

Eating out in Africa

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Riassunto. Con un simile titolo il lettore si aspetterà un racconto di trucidate orgie cannibalesche. In realtà l'antropofagia in Africa è più immaginata che messa in pratica (io ne ho sentito parlare solo una volta), anche se il cannibalismo rituale non era del tutto sconosciuto. In senso metaforico, il verbo "mangiare" è usato per indicare la predazione politica e sessuale. Ma che cosa e come mangiano gli africani? Presso i Wakonongo, tra cui ho lavorato, il piatto principale è la polenta, accompagnata da: fagioli, manioca, una specie di spinaci, pesce e carne. In occasioni particolari viene preparata la birra, uno speciale idromele e piatti rari come porcospino e formichiere. Per i Wakonongo "convivialità" non fa rima con "commensalità". Il cibo viene preso in monastico silenzio e nella distribuzione le divisioni generazionali e sessuali rigidamente mantenute. I primi ad essere serviti sono gli anziani e i maschi lavoratori, coloro insomma che contribuiscono maggiormente al sostentamento della comunità. In quest'ottica, dopo il contatto con il cristianesimo, per loro è stato difficile capire l'importanza della cena eucaristica, apprezzano molto di più la liturgia della Parola (sermoni e canti). Allora perché trasmettendo il messaggio evangelico, i missionari, sono ricorsi esclusivamente al simbolismo della commensalità? Non è che sono stati antesignani dell'attuale imposizione della cultura occidentale nel mondo? Secondo me, dovremmo accettare di essere radicalmente diversi e cercare di prendere il meglio dei mondi per fare il migliore dei mondi.

With such an appetizing title for starters, the reader will surely expect to be treated in what follows to a lurid description of cannibalistic orgies! Though the africanist author of this text would not go so far as to maintain with one of his fellow anthropologists that cannibalism, apart from the odd criminal or pathological case, has never existed anywhere or at anytime, it has always been exceptional, excentric and esoteric in Africa (¹ - numbers refer to items in the bibliography). Africans have never regularly eaten one another for lack of anything (better) to eat! An elderly member of the Wakonongo of Tanzania with whom I lived between 1969 and 1972 once mentioned that a group of men whom he had known as a boy had eaten a child having drunk too much *kangala* (a home brewed, potent hydromel). But this was the only case I heard of during the whole time of my field work. Paradoxically, the shoe was on the other foot as most Africans imagined Europeans to be cannibals. And not without some justification. The elders of Urwira, one of the earliest mission post in my area, told me they thought the first missionaries who were obsessed with baptising babies in *articulo mortis* transformed them into zombies after having imprisoned them in a small square box surmounted with a huge trumpet... in fact, the screeching phonograph the priests (who seemingly grew fatter and fatter without ever putting their hand to the plough) listened to of an evening on the veranda of their mission! When I arrived unannounced on my antiquated, noisy motor-bike in Ukonongo, covered in dust, helmeted, bearded and with dark goggles, the children scattered into the forest, screaming "*the chinja chinja* (or blood sucking vampire) *has arrived!*" They had heard that the White men were back in the regional capital of Tabora filling buckets with native blood - in fact, a Red Cross

campaign had been organized there (not very successful to say the least), to encourage locals to give their blood for transfusions! Human sacrifice was not entirely unknown in Africa and infanticide for ritual reasons once relatively frequent². But on the whole, both among "my" Wakonongo and Africans in general, anthropophagy is far more imaged in the mind than realized as a matter of fact. Novice witches, for example, are thought to offer a close member of their family as an entrance fee to their coven, the victim being consumed during the ensuing cannibalistic banquet. The Wakonongo with stomach or other interior pains tended to think they were being devoured from within by hungry sorcerers and, on more than one occasion, unfortunately died as a consequence. The metaphor of eating is widely used in Africa to designate political predation³ - but even before the present generation of avid politicians getting fat off the land, the chiefs were ancestrally said to eat their subjects. But the verb (*kula* in bantou languages) is also used in less ambiguous contexts. It is descriptive in particular of sexual appetites and activities, be they legitimate or less so⁴. An elderly Konongo couple once asked me (I was their parish priest at the time), whether they could "eat one another" (*kuly'ana*). At first, hesitant despite an ecumenical turn of mind, I replied that I would give request serious consideration but they went on to explain that being at last sure of their mutual love (they were both in their eighties), they were ready to pledge fidelity till death do them part...thanks to a rite, publically sealing their troth, which included the mixing of sexual secretions with a goat, sacrificed and consumed at a crossroads. Stories of ogres are well known throughout the continent and proverbs abound in references to all shades of food and eating.

However we will not dwell on the imaginary here but rather speak about the simple fact of eating -what, how, when, where and especially with whom did the Africans

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I knew eat? The bad press Africa is usually subjected to at present - genocides here, droughts there, famines everywhere - make it rather difficult to imagine that one can eat well and fully in many parts of the continent. I never went hungry during my stay in the bush amongst the Wakonongo and have eaten exquisitely prepared local fare (from snake to shark) in many a capital's better class restaurants. Africans are no exception to the rule: amongst the ways ethnic groups inculcate and manifest their distinctiveness are taboos on certain types of food. You could no more persuade an Englishman to eat horse meat than incite a Senegalese to taste pork salami. But in this respects, the Wakonongo ate almost everything - apart from hippo meat. When in Tanzania, my missionary confrères, knowing I was living and working in an *ujamaa* or socialist village, would ask me two questions: how I could live alone - to which I replied that there were also 300 or more "natives" in the vicinity! - and how I could cope with the local food (some missionaries would take their own supplies when visiting outstations and I knew one who regularly recooked what he was offered in a pressure cooker!) - to which I replied that apart from the fact that as an Englishman I was not particularly fussy about what I ate, in any case what the Wakonongo ate more than whetted and satisfied my appetite. True, breakfast was not even continental in size or shape! At dawn, an enamel mug of lukewarm gruel, slightly flavoured with baobab beans would be drunk by some before going off to the fields till late in the afternoon. Occasionally the women would bring us a huge platter of rice laced with peanut butter as a mid-morning snack. Rice, however, was not considered particularly nourishing - fit for idle Arab shopkeepers or lazy Europeans but not for hard working peasants. The staple, for most meals, was polenta rather quickly made by mixing white, pounded maize flour with boiling water. The Wakonongo would not touch, even in difficult times, the yellow corn sent from America. Cooking was essentially the women's task. Men did most of the heavy work involved in growing maize or exploiting forest resources. The women would return home from the fields a little earlier with their small children and set about pounding the maize to prepare polenta. With this task they identified and were identified. The local euphemistic phrase equivalent to our (former!) asking a girl's parents "*for her hand in marriage*" was "*you would not by any chance have a wooden spatula (upawa used for stirring polenta) to spare?*"! The relish (*mboga*) accompanying the huge mound of steaming polenta (*ugali*) varied from day to day: it could be anything from the spinach-like leaves of manioc or beans (both in peanut butter) to fish (either the sun dried sardines, *dogata*, from Lake Tanganyika or the smoked catfish, *kambale*, caught in nearby mud ponds) through various kinds of meat (*nyama*) of domestic animals - especially hens and pigeons, much more rarely goats, sheep or cattle - or from game, large or small - abundant in the region. Small tomatoes and onions together with homemade peanut butter oil were usually included in the sauce. Sweet potatoes (a famine standby

imposed during colonial times - the elderly Wakonongo said their ancestors in case of need could get by with roots from the forest) and manioc roots were also eaten (dipped in peanut butter) but more as a snack out of meal times than as a meal as such. Water would be drunk after a meal but more to rinse out one's mouth than to satisfy thirst. Beer (*pombe*) was brewed in huge recycled twenty gallon oil vats but not on a daily basis. Women prepared *pombe* for festive occasions (especially marriages), to make money or to reward teams of young workers, clearing the bush or tilling the soil for local worthies. This native beer looked like and had the consistency of mushroom soup but was quite delicious and potent - especially when four gallons of honey were added to the twenty of water to make the extra special hydromel (*kangala*). Some oranges and bananas were grown but never eaten as a desert - in fact few people ate them at all. It must be remembered that the Wakonongo as shifting agriculturalists, never stayed put long enough to make it worthwhile planting fruit trees. On the score of what was eaten locally, let me conclude on a rather moving note. While people everywhere like to offer visitors their specialities, they are never sure whether these titbits will be appreciated, especially when proffered to their betters. The Wakonongo were no exception. But seeing how I never turned up my nose at anything but willingly tried everything I was invited to taste, they took pleasure and pride in presenting me with rare or seasonal dishes such as porcupine and anteater meat (both nocturnal animals, so difficult and even dangerous to catch that professional guilds specialized in hunting them) and, on one occasion, a finger's length and thick caterpillar, tasting for all the world like a first class sausage! I do not know how I would have managed had I done fieldwork amongst lets say pastoralists who only live on the milk and blood of their cattle. What I do know is that I never went hungry amongst the Wakonongo and cannot remember an unjoyable meal.

This enjoyment was initially marred by the fact that I was made to eat before anyone else and apart from everyone. Either the wife of Jakobo Kasalama, the old neighbourhood headman who lodged me or one of the spouses of his four married sons living nearby would discretely depose a plate of *ugali* (covered with a cloth) and a bowl of relish in the vestibule of Jacob's modest hut, leaving me to eat alone what I liked, the rest being then taken to the elders or other members of the extended family or passers by - anyone coming across people eating would be invited to join in (*Karibu chakuli*). This was the way the former chiefs had taken their meals: in splendid isolation. This continued to be the way distinguished visitors were treated. Whatever might have been the ancestral reasons for this custom (such as the sacred and therefore segregated nature of chieftainship), it is a fact that the Wakonongo felt uneasy watching their hosts eat... which is one of the reasons why they preferred the priest saying mass back to the people as in pre-Vatican II times rather than facing the congregation as of now. Finally, however, on my insisting, they allowed me to

take my meals in common - with everyone else as I fondly imagined. I still vividly recall my first meal. We had returned from the fields round about four in the afternoon, cleaned ourselves up in our respective huts and returned at six o'clock to Jakobo's *banza*: a rudimentary, open sided shed, with logs as low lying seats. It served as a gathering place for local elders to chat of an evening, as an informal court house, as a kind of men's club and even, on occasion, as a forge. In former times, the *banza* had been a far larger and better built, centrally located village hall - on the lines of those known to the Vikings and still in use by Papuans. On the occasion of my first communal meal, a couple of women quietly placed in our midst a huge wooden platter (*lubehe*) of polenta and one or two bowls of relish. After washing our hands (there were of course no knives or forks nor individual plates and no table), we skewered out of the steaming hot mound a small amount of *ugali*, roughly rolled it into a ball between our fingers, dimpled it so as to retain a little of the relish into which it was dipped. (Until my fingers had hardened through working in the fields, I experienced some difficulty in kneading the scalding polenta - the Wakonongo, on the other hand, marvelled at my ability to drink boiling hot tea!).

Pleased to be able at last to participate in the extended family meal, I sought to make conversation with my companions. But not only did they not reply, I ended up by eating next to nothing! In fact, eating outside means one must eat rather quickly because the polenta rapidly cools down, becoming unmanageable and inedible. Moreover, especially in the dry season, mini whirlwinds threatened to smother everything with dust. Many a time, seeing a column of sand approaching, a man would point a finger in its direction so as to make it veer magically away from our *bonza*... and into someone's else's meal! Not having learnt my lesson, the following day, while taking care to get on with the business of eating, I again tried to involve other participants in an exchange of information. At Jacob's feet sat one of his youngest grandson. The three year old, naked, quietly but quickly tucked into the *ugali*, not saying a word. Suddenly Jakobo bent down and hit the lad (gently!) on his cheek, expostulating thus: "*Have you come here to chatter or to eat?*"! Not being able to clout me, the wise old man had none the less sought to make it more than clear that I should first get one with meal and only after all was done should I start to say something! And in fact after every meal we would sit around the fire in the *banza* talking over the days events, sorting out neighbourhood affairs or listening to legends of yesteryore. Even before the penny had dropped, I felt that what went on in the *banza* was not only more relevant than what took place in church but just as if not more sacred. From that very moment it suddenly dawned upon me that for the Wakonongo "conviviality" did not rhyme with "commensality" and that sharing in a meal did not represent the high-water mark of togetherness. Not that they ate like animals! Though eating in monastic silence, they were as good mannered as any a monk. Jakobo would

discretely put in my way choice morsels - the relish being eventually added to the polenta. No-one gobbled down his food or snatched at the better piece of meat. But it is a simple fact of village life in Africa, partly for the material motives instanced above, food must be consumed rapidly and without much talk. And this has been my experience elsewhere in sub-saharan Africa. The Wakonongo were not an exception confirming the rule. More to the socio-cultural point, eating rather than confirming communion underlined separation, keeping people apart rather than drawing them together. A rural community in Africa is rigidly stratified and the generational and sexual division of labour strictly maintained. Eating is part and parcel of this coherent whole. The chief, as has been said, did not eat with his subjects. Even less did women eat with men. In my village, only one young married couple and then timidly and irregularly, ate together - she being a very pushfull person, he being notoriously weak willed, their partaking of food together was dismissed by almost everyone else (including members of their own age group) as extravagantly excentric rather than as pioneeringly prophetic. The elders and breadwinners ate first and were furnished with the best ingredients of the relishes. Again far from being a sign of selfishness and exploitation, this surrounding of the ageing with privileged attention, simply made sound, common sense. In this kind of rural community, one's public usefulness grows apace with one's age⁵. The older one becomes, the more one is able to contribute to the group's survival thanks to one's material, moral and mystical know-how. The younger one is less one is likely to know which soils will yield a good crop or where the wild animals hide, having little experience of human relationships even a young adult is not yet able to resolve satisfactorily moral issues such as quarrelling between co-wives or disputes amongst neighbours and above all not being dose to death or better to the dead, one is not in a position to negotiate with the ancestors the maintenance of their goodwill as manifested in the regular return of the rains or the health of the women and children.

For all these empirically manifest reasons, making sure the elders were well fed was as self-evident a strategy of survival as providing breadwinners with meat was in the working class milieu of my youth before the emergence of the Welfare State. Not that women and children went without in Ukonongo. Circulating far more than the men amongst the womenfolk, I could not but notice that the women made sure they got their fair share of the food they prepared. And occasionally following the children in their work and play, it was evident that not only did they eat daily in several households but that they also (at least the boys) caught and ate small animals as well as surreptitiously helping themselves to manioc roots, maize or fruit. None the less, to return to our main argument, eating for the Wakonongo had neither substantially the same sense or structures as it has for us. For instance, when we went to collect a bride, snatching her from her family to remove her to her husband's or rather her father-in-law's homestead, we were treated as

invaders, kept for a while at a distance, given water to drink only if we insisted - of a nuptial banquet it was simply never question. In a way, eating rather than confirming a being or a growing together, expressed and even effectuated the separate collective identities making for a complementary socio-economic whole.

At the time, a post-Vatican II missionary, this state of socio-cultural affairs interpellated me deeply. The inculturation and africanization of the Gospel were then high on the apostolic agenda. While studying in Rome during the Council, I had once publically asked Cardinal Henri de Lubac s.j., a pioneering theologian of intercultural ecumenism, whether it might not eventually be possible in Africa to have recourse to local material such as palm wine or modest calabashes instead of imported wine and expensive chalices, so as to indigenize the eucharistic meal. Rather angrily he retorted that we young missionaries were not only throwing out the dirty water but the bath and even the baby! He would probably have had me excommunicated on the spot had he known that not only was I to end up saying mass for a while with porridge oats and orangeade (for lack of bread and wine) but by downplaying the eucharist meal and upgrading the liturgy of the Word. In effect, if the Wakonongo were preprogrammed to understand and accept the mass as a bloody sacrifice, their culture had in no way prepared them for the mass as a meal. Not only on the surface, at the level of symbolic tables and eucharistic elements (bread and wine), but at a deeper level of everyday experience (eating together), there was little or nothing in their culture on which I could lean an explanatory catechesis of the eucharistic as a fraternal *agapè*. For them, whether mass was said with european bread and wine or native beer and *ugali* was rather irrelevant - a question of clerical cuisine rather than common concern. On the other hand, they loved the liturgy of the Word (sermons and songs), revelled in participatory rituals (the imposition of healing hands, the dealing with the possessed and the bewitched) and if given the chance would have danced to the sound of drums from start to finish. A later study of religious movements created by Africans themselves rather than imported and imposed by foreign missionaries, confirmed my field experience amongst the Wakonongo: none of these indigenously inspired initiatives centred on the africanization of the eucharistic sacrament, all highlighted the workings of the spoken Word⁶.

But already amongst the Wakonongo, I had early on reached and acted upon the empirically induced conclusion: had Jesus been an African it would never have spontaneously entered his mind to make of the meal his main memorial sacrament, he would simply have suggested that if those who followed him wished to be ever mindfull of what he stood for, then they should do so in the setting of the palaver. (In any case it is now exegetically known for sure that the historical Jesus had no intention of creating a Church and even less of confiding to a clerical clique of sacred specialists the monopolistic management of seven sacraments⁷). If the Word in

Africa is already far more sacramentally efficacious (*ex opere operato*) than the Meal of western culture, then why, in making the gospel message of interior freedom from institutional and ideological bondage clear, have exclusive recourse to the symbolism of commensality? To be or not to be an African Christian, as Shakespeare would have put it, is a question of making sense of the Gospel according to one's own indigenous programme rather than that of an expatriate's. If, rather than being divinely planned, it just so happened that in Jesus' time, the ritual meal was "naturally" or rather "culturally" crucial, why can the basic message of his life not be made to happen *de facto* in Africa via the ceremonial celebration of the Word which is of vital importance to Africans? In imperiously imposing on Africa what was a mere matter of fact, namely the role played by eating together in judeo-christian culture, is it not the missionary the religious forerunner of the presently prevailing imperialistic imposition of western culture on the whole World? (The primordial importance of convivial commensality in the West can be illustrated by the fact that despite the tridentine Church's opposition to lay confraternities banqueting they continued to do so down to our days⁸). A missionary who answers affirmatively to these questions, cannot but feel free to dispose as he thinks fit of the western style gift wrapping of his faith and to incorporate in the communication of this latter the intentional identities of his indigenous interlocutors.

Eating, then, in euromediterranean culture is one thing, eating elsewhere can be quite another. This phenomenal difference is interesting in itself. But upstream it raises a far more broader issue: what to do about or with radical otherness? When an Englishman is invited by an Italian to eat a pizza rather than potatoes, the difficulty, if any, will be one of mere taste since as Europeans, they are substantially on the same wave-length in so far as to what eating together entails. But when both are confronted with a culture such as that of the Wakonongo, where the very meaning of eating itself above and beyond what is eaten is at stake, then one is clearly confronted with a deep divide. Faced with relatively absolute alterity, attitudes and appreciations tend to bifurcate in two directions. On the one hand, some continue to feel that despite appearances we are all fundamentally the same. Black or white, old or young, prehistoric or postmodern, has not everyone to eat, to drink, to make love and progress...? Philosophically, this discourse answers to the classical distinction between the natural, the essential, the substantial and the accidental, the superficial, the secondary. But to the anthropologist's mind, it is too general, too common denominator to do full justice to the manifestly irreducible differences encountered experientially. When, for instance, a given people has no word for God or religion and another no term for fatherhood or marriage, is there not something ambiguously artificial and ethnocentrically equivocal in postulating that the first are, unbeknown to themselves, none the less theologically religious and the second just as unconsciously bent on the family? Hence, on the other

hand, those who accept that differences can be deep and permanent, that values and visions of the world can be incompatible and conflictual and that, consequently, choices for the one rather than the other must be made. This wanting to take the other seriously does not mean that anything goes. When “being other” involves, for instance, being a pedophile or a drug dealer, a “*laisser faire*” attitude would be tantamount to irresponsibility. No one in their right mind has a right to be indifferent to the destructively different. Acknowledging a *priori* that all differences cannot be reduced to mere variations on substantially the same theme, simply implies initially a readiness to take act of another’s possibly being quite other than oneself. Retroactively, this recognition of radical otherness can and should lead to a greater awareness of one’s own specific identity. It can subsequently lead onto to a series of solutions, some tending to the “extremes” others more heuristically middle of the road. It is possible (and has historically been the case) that, bowled over by the attractiveness of alternatives, one adopts otherness and renounces one’s own identity. About turn conversions do take place! The other polar possibility is winning over the other to one’s own sameness. Unfortunately this is what usually happens when the inevitable asymmetry between interlocutors takes the shape of the manifest superiority of one partner over the other. When the Gospel was accompanied by the Gun, the native had little choice but to become a civilized Christian! But, as in the case of eating presented here, encountering the other with a will to walk part of the way with him on his own ground, can plausibly and legitimately involve renegotiating elements which one took at

home to be self-evidently essential. Within a given culture (lets say euromediterranean), focussing on food can appear to represent the analytical limit. Between cultures, however, it is the contrast between eating in one way *versus* not eating in that way which suddenly becomes crucial, thus raising radically the question not so much as to what future generations will eat in post-modern times but how. More or less as We, euromediterraneans, now do or perhaps in some way or other as They, Africans, Asians etc., have done and still do, or in a manner taking the best of both worlds if not making the best of worlds?

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