst the Warekena of northwestern Brazil

Elizabeth Rahman

Research Associate, Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 2 August 2016
Accepted 27 October 2016
Available online 15 November 2016

ABSTRACT

The paper explores the nurturing and nourishing practices of a small group of Amerindians, the Xié river dwelling Brazilian Warekena, and focuses on the gradually expanding diet of infants, babies and toddlers. Unlike other instances of food shamanism, the rituals surrounding infant feeding, and in particular during weaning, are topics that have received little attention. This paper provides ethnographic detail of the Warekena's infant feeding practices and offers an alternative perspective on food shamanism: one that is based on the Warekena's own insistence on mediating vital processes, through attention-directing practices, such as when eating. In particular, the paper seeks to throw light on food preparation, the ritualised consumption of foods, including the prior bathing of infants and the blessing of new foods introduced in the infant's diet. Working within animic relationality, the focus here is on the mediation of foodstuffs and of the vital processes of the body itself, so as to promote the cosmological and bodily balance that engenders the good health of infants.

Introduction

Little fish (G.[1] *pirá miri*), that have been carefully prepared and boiled in river water under the watchful eye of the mother are, at six months, the first real food a baby will eat. The moment is often marked by a spell-blowing elder (P. *benzedor*), called on especially for this occasion. I witnessed one such blessing when Lino, the uncle-in-law of my friend Sueli, took a tiny plateful of the fish dish (G. *daiquiri*) and, in a quiet corner of their comfortable one-room residence, muttering something unintelligible, blew a spell over the food. The blessing was intention-laid and although it only lasted a few minutes, it shifted the tenor in the household from one of mundane sociality to that of quiet composure. Henceforth *daiquiri*, and all other small fish, were considered harmless for the infant to consume. This type of blessing is said to forestall attacks by ancestral spirit animals (G. *maiwa*), protecting the infant and his family from them. In particular, it protects the child from the G. *mira* of the animal eaten, that is, the animal's invisible aspect or 'spirit' (P. *imagen*, or 'image') commonly manifesting as a reflection or shadow of the animal.

This article explores the nurturing and nourishing practices of a small group of Amerindians, the Xié river dwelling Brazilian Warekena, and focuses on the gradually expanding diet of infants, babies and toddlers. The consumption of food, including breast milk, is a carefully mediated process. As with the Warekena's food blessings that protect against the 'image' of the ancestral animal spirits, the overt aim of controlling consumption is to mitigate against the attacks of their descendants, the potentially malignant and infirming 'animist' agents: the *maiwa*. Such rituals involve spells, blessings and/or practices of thanks-giving, or 'seek[s] permission and offer[s] placation' (Tawhai 1988: 101 cited in Harvey, 2006:55) to 'animist' agents who will be eaten, thereby allowing for the safe consumption of foodstuffs, be they agri or horti-cultural produce, fish or meat. In Amazonia and in the wider context of food proscriptions, the specific ritualization surrounding the sourcing of wild foodstuffs (i.e. hunted fish and game), rather than food preparation (processing and cooking) or consumption, has formed the focus of 'food shamanism'.

Unlike other instances of food shamanism, the rituals surrounding infant feeding, and in particular during weaning, are topics that have received little attention. This paper provides ethnographic detail of the Warekena's infant feeding practices and offers an alternative perspective on food shamanism: one that is based on the Warekena's own insistence on mediating vital processes, through attention-directing practices, such as when eating. In particular, the paper seeks to throw light on food preparation, the ritualised consumption of foods, including the prior bathing of infants and the blessing of new foods introduced in the infant's diet. Working within animic relationality, the focus here is on the mediation of foodstuffs and of the vital processes of the body itself, so as to promote the cosmological and bodily balance that engenders the good health of infants.

The article begins by locating the subject of weaning within the greater Amerindian literature on human-nature relationships so as to suggest how this may relate to wider cross-cultural debates, on the evolution and psychology of feeding (i.e. Fouts, Hewlett, & Lamb, 2005; also see Trivers, 1974; Daly & Wilson, 1988), and in particular, to asymmetric

E-mail address: elizabeth.rahman@anthro.ox.ac.uk

[1] Throughout the article, words prefixed with G. are in the Géral language (a modified form of ancient Tupi) and words prefixed with P. are in Portuguese.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2016.10.013
0277-5395/

relations of mastery between the feeder and fed therein. The article then turns to the ethnography, and describes the feeding practices of Xié river dwellers, the Warekena.

Balance and temporal asymmetry in relations of caring for and feeding others

There are three aspects of feeding infants that are of particular interest. The first is the sociality of who takes, who gives, when and to whom, and what this says about the type and category of person one is. The second is the 'what' of feeding: who eats what and at what point in their lifecycle - and life state (e.g. infirm or convalescing) - they do so. The third is to do with the practical arrangements of preparing and consuming foods, or feeding and making them available to others.

Caring for and feeding others is an essential part of hospitable human life, but carers are in an asymmetrical relationship to those for whom they provide. As Peter Gow (1989) has shown amongst the Arawakan Piro, people aim to achieve the status of a married adult, with children, precisely because this will engender the production of an independent family unit. A husband who hunts, and a woman who gardens and processes manioc, evince a gender complementarity that is the basis of Amerindian sociality; and as respective providers of protein-rich meat and carbohydrate-rich manioc, men and women may make demands on one another, and enter into the commensal relations of production, sharing, circulation and the consumption of foods that defines 'subsistence' sociality (Overing, 1989a, 1989b; McCallum, 2001).

