Chapter 8

The Feast and the Gift

Probably no society is without those unifying events known as festivals, whether they honor the nation, pay homage to divinity, or bless the crops. At each of these a limited number of distinctive foods are eaten: in the United States, hot dogs and barbeque on July Fourth, a turkey at Thanksgiving, a roast goose or ham at Christmas. In Britain, mince pie has been a traditional Christmas food; its spicy ingredients symbolize the gifts brought by the Magi to the infant Jesus, and the latticework of the top crust is supposed to represent the hayrack above the manger. In Europe during the Middle Ages, a special bread was prepared at the time of the winter solstice that was circular like the sun but twisted at the center into the form of a cross, so as to represent the four seasons. It was called a pretzel; today's pretzel retains much the same shape but has lost the symbolic connection. Whatever the particular celebration, the foods that are eaten often have in common that they take time to prepare, are scarce, and are expensive.

In simple societies the most common religious occasion is a communal feast, whose function is to maintain the unity of those who participate in it. In Java, such feasts are known as slametan. The kin, friends, and neighbors who come together to eat at such a gathering are said to be joined by dead ancestors and supernatural beings as well. The occasion for a slametan can be almost any event the giver wishes to honor, sanctify, or endow with well-being: having reached the seventh month of pregnancy, birth, circumcision, marriage, illness, death, moving into a new dwelling, or winning the support of a particular spirit, to list a few. The emphasis is slightly different for each occasion, and special kinds of food are usually provided at each.

Men are invited to a slametan by a messenger only five or ten
minutes before it is about to begin; they are expected to stop whatever they are doing and to gather immediately. This almost everyone does, since an invitation has been awaited; it is hardly possible in a small village to keep the preparations secret. Once all have arrived and formed a circle around the platters of food, the host briefly states his reason for celebrating a slametan; he calls upon the spirits to join them; a prayer is offered in Arabic, which few of those present are likely to understand. Each participant (except the host, who does not eat) is then given a stiff banana leaf on which he places samples of the special meat and fowl, along with rice colored and molded in various patterns and shapes for each occasion. The host then bids the guests, and the spirits as well, to eat. Food, rather than prayer, is the heart of the slametan. The spirits are said to feed on the aroma of the food, leaving its substance for the human diners. After briefly sampling the food the guests one by one ask the host’s permission to leave, taking with them the uneaten food, which they will share with their families. Upon their departure the slametan has ended, a mere ten or fifteen minutes after it began.

Outsiders might regard a slametan as too brief, haphazard, and even irreverent to have much ritual efficacy. But it is, as one anthropologist has described it, “a kind of social universal joint” that can be made to fit a wide variety of occasions. Protection is obtained from the spirits; social harmony in the village is promoted, since everyone present is treated the same; most important to the Javanese is that it confers what is known as slamet, a state of physical and mental equanimity during which everyone feels that nothing upsetting will happen. The Javanese do not seem to be consciously aware that in addition to ritual, social, and psychological purposes a nutritional one is also being served: With everyone in the village providing a slametan or even several of them throughout the year, food is constantly being redistributed, so that everyone in the village eats approximately the same diet.

Feasting was of great importance to many North American Indian groups, but nowhere more than in the potlatches (from a Nootka Indian word, *patchat*, “to give”) held by those along the Northwest Coast from Oregon to southern Alaska. By the time anthropologists began studying the potlatch late in the nineteenth century, it had become an orgy of conspicuous consumption at which food was wasted to a degree unknown in any other society, past or present. Kin groups competed with one another in giving ever more lavish feasts, in providing more food than at the last one—in short, to make the guests eat until they were bloated, were forced to stagger off and vomit up what they had eaten, and then return to eat more. To dramatize how niggardly a rival chief’s previous feast had been, the host group would load down the guests with food and gifts to take home. At one potlatch given by Kwakiutl Indians, the guests consumed the meat from fifty seals, and among the gifts they received were six slaves, eight canoes, fifty-four elk skins, two thousand silver bracelets, and thirty-three thousand blankets. If it was believed that a rival group had not yet been humiliated, food and wealth almost beyond belief would be destroyed in the flames. This extravagance belonged to a time when the societies of the Northwest Coast had become the beneficiaries of the surplus wealth pumped into their economy by North Americans engaged in fishing and the fur trade. Since the Indian populations at the time had been plummeting as a result of disease, fewer people were available among whom to divide the wealth, and so the survivors had grown rich beyond their own imagining.

Numerous attempts have been made to account for the origins of such a wasteful system: that it grew out of competitiveness between rival groups; that it was really the occasion for building up peaceful relations with neighbors, substituting rivalry at feasts for armed conflict; that its true function was to validate the rank of hosts and guests, each guest being served according to a precise tallying of status; that it was meant to confirm the strength of the society. The potlatch undoubtedly was all these things. Beyond them, what made it crucial to the adaptation of the Northwest Coast Indians was the unreliability of their coastal environment. Though their environment has been described as an abundant one, providing food from the sea, the rivers, and the forests at all times of the year, this was not true in a consistent or dependable way. Deer, for example, were to be found mainly in certain burned-over areas; a dry spell meant that the forests would not produce their usual quantity of berries and nuts; the salmon on their migrations upstream could be taken only at certain places, and their numbers varied from one year to another. Such wide
fluctuations occurred throughout the region. The supply of fish taken by the Southern Kwakiutl of British Columbia varied annually from thirty-five percent to two hundred percent of the average. Although the Indians of the Northwest Coast could have easily survived on the average annual bounty, a limit was put on their numbers by what was available during periods of scarcity.

In many simple societies, this "law of the minimum" sets a limit to population growth far below what might be sustained during a bountiful year or season. The Northwest Coast peoples did, of course, attempt to counteract the law by storing a supply of nuts from the forest or by drying fish and preserving it in oil. Storage bins, though, were not always sufficient to provide food during the lean years. One other way of surmounting the law of the minimum was to put aside a surplus in the form of obligations on the part of others. If, for example, one group whose subsistence was based on obtaining seals from the sea enjoyed a year in which the animals were abundant, this group might then give a potlatch for another group whose rivers had failed to produce many salmon. The guests would be feasted for a few days and would go home loaded down with presents of food that would help get them through a lean time. The river people would undoubtedly have been shamed. But in the following year the situation might be reversed; the salmon in the river might be plentiful, and the seal hunters hungry because they had been kept from the open sea by fog and rough water. Now it would be the turn of the river people to hold a potlatch, thus humbling their former benefactors — and at the same time repaying the debt of last year by becoming this year's hosts.

Competitive feasting has the effect of offering a margin of safety in the event of shortage. It keeps people extracting food from the environment at high rates of productivity in order to prepare for the next potlatch. It equalizes the differential productivity of villages that occupy the diverse environments of forests, rivers, and coastline. The potlatch thus provided a setting in which groups who recognized no common economic authority could meet to exchange resources. The investment made in a potlatch was secure, and would eventually be returned with interest. Competitiveness, rivalry, and prestige were therefore — if this explanation is correct — not the reason for the potlatch but simply a means of keeping the system in motion.

Competitive feasting similar to the potlatch, but without its extravagance, is found in societies around the world that lack any other mechanism to redistribute resources. The rise to prominence of the feast-giver, who is also the redistributor of surpluses from local groups, is seen in those inhabitants of the islands of Melanesia known among anthropologists as the "big men" — also referred to as "men of renown," "generous men," "great providers," or "center-men." The last term seems most apt because it connects a cluster of followers gathered around a pivotal personality. Whatever such a man is called, he is the entrepreneur, the man who combines statesmanship with a reputation of working hard for the general welfare. Big men do not inherit previously existing positions of leadership, nor are they installed in any office. They create the office by their deeds and then see to it that no one else fills it. The primary way these things are done is by sponsoring a feast.

A big man starts his career early, often while he is in his teens, and his first leap toward high status cannot be taken without the efforts of his own household and kin. He encourages his wife to cultivate larger yam gardens; having increased their production, he can enlarge his domestic working force by taking more wives. The economic importance of having many wives was stated in pidgin by one Papuan: "Another woman go garden, another woman go take firewood, another woman go catch fish, another woman cook him — husband he sing out plenty people come kai [that is, come to eat]." He borrows pigs from his kin and breeds them to increase the size of his own herd. His neighbors and kin are impressed by the diligent labor of his wives and children, his flourishing gardens, his large number of pigs. Realizing that this man can bring them wealth and prestige, they increase their own productivity to add to his surplus. In this way he draws on the circle of his relatives and friends for additional labor, and is ready to begin the expansive phase of his aspirations.

He sponsors his first feast "to build his name," as the Melanesians put it. To make it memorable, those who have become his followers work almost around the clock to erect a fine house for the accumulated bounty he is to display: fish, yams, bananas, all piled as high as possible to overwhelm the guests. At one such feast, given on Guadalcanal several decades ago, an aspiring big
man offered his guests three hundred pounds of fish, three thousand cakes made of yams and coconuts, nineteen large bowls of yam pudding, and meat from thirteen roasted pigs. The big man himself ate sparingly and not until after the feast was over. For such a man, once his career has begun, the feasting never ends. He must immediately go to work to prepare for another, bigger feast; he must worry about other big men who might shame him by topping his feast with a more lavish one. So he spurs on his followers, flushed with their first victory, to increase their production. He becomes miserly, consumes less food than anyone else, and works harder to set an example. Prestige, not a higher standard of living, is his reward.

The aspiring big man must now make careful calculations against losing all by a blunder. Deciding to challenge an established big man whose reputation is greater than his, he invites this big man to his next feast. It is a grander one than the first, thanks to additional supporters who, impressed by his first effort, are now contributing their productivity. The challenged guest must reciprocate in a reasonable length of time with a feast still more lavish. If he is unable to do so, he will be humiliated and no longer considered a big man. His followers will desert him to become supporters of the new big man—who is less able than before to rest on his past achievements. His own ambition, calculation, and self-deprivation having enabled him to become a successful big man, he now lives in fear that the same route will be followed by some equally enterprising rival. So he constantly goads his relatives and supporters to work hard in preparation for a challenge. One thing that makes them willing to do so is being able to bask in the aura of prestige that surrounds their “centerman.” Another is that because they now produce more food than before, they are living better than they ever did.

The way the big man goes about setting himself above his followers and becoming the ruler of an incipient chieftdom may offer a clue to the manner in which complex society might evolve out of a relatively simple horticultural economy. His consuming ambition becomes the means whereby a small, fragmented society may surmount its divisions and evolve to a higher level of cooperation. Before the European colonial governments outlawed warfare in Melanesia, a big man not only got his followers to produce more food, but also got them to go to war for him.

The big man both intensified food production at home and became a raider against the food supplies of neighboring groups. Melanesians speak of him as “the great provider,” but for economists he is a redistributor. In most societies based on foraging and simple horticulture, everyone is approximately equal in status, everyone eats the same food, and no one works so hard as to exploit all of the available resources. In a redistributive system, on the other hand, many different kinds of food, each produced by a household or a kin group that more or less specializes in it, are brought to a central place for distribution—one may bring yams, for example, and return with supplies of fish. Redistribution is obviously a much more efficient use of resources, permitting a larger and denser population, than is the simple sharing of hunter-gatherers—but it works only when a powerful individual, a redistributor with a large following, can coordinate the efforts.

Competitive feasting increases production and thus makes available to the redistributor both the food to be distributed and the social occasion for doing so. In the early stages of what is on the way to becoming a complex society, the redistributor consumes less than everyone else, but sooner or later egalitarianism gives way to selfishness. The redistributor demands, and receives, certain benefits for himself and his kin: a larger share of food, higher rank, and hereditary status. To sustain his position, though, he must continually find new sources of production, either by increasing yields or by making raids against neighbors. These developments must have taken place in the chiefdoms of the Northwest Coast, Polynesia, and elsewhere. Competitive feast-giving by ambitious young men would eventually have led to political states with their large and dense populations, social classes, intensive production, and frequent warfare.

As societies grow more complex, the privilege of levying taxes, rents, and tributes from those of lower status is accompanied by the privilege of eating very much better than the great mass of the population. In medieval England the tables of nobles were so laden with every sort of food that they became known as “groaning boards,” and a knight might put away a dozen dishes during a single sitting. The menus for royal banquets in the
fifteenth century list as many as forty dishes, although it was considered proper merely to sample rather than gorge on them. The purposes of these opulent feasts were social and political, a display of the control a noble had over both people and sources of supply. The seating arrangements were a reflection of social rank. Members of the lesser nobility were obliged to share a serving with one or more others; those belonging to the lower classes were not allowed even to look at what was served to their superiors. Youths of high birth sent to the court of a noble were similarly distinguished according to rank and social status while they were being educated in the etiquette of entertaining guests.

Serving food in an important household was an avenue for social and political advancement; most of the knights of the medieval courts began their careers in this way. Each server had his own title and rank. The most exalted was the carver, who was expert in the use of an extraordinary number of butchering utensils, along with technical terms and social rules. He had to know, for example, that only the left wing of a capon was suitable for the lord and that the kidney of a fawn was the delicacy served first. The panter (his title derived from pain, French for “bread”) was schooled in the use of a variety of knives, such as the one for smoothing the edges of trenchers, hard squares of bread that served as plates upon which meat was heaped (whence the word “trencherman” to describe a hearty eater). The butcher had responsibility for the butts or casks of wine and ale.

In most societies, certain foods are associated with the ruling classes. These include camel stuffed with goat and fowl in the Near East, venison and game birds in northwestern Europe, and dog in aboriginal Hawaii. In medieval times certain spices were scarce, being either imported to order or brought as a gift by an ambassador — and so a particular aroma could be an affirmation of power and status. Most often, though, prestigious foods are animal, and they are limited in supply and usually expensive. Those not rare in nature are made artificially exclusive by the practice of denying them to the common people. This was done in medieval Europe and Elizabethan England with venison and other game, which could be hunted only by the nobility. When the Pilgrims celebrated their first Thanksgiving, venison became a spectacular substitute for the chicken, hare, and pigeon meat that filled the “flesh pies” they had eaten in England. In Europe,

deer were kept in preserves for the pleasure of the nobles and their friends, and venison was not sold or bartered. Accustomed only to fowling pieces, the Pilgrims lacked both the guns and the skills necessary to shoot deer that first Thanksgiving. Because the culinary status symbol of seventeenth-century England was ordinary food to the Indians, Chief Massasoit presented five carcasses of deer for the occasion.

Restrictions upon what certain people are permitted to eat, known as sumptuary laws (from the Latin sumere, “to consume”), go back to antiquity, and were common in medieval Europe. In 1363 Edward III of England directed sumptuary edicts at members of the servant class, whose expectations had risen with the shortage of labor resulting from the Black Death, in an attempt to limit both what they ate and what they wore. In France, six different edicts in the period between 1563 and 1577 alone tried to limit the number of courses served to three, even at festivals, and to forbid the serving of meat and fish at the same meal. Whoever ignored these edicts, whether host or guest, was subject to large fines, and the cook who had prepared the meal was to be imprisoned for fifteen days on bread and water. The failure of Edward’s legislation, and the need for edict after edict in France, attest to the difficulty of enforcing sumptuary laws. If they had been enforced, vegetables would have come to play a more important role in the traditional diet of Europe. As long as animal foods could be obtained, Europeans disdained all vegetables except cabbages, onions, peas, and certain herbs. Such plants as radishes, spinach, lettuce, parsnips, turnips, carrots, and beets were known but were rarely eaten until an increased population and dwindling supplies of meat made doing so a necessity.

Most people are likely to take pride not only in having the food they serve reflect their social status, but also in having important people as their guests at table. In some societies, though, this is exceptional behavior. The highest compliment that the Bemba can pay to a man is not to have him as an invited guest — but rather to send a gift of porridge, relishes, meat, and calabashes of beer to be eaten privately in his hut. The least hospitable thing would be to invite a guest to share one’s own meal. Feasting among the Bemba, rather than being an occasion for conviviality
or conversation, is a symbolic way to offer respect. A man who is sent food to eat in privacy is complimented by being treated like the chief who eats alone; but to ask a man to share a meal would be to treat him like a dependent.

Hindus in India, possibly more than any other group in the world, have made eating the insignia of status. In fact, the hierarchy of the caste system is embodied in what is eaten, with whom, and by whom the meal is prepared. Food categories and social categories thereby become one; a person acceptable for the table is acceptable also for the marriage bed. The rejection of an offer of food is a gesture of superiority, and also an implicit refusal to give female relatives in marriage. Accordingly, the focus of the marriage ritual in India is commensality. As the bride and groom publicly exchange pieces of food, they are reinforcing the structure of the caste system.

Besides its great masses of Hindus, India has minority populations of Moslems, Jains, Sikhs, Zoroastrians, and Christians—and also of about 150 tribes with their own ritual practices. Some Hindu beliefs, such as those concerning ritual purity and the veneration of various animals, were adopted from the tribes and incorporated into the Hindu system of ethics. Almost all tribes set themselves apart by the foods they eat and avoid. Even within a single tribe, members belonging to different subdivisions of it eat separately. Once such distinctions are made, the judgment will follow that some ways of eating are superior to others, and that so are the people who practice them. Inevitably, a hierarchy of social status based on eating will be established. One division of the Kamar tribe, for example, considers itself superior because its members do not eat snakes, crocodiles, and monkeys, as those of another division do; and the Yanadi of Kerala will have nothing to do with tribes whose members eat frogs.

The numerous castes in a Hindu village compose a hierarchy ranging from high to low. A study of several villages in northern India showed the basis of social rank to be the foods prepared and eaten by each caste, though the reasons for the placing of a particular caste were often vague. Hindus in general rank all foods according to four categories: raw, superior cooked, inferior cooked, and garbage. The highest rank is given to raw foods, which are the only ones suitable for a Brahman or anyone else belonging to the highest castes. Less valued are cooked foods, but of these certain ones are considered superior if they contain ghee, a clarified butter from which the water has been removed. The costliest of fats, ghee is prized in India as tending to build health and virility. Inferior cooked foods include barley cakes, pickles, and cheap curries, all of which lack ghee. Garbage, the bottommost of the four categories, includes not only waste, but also the abominated beef and pork—and even any raw or superior food that has become polluted through contact with people from lower castes.

Logic would require the ranking of various castes to follow these categories, but among the thirty-six castes in one village that was studied, no consistency in ranking was found. Meat (that is, "garbage") was eaten not only by members of the two lowest castes, but also by people belonging to another caste that was considered to be among the highest in the village. How was it possible for the members of this caste to rank high, yet be consumers of meat from the sacred cattle? It was learned eventually that what members of each caste thought about members of other castes depended not so much on who ate what as on who took food from whom. If members of caste A habitually gave food to those of caste B, then caste A was considered to be higher; and because members of castes X and Y exchanged food with one another's members, they were ranked as equal. The ranking became more complex when many castes were involved in food transactions. If A gave food to both X and Y—whereas B gave only to X and not to Y—then A was considered higher than B because of having given to more castes.

Such distinctions might appear irrelevant to people brought up in Western society; but in village India food is closely bound up with the economy, since it is the traditional payment for artisans and servants. Members of caste 34 will ordinarily not accept even raw grain as payment from a member of caste 35, but they will accept it from a member of this lower caste who threshold it while in the employ of a landowner belonging to a higher caste. Similarly, flour ground by a low-caste woman in her own house will be regarded as inedible by the high castes, whereas flour ground by the same woman as an employee of a Brahman household will be quite acceptable. Since the government of India is now attempting to modernize the country's economy, it might be supposed that such distinctions would soon die out. For a
number of reasons, though, the entire system of food transactions is inherently conservative. Any change of attitude by one caste is likely to affect the relative standing of many others. Accordingly, the reasoning goes (except among the members of the lowest caste, who have nothing to lose by change), better to stay where you are than to risk falling lower. Moreover, some castes are of equal rank because they use food as payment to one another, which would make it difficult to change the rank of one of these without changing the rank of the others as well. But above all, any attempt to modify the traditional food transactions between castes would bring economic chaos to the village.

Because food is essential for all human beings, offering it to someone is usually considered to be a “pure gift” — not trade, not barter, no strings attached. That attitude is ingrained in much everyday behavior. Panhandlers really want money, but they are practical enough to dress up a request for it by saying they need it to buy a cup of coffee or a sandwich. International relief organizations employ the same tactic when they appeal for contributions by showing a child with an empty food bowl rather than the tractor on which the money is more likely to be spent.

That a gift of food entails not simply charity or generosity, but is a complex transaction, can be clearly seen in simple societies where the giving of food is an obligation. When the Arctic explorer Peter Freuchen was given meat by Eskimos with whom he had been living, he thanked them, as he had been trained to do at home. An old man promptly corrected him:

You must not thank for your meat; it is your right to get parts. In this country, nobody wishes to be dependent on others. Therefore, there is nobody who gives or gets gifts, for thereby you become dependent. With gifts you make slaves just as with whips you make dogs.

Thanking anyone for food is a serious breach of etiquette among hunter-gatherers because it implies both that the giver is not generous as a matter of course and that he is not a good enough hunter to afford to give away meat. More important, by his thanks the recipient seems to deny the obligation to repay at some future date. A hunter shares because it is the appropriate thing to do in his society; he later expects to receive, and this is his right. The well-brought-up recipient in a hunting-gathering society praises the giver for his hunting prowess but never for his generosity.

The exchange of food, or a symbolic representation of it, marks the beginning and the end of sociability — the establishment, maintenance, or severing of the social bond. Accordingly, in most societies a restraint is placed on selling or exchanging food for other kinds of goods. In those indigenous societies possessing rudimentary forms of currency — such as certain groups in Melanesia, and the Pomo and other Indians in California — currency could not be used to obtain food. In such a society, the social value of food within the group is too great to be given a market value. The Salish Indians of the Northwest Coast, for example, described a category of their possessions — canoes, shell ornaments, tools, and baskets — as “wealth.” Food, on the other hand, was described as a “holy thing” that ought to be given and not be exchanged for wealth. In many other simple societies, food does serve as a sort of payment to someone equal in status who helps out in gardening or building a canoe. Some economists regard such payments as wages and as revealing incipient capitalism. But if the payments represent any incipient tendency, it is one toward socialism. The giving of food to those who provide labor for household tasks is a metaphorical extension of the household economy to a wider circle. Rather than serving as a means of exploiting the labor of others, its function is to give more people a claim on the productive fortunes of a household other than their own.

A gift is usually defined as a voluntary transfer of some good without any stipulation of payment. Such a transfer, though, is almost never entirely free. Social pressures may force someone to give gifts to kin on birthdays; social benefits may be anticipated as a result of a gift when it is made to someone of higher status, or the giver may calculate that something of at least equal value will be given in return. This ambivalence about gifts appears in the New Testament. Matthew (10:8) quotes Jesus as high-mindedly admonishing the disciples: “Freely ye have received, and freely give.” But in Luke (6:38), Jesus points out that gifts will
bring recompense: “Give, and it shall be given unto you ... For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again.”

The New Testament thereby attests both to common wisdom and to anthropological fact that however selfless gift-giving may appear to be, some balance in reciprocity is expected. One person might continue giving to another at Christmas for a few years before there is any reciprocation — but when that occurs, it is expected that the reciprocated gift will be lavish and approach the cumulative value of the previous gifts. Is not such a system at the mercy of freeloaders who always take but rarely give? Not usually. In simple societies, such a thing is so unthinkable that freeloaders are taken for witches and may be banished or killed. The Bemba in fact define a witch as someone who comes to a hut looking for a handout of food. Even in Western societies, a person who invites another for several dinners in a row without a reciprocal invitation feels exploited; word sooner or later gets about, and the freeloader will pay a penalty in being shunned socially.

Artful ways to avoid reciprocating do nevertheless exist. Bemba housewives attempt to dodge reciprocal obligations by hiding their beer at the approach of a relative, and then saying that they are poor and, alas, have nothing to eat. The Maori of New Zealand sometimes avoid reciprocating by falling back on the distinction between raw and cooked food, of which only the latter is given to others. So to avoid obligations they often eat food unprocessed or underdone — as is stated in their adage, “Broil your rat [a favorite Maori dish] with its fur on, lest you be disturbed by someone.”

Ambivalent attitudes about sharing and freeloading are seen in the Gurage of Ethiopia, whose anxieties about food have been described on pages 76–77. Those with a reputation for generosity in giving food are the people with the highest prestige and authority in all spheres of Gurage life. There is nevertheless anxiety about retaining enough of a supply to be able to give at a future time. With such contrary motivation prevalent, it is no wonder that two patterns of behavior have developed. Publicly, the giving of food is part of normal social relations; but these occasions are more a matter of etiquette than of nourishment, and are about as filling as a coffee break would be. Privately, late at night, the family eats its main meal in the seclusion of its dimly lit hut.

In the face of ambivalence, how can such a system continue to operate? It can because reciprocity makes possible new social obligations beyond those of close kin. The offering of highly valued foods — such as an antelope steak among the San, or in North America an aged Smithfield ham from Virginia, lobsters from Maine, or caviar from the Black Sea — elevates the new fellowship as a matter of importance. But even food that is not particularly valuable can be given in ways that foster and maintain social relations. Food is offered to visitors even though they have just eaten elsewhere. Visitors who refuse, or who accept and then do not eat with a show of enthusiasm, are considered to have committed a breach of etiquette. In some Melanesian societies, the same food will be given and regiven in a round of gifts so many times over that it becomes decayed or bruised. That it no longer has much utilitarian value does not matter; what does matter is that it continues to circulate, and is always accepted graciously. The giving and regiving of inedible food stands for friendly social relations, and the transaction as a whole serves to keep everyone aware that mutual obligations have been incurred.

This section of the book has been concerned largely with the avoidance of certain foods because of their symbolic aspects, with the religious sanctions placed upon food, and with the social controls operating at occasions at which eating occurs. The next section will concentrate on a narrower aspect of these general topics: the numerous preferences and avoidance that have little to do with individual taste, yet are so firmly ingrained as to be characteristic of a whole culture.