

Food Rituals And Taboos: An Ethnoarchaeological Study among Brahmans and Magars in the Baglung District of Western Nepal

Terje Oestigaard,

Food as an archaeological object is often a neglected area when it comes to contextual analysis and the social significance in the structuring of society and human relationships. Although much of the archaeological debate is concerned with different types of food production and the tools involved, food itself has been assigned only a minor role, apart from lists of edible items found on sites. Little has been done to see how and why food is used symbolically in different contexts.

As I see it, food is culture. Thus it has social, ideological and religious meanings and aspects which structure both the identity of individuals in particular and that of their society in general. This is the setting for my ethnoarchaeological study of food rituals and taboos among the Brahmans and Magars of Baglung district of Western Nepal. An underlying aim is to see if it is possible to trace these two ethnic groups in the archaeological material. The field study has mainly been carried out in Argal and Sile villages in Argal VDC, and Hila village in Hila VDC. I have mainly concentrated on two subjects: food in a household context, and food as a life-giving process in connection with life-cycle rituals and especially different funeral practices.

Ethnoarchaeology is a combination of two disciplines, archaeology and ethnography. Archaeologists use material remains from past activities to infer about prehistoric societies. The main problem is what the material culture reflects and how it is possible to make interpretations of a particular prehistoric society. Ethnoarchaeology combines the meaning of

archaeological objects in the past with those in living societies today (Haaland 1988, 1995, 1996, Haaland & Haaland 1995, Hodder 1982a & b).

In nearly every interpretation archeologists use analogies, and if such analogies are unreliable, then they must also be unscientific (Hodder 1982b:12-14), because the problem "...archaeologists feel (is) that it is all too easy for different people to read different thoughts and meanings into the past (Hodder 1987:43). Ethnoarchaeology makes explicit the underlying assumptions and analogies for the interpretations, and increases the number of known features in a homology before the use of analogies in archaeological interpretations. This strengthens the interpretations of the socio-cultural conditions in the past which produced the archaeological remains. "It is by looking at the objects from such theoretical frameworks that we should try to derive hypotheses about what the objects "say". The objects are from this point of view evidence which may corroborate (not verify), weaken or refute our theoretically derived hypotheses" (Haaland 1997:1-2).

In a household context, I will distinguish five stages in connection with food:

Firstly, the phase of production. It includes for (1) plants: a) preparation of fields, tools and labour, b) planting, c) cultivating, d) harvesting and e) conservation, for (2) animals: a) preparation of byre and fodder, b) breeding, c) herding, d) slaughtering and e) husbandry.

Secondly, the phase of distribution. The transactions include a) allocation within the unit of production, b) gifts, c) reciprocal exchange, d) the market, e) obligatory transfer and f) destruction.

Thirdly, the phase of preparation. It involves a) preliminary work and b) cooking. Important aspects here are who does the cooking, with whom and for whom, and what type of utensils are used.

Fourthly, the phase of consumption. It involves a) the assembling of the participants, b) the serving of the cooked food and c) eating the food.

Finally, the phase of disposal. It involves how to treat left-over food, both during and after clearing away (Goody 1982:44-48).

Distinctions between castes are expressed and acted out through food, water and admission to the house. The two main ethnic characteristic features for Magars are 1) marriage between a man and his mother's brother's daughter is allowed and often preferred and 2) they eat pork, buffalo and

drink raksi. For Brahmans, both of these habits are taboo. The first feature is probably impossible to trace in the archaeological record, whereas the latter should be possible.

In my fieldwork area, the production of the major plants and vegetables is the same among both Brahmans and Magars, so I will concentrate on the animals. Both groups keep also the same main animals: buffaloes, goats, bulls, cocks and hens. Production is only partly reflected in consumption. The Brahmans use buffalo for secondary products, as do the Magars, but the Magars also eat the animals on special occasions. Therefore, it is the disposal phase, the garbage, which may identify the different groups. Osteological remains will indicate what is eaten, and the negative evidence, the absence of supposedly available resources, may be interpreted as a food taboo. Furthermore, even though a household may for instance have buffaloes, it is not necessary their own animals they eat, because this interpretation neglects the phase of distribution. In a village, people come together and share a buffalo. A more important aspect of distribution is the consumption of pork. In their villages, Magars do not keep pigs because they are considered to be troublesome animals, but they eat pork whenever they get the possibility. This will be visible in the garbage, but will not reflect own production.

Another problem is the house structures. There are slight differences between a Brahman and a Magar house, in the use of timber and the wall painting. These differences are hardly visible in the archaeological material. The location of the hearth may be an indicator, but this is also dependent upon the environmental conditions, if there is enough firewood for heating or only for cooking. Thus there will be natural variations in the house structures. In particular, two problems emerged in my fieldwork. Firstly, in the villages where I have been studying, there was a major change in the house structures. Approximately sixty years ago, all the villagers started to change from round to square houses, no matter of their caste or ethnic group. At the same time, there are indications that they also changed from ceramic vessels and pots to utensils made of copper. The appearance of two such dramatic changes at the same time is often interpreted in archaeology as immigration of new ethnic groups. In this case, however, these changes happened quite peacefully among the original inhabitants, simply because it was a new fashion of the time, or so I was told.

Food and sex are, as I see it, the two life giving processes which maintain the lineage and society. They are connected and must be controlled. When food is incorporated into one's body, the food becomes the self

(Lupton 1996:17). This means that food affects and creates identity, and so food is an important feature in human relationships, e.g. status, gender, age and ethnicity. Food can therefore be looked upon as a process of experience (Curtin 1992:18).

Turner sees the life-cycle rituals and all rites of transition as marked by three phases: separation, liminality and incorporation, and the rites accompany every change of place, state, social position and age, e.g. birth, initiation, marriage and death (Turner 1967, Turner 1969, Van Gennep 1960). In relatively stable and cyclical societies such changes are dependent on the biological and meteorological rhythms (Turner 1967:93). "Traditional societies is generally seen as stable, it eliminates "lived" time by means of myths, which transfer "lived" reality to the plane of eternity of thought, and also by means of *rites de passage*, which regulate the flow of time into a series of stable states" (Dumont 1966:195). What is unclear in a society is seen as unclean. Transitional persons are thought to be particularly polluting since they are in a liminal phase. Transition is dangerous, and it is controlled by the ritual ideas concerning pollution and purification (Douglas 1966:97). There are differences between static and dynamic pollution situations. The static pollution notions concerns states which are ambiguously defined, while the dynamic pollution notion derives from ritualized transitions between states (Turner 1967:97).

After observing birth pollution, Brahmans have five main life-cycle rituals: 1) name giving (nwaran), 2) first rice (pasne), 3) initiation into caste and patriline for boys (bartaman), 4) marriage and 5) death ceremonies. The three first of these rites are directed towards the child's achieving full responsibility for his actions and ritual purity, to get "activated karma", bringing the child into samsara, "the round of birth and death (Bennett 1982:53).

Originally, the Magar religion was animistic, but generally the Magars have been influenced by Hinduism and Brahmanism through the ages. Fortunately, although many Magars have lost their language and imitated Hindu manner, they have not become fully absorbed into Hinduism. In Baglung district, parts of the Magar people practice neither Hinduism as a philosophy of life nor a totally Buddhist way of living (Khattri 1995:40).

The Magars have more or less the same life-cycle rituals as the high-caste Hindus, but with different contents. They do observe birth pollution, they have the name-giving ceremony, rice-feeding ceremony, hair-cutting ceremonies, marriage and death ceremonies. Compared with the Brahmans,

especially in observing pollution periods, Magar rituals are not so elaborate neither in days nor in number of people involved.

In archaeology, graves are one of the most common sources to knowledge and interpretations about the past. The underlying assumption is that the graves reflect some of the deepest and most resilient traditions and values in a society. Cremation or burial, the structure, size and location of the graves, the direction in which the deceased persons are placed, and the grave goods and the gifts placed with them, each feature gives some information of the past societies. The existence of similarities in funeral practice are often interpreted as indicating one ethnic group, various practices side by side is often interpreted as two or several different ethnic groups living together. If there is a conglomerate of different practices, it is very difficult to say anything at all.

The Brahmans cremate both men and women. The position of the deceased person on the funeral pyre is with the feet to the north and the head to the south. The eldest son put raw rice and raw lentils into the mouth of the deceased before the funeral pyre is lightened. The cremation is located to holy rivers, that is rivers which contains the ammonite fossils known to Hindus as saligram. The cremation site reflects the area in a way, because Hindus are supposed to go to the nearest holy river; they do not cross the river to cremate. Thus if there is a cremation site on each side of the river, they belong to different localities. In the past, Brahmans, Chhetris and the low castes had different places where they cremated at the riverside, while nowadays all castes are cremated at the same place. If a boy dies before he has undergone the bartaman rite, then he is buried on the riverbank, and he get raw rice and raw daal as gift, and likewise for unmarried women. If children die before they have done pasne, then they also are buried, but they do not get food as a gift. The direction of the deceased in all burials is with the feet to the north direction and the head to the south.

Among the Magars, there is a great variation in the funeral practice. They may bury or cremate, according to their will and financial capacity.

In Argal village there is a special graveyard marked by a stone wall. Each of the Magar group in the village has their own area for burials in this graveyard. In the more recent graves, the corps is lying on the back with the feet to the south-west and the head to the north-east, with the face turned to north. I was told that this direction of the face is because their forefathers migrated from the north. The older graves are oriented more east-west. The only gift the deceased have with them for their journey to the afterlife is a

copper pot or a bamboo basket with their favorite cooked meal, placed under their right arm. The Magars rarely practice cremation, and when they do, they have their own river for cremations. The dead person is laid on the funeral pyre with the head facing the north and the feet south, and with the food placed on their heart. The reason they give food as a present to the deceased, is that the person depends on food when he is alive, and therefore he depends on food also when he is dead. Then he will get peace in the afterlife. There is no difference in the meaning and the symbolic value whether the food is placed under the right arm or on the heart.

In Hila village the Magars throw raw food in front of the funeral procession on the way to the graveyard. The deceased is supposed to be buried with the head towards their home, but I found that the graves are oriented east-west although the graveyard is south of the village. The cremation ground is further south; they also cremate with the head towards their home, that means the head is facing north.

In Sile village mostly children are buried, while the adults are cremated. In both cases the deceased is placed with the head to the north and feet pointing south. Raw food is placed under the right arm, the same ingredients as in a meal. In the past they used to put the food in a small bamboo basket.

The burial and cremation ground at Nire by the Kaligandaki river outside Baglung Bazaar shows a great variation of different practices. Although most of the deceased should have been cremated, because of poverty and difficulties in getting firewood for the funeral pyre, many are buried on the riverbed. These graves are small cairns of loose stones which barely cover the corpse, and therefore a lot of the skeletons can be found lying exposed. All of them are less than one year old, because in the rainy season the river washes away the graves with the monsoon flood. This is a combination of burials and water-burials. In the past some Magars were buried in deep graves on the riverbed, sitting in Buddha position with the face directed towards north, namely because they were originally Buddhists. Today people from the Baglung district up to four hours away are buried at this site. I witnessed a 96-year-old Magar woman being buried in a little cairn half into the river, sitting in Buddha position with her face towards south. Her relatives claimed that the reason why she was buried like this, was that she had been a Hindu. Among the Brahmans, however, most of them cremate and bury their dead lying with the head in the north, while some practice the opposite, and they all claim that it is according to the Hindu laws. Common

to all the funeral practices is that food is used as a gift and as a life-giving process.

In archaeology, at this site at least three problems emerge. Firstly, all these funeral practices are invisible in the archaeological record since the river washes away the graves with the monsoon flood. Secondly, what may be ethnically distinguishable features in funeral practices one place, may differ another place. Finally, deceased from areas far away are buried or cremated by the Kaligandaki river. Thus it is difficult to locate where the deceased lived.

Is it possible to trace distinct ethnic groups in the archaeological record with this material? We may distinguish between matwalis and non-matwalis, those who drink alcohol and eat buffalo and pork, and those who do not, because of the food remains. In areas where the Magars are in the majority and not highly influenced by Hinduism, it should also be possible to use graves as an indicator. A problem arises when long co-existence has resulted in a symbiosis of many different practices. And that brings me back to one of the aims of ethnoarchaeology: to investigate the possibilities and limitations for interpretations of archaeological material.

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