The laborious task of processing manioc has been an important precursor to this research. Two landmark articles by Peter Rivière (1984, 1987) address the question of processing the otherwise toxic bitter manioc tuber, but to a more exaggerated degree in stratified Amerindian societies than in egalitarian ones. He argues that in the marked patrilineal ideologies of northwestern Amazonia - such as that of the Warekena - where women marry into agnatic clan groups, the trivial and time-consuming labour of manioc processing is as a key means of controlling women's labour and limiting their sphere of influence. This contrasts to the egalitarian and complementary gender relations in more egalitarian societies where manioc processing is observed to be less intensive. At face value, this would appear to be the case. On the other hand, women's ability to convert otherwise toxic tubers into a diet staple can be seen as an example of their technical prowess, and thus a source of prestige (Heckler, 2004). Part of reason for the sidelining of this debate has been the greater cosmological importance given to the caring of manioc.

Manioc is a curious crop. According to Amerindian epistemologies, it demands attention and care-giving level to what children require to ensure their healthful growth and development. Christine Hugh-Jones (1979) was one of the first to comment upon the intimate relationship northwestern Amazonians perceive between manioc gardening and processing, and human reproduction and fertility, with the manioc garden an apt place for childbirth. Elsewhere, based on work amongst the Makushi, Rival (2001) has demonstrated the relative power women yield as only they, and the Cassava 'mother', have the power to care for manioc. Further, the abundance and size of cultivated manioc is spoken of in terms similar to children, requiring the same energy and input of care (Rival, 2001: 70; Ewart, 2005). Amongst the Colombian People of the Centre, the parent's proper 'feeding' and raising of both children and cultigens (for men, tobacco and coca; for women manioc, chillies and cool herbs) is a manifestation of their personal knowledge and moral worth (Londoño-Sulkin, 2012: 81–82.) Descola (1986) has argued that women develop consanginual-type relationships with the plants they cultivate, and later in his seminal work on animism he gives the example of blood-sucking manioc that menaces young Achuar infants, suggesting that a woman has two sets of offspring to care for, the manioc and her children, both competing for her attention (Descola, 1994: 206). The notion of care-giving - and competition for it - is thus extended to relations with plants, and other non-human persons.

Relations of mutual care define both human-human relationships (Overing & Passes, 2000), but also human relationships with plants or animals. Reichel-Dolmatoff (1976) and Århem (1990, 1998) in particular have noted how the extension of personhood to animals generates an ecologically sustainable attitude that mitigates against the exploitation of natural resources. They have emphasised how people take care not to exhaust forest reserves - by respecting the autonomy of the beings that live in them - because they also depend on them.

Considering human-nature relatedness, Århem (1996) draws on his ethnography amongst the northwestern Amazonian Makuna to define food shamanism as a way of transforming slain animal-persons into food for humans by means of a blessing. Such rituals are necessary in the animist context, where animals share the same generic and primordial vitality as humans. Because of this, food is understood to be both life-sustaining, but also as a source of illness. In order to mitigate the dangerous effects inherent in the act of consuming other beings, 'the blesser must know and in his silent chanting recount the mythic origin of each class of food' (1996: 194). These blessings define the animal's generic identity and they describe its embodied powers (their 'weapons', e.g. feathers, blood, saliva), distinctive to its species, which could negatively affect the person who consumes the food. It is thus that food shamanism allows the Makuna to overcome these dangers while still incorporating the animal's life force. Eating is then a 'metaphysical act of incorporating the creative powers of the gods' (ibid.).

Århem (1996: 195–199) distinguishes between four types of Makuna shamanism: preventative (*queare*), protective/regenerative (*wanore*), curative (*quenore*) and destructive (*rohare*). Food shamanism is a preventative (*queare*) measure, because it enables harmful substances to be removed from the food; but it is also a regenerative (*wanore*) measure as, by sending the animal soul back to whence it came, it enables that animal's rebirth. Out of the contexts of food blessings, shamans also perform ongoing protective acts of offering shamanic foods (coca, snuff and beeswax) to the Spirit Owners of the animals, in compensation - or anticipation - of their reciprocity: the provision of fish and game for humans to eat. It is in light of this environmentally conversationalist attitude that the Makuna's 'proscriptive food system' (Århem, 1996, 1998: 94–96) and practices of food shamanism are understood to form part of the 'cosmic food web'. The observation of special diets, acts of food shamanism, food processing and cooking are all key ways of at once detracting the potency of others and maintaining relatively balanced relations with them. Early on, as Overing and Kaplan (1988: 402) pointed out for the Piarora, food prohibitions and hunting magic and songs, all serve to protect people from the diseases 'owned' by animals. They are necessary because inherent dangers exist between unequal spheres of being.

Viveiros de Castro's (1998) perspectivism, as the term suggests, highlights the extent to which Amerindians see other species as leading the same type of life they do, when viewed from their perspective. However, these animal-others are not equals per se, and neither are they fully human persons. From the normal human perspective these animals' morality is questionable. They do not engage in cool-minded and intimate, carefully managed convivial co-resident relations, and hence, they are worthy of becoming food. More importantly perhaps, as Londoño-Sulkin (2012) has demonstrated for the Colombian People of the Center, is the fact that the substances that these animal's consume are deemed - from the human perspective - to be immoral, provoking, for example, indiscriminate behaviour, a foul temper and promiscuity. Because people are what they eat, only virtuous substances should constitute properly human bodies, making animals inherently (substantially) inhuman.

The newborn infant too, while it has the capacity to develop into a human person, is something of another species. Initially it occupies this space of a potentially immoral other or, at the very least, of an unknown guest (Rival, 1998). Writing on the Arawakan Piro, Gow (2000